

Notes on John Nixon's EPW: Silver

Begun quietly in 1995 alongside his more widely known orange paintings, John Nixon's *EPW: Silver* developed over the following decade and a half as an equally sustained inquiry into the monochrome, and as a second one-colour subset of his broader Experimental Painting Workshop. If orange was, for Nixon, *'bright, uplifting and open to a range of associations'*, silver was something more enigmatic: *'opaque and reflective, a non-colour in the sense that we know colours to be'*, though as he said: *'both silver and orange are full energy and light'*.¹

A central inspiration for this body of works was the lively play of sunlight across silver-painted industrial roofs, which Nixon saw through a fellow artist's studio window in a New York high-rise building. This encounter from 2001 affirmed for him the strength of silver as an alternative to orange.

*'I noticed the rooftops had been recently repainted with silver paint. The paint was thick and dense to waterproof the surfaces over many years. The sight was visually impressive as the sun shone on the rooftops covering the city blocks below.'*²

Such attentive engagement with the world around him was fundamental to Nixon's art, enlivening and bringing into the present his engagement with modernist abstraction. Returning to Melbourne, he immediately intensified his focus on silver, with his usual practice of using house paint and utilitarian materials such as hessian, cardboard and wood echoing the functionalism of the roofs. Nixon would later describe his silver works as embodying *'an expansive vision for painting that extends painting into real space, and AGAINST the notions of narrative, illusion or expressiveness'*.³

Shades of Constructivism, Minimalism, the ZERO group and Fontana's Spatialism are discernible within these paintings. Nixon situated his work within this orbit of modernist experiment while making it indisputably his own. As with the roofs, the paintings' reflective surfaces have a luminosity that is actual rather than illusionistic: their metallic sheen catches and modulates the ambient light present in real space—there is no artifice or chiaroscuro here.

From tactile effects on rough hessian to smoother applications on canvas and MDF, the interaction of light with texture is central to these works. Nixon relates how, after moving his studio to Melbourne in 2001, several old hessian bags collected in the 1980s were brought from storage and given new life, with *'the tactile faktura of the woven sacking'*⁴ providing the basis for several monochromes. Additional elements—constellations of upturned bottle tops, swathes of sand and grit, and pieces of wood or broken glass—heighten the works' material tactility and sensory appeal.

The glimmering surfaces in these paintings might, if we allow it, bring to mind the infinity of the cosmos (a connection made explicit by a collage in the exhibition), or the flash of sunlight on snow. The latter evocation takes on particular meaning in light of Nixon's love of the Alpine landscape. Such associations arise through poetic suggestion while retaining the force of abstraction. As Nixon simply put it, *'The task is to make dynamic artworks, to challenge and excite the viewer'*.⁵

¹ 'John Nixon, EPW: Silver (Aluminium) 1995–2004' in *EPW: 2004*, exhibition catalogue, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2004, p.11. A version of this text was published as 'EPW: Silver' for Nixon's *EPW: Silver* exhibition at Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne in 2006. The ACCA catalogue is available online at https://content.acca.melbourne/legacy/files/2004_EPW_John%20Nixon_Catalogue_1.pdf

² 'John Nixon, EPW: Silver (Aluminium) 1995–2004' in *EPW: 2004*. The New York studio visited by Nixon belonged to the artist Peter Halley.

³ John Nixon, *Lucio Fontana and John Nixon (A Dialogue)*, exhibition text, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2006. Accessed 10 August 2026, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/exhibition/lucio-fontana-and-john-nixon/>.

⁴ John Nixon, 'EPW: Silver (Aluminium) 1995–2004', in *EPW: 2004*. Nixon borrowed and adapted the term *faktura* from Russian Constructivist artist Vladimir Tatlin, for whom it referred more specifically to an almost scientific attention to the inherent properties of specific materials.

⁵ *Lucio Fontana and John Nixon (A Dialogue)*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2006