

The past perfect tense clarifies a sequence of events. This happened before that, or that happened before this, or by this time, that had already happened. It's a subtle tense, quietly keeping moments in order, almost like the stretcher that keeps the canvas taut, allowing us to see the painting as it is. Taken as the title for this exhibition, a poetic double entendre also comes into play: paintings from the (recent) past remain perfect today.

If we use the past perfect to describe this group of paintings, we might say that although they were produced decades ago (Gretchen Albrecht, Noel Ivanoff, John Nixon), or a decade ago (Jeena Shin, Helen Calder), they had already anticipated contemporary visual sensibilities. Drawn from five very different practices, the works in *Past Perfect* hold a shared interest in geometry, the possibilities of light, transparency, deep black and shadow, and the tension between exposure and layering.

Two large squares, bodily in scale, one black, one yellow, perhaps the night sky and the shade a child might choose to colour in the stars. Up close, there is something else starry; lines delineating prisms with edges so sharp they appear almost embossed, hues shifting so subtly across each glossy pane that light and dark are only incremental, barely discernible from one another. Shin's work brings the fractured forms of Cubism and Futurism to mind, but her paintings move at a slower pace, meditative rather than dynamic, unfolding rather than flying, crystal not machine.

If Shin's work is in slow motion, Calder's is frozen in time, a crime scene paused before the clean-up. In *Black Wave (40 fl.oz)*, 2009-20 viscous black acrylic oozes down a slab of ply to pool on the floor like crude oil, slippery at the border of liquid and solid. In *10. fl.oz Black* (2008), thick black clings to the panel like melted rubber on tarmac. Referred to as paint-skins, Calder's more recent works have escaped the surface to hang like scarves or pelts upon various supports, or to be folded and stacked. Harking back not quite two decades, these are skins before they slid from the wall and into sculptural space, their volumetric titles a nod to their liquid pasts.

In Gretchen Albrecht's *Mai Mai (White Swan)*, 2001, layers of sheer white swirl around the signature oval—or perhaps thrash, like seafoam against rocks, the movement of the paint is that forceful. Atop are two horizontal rectangles, equals formed in waxy gold and black, the thick hairs of Albrecht's paperhanger's brush clearly visible, paint like wet combed fur. Albrecht has described how her horizontal lines work to “quell the activity of the paint” within her oval forms; “They provide stability and serenity and complement the paint's movement.”<sup>1</sup> Here the lines are wonderfully chunky, corners almost touching the canvas

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<sup>1</sup> Gretchen Albrecht, “Gretchen Albrecht: Between Gesture and Geometry.” Interview by Catharina van Bohemen. *Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki*, February 20, 2024.  
<https://www.aucklandartgallery.com/article/gretchen-albrecht-between-gesture-and-geometry>

edge, and stacked perfectly one on top of the other, dark celestial gold and heavy black contrasting against the foam of white acrylic although never quite quelling its frenetic journey around the canvas, for these rectangles hold their own movement within hard-edged confines,

In stark contrast to Albrecht's great eddying oval are Noel Ivanoff's serene diptychs from 1999. These older works hold much in common with Ivanoff's recent modes of working, both being concerned with removing the brush—the artist's tell-tale mark—from the work, and therefore with finding other tools and methods of applying paint. In 1999, this was done via a mono-printing technique which saw Ivanoff applying layers of colour, dark red and bruised purple, onto a wooden panel that was then stamped against a sheet of drafting film while still wet. In some of these experiments, he applied direct pressure to facilitate a simple transfer of colour, while for *No.5* he employed a set square to gently trace lines down the film, squeezing the paint into striations that transferred across panel and paper. From afar, the pair appears as an original beside its ghost, but creep closer and you will see how each bears its own subtle changes in opacity, what is thick and dark on one is pale on the other, mirror twins instead.

And then there are two John Nixon paintings, both untitled, painted a decade apart: a shiny bright shock of orange on hessian from 2004, and a cruciform on found metal from 1994, the oldest work in this exhibition and yet really even older, for who knows when the oven tray was first pressed, first heated, or when it first acquired the many delicate scratches and blooms that whisper of a life lived before it had ever made its way into Nixon's studio. It is unusual to see just a couple of Nixon works at a time, given his propensity to work in groups and series, but in this exhibition they are hardly lonely, conversing—as Nixon's paintings are wont to do—with those around, echoing and amplifying the oxblood of Ivanoff's diptych, the contrast in Albrecht's oval, the clean geometry of Shin's fractured forms, and the thick opacity of Calder's skins.

The past perfect tense is ostensibly there to keep events in order, but language is not so straightforward—if it were, we would be without poetry. If it can keep events in order, it can also be enlisted to take them out of order, or to reveal the inherent slipperiness of time. And that is exactly what this exhibition does in presenting works that could have been painted yesterday but were in fact made many years ago.

Lucinda Bennett, April 2026