

## How to Paint Backwards

Anthony Byrt, May 2002

There's a quote from Clement Greenberg that I found the day after I first visited Judy Millar's studio:

With the same immediacy as that which ordinary intuition registers the *properties* of things—to wit, their descriptive, identifying attributes, so esthetic intuition registers value and values. Which means that you don't, and can't, experience art or the esthetic, *as* art or the esthetic, without judging, evaluating, appraising. To the extent that something is intuited or experienced esthetically, to that same extent is its esthetic value appraised, evaluated, judged (whether consciously or unconsciously). There's simply no separating esthetic intuition from evaluation; it can't be imagined or thought of without that.

That I stumbled upon this after meeting with Judy was no coincidence given that she'd actually loaned me the book that contained it. But what made this passage so resonant was that it seemed like a summary of the conversation Judy and I had had the day before about her most recent work:

**JM:** 'I'm not interested in just painting about me. And I don't need to like it. And that's been a big thing for me to get over. I mean, it has to be right, but I don't need to like it personally.'

**AB:** 'So is that an issue of quality then?'

**JM:** 'Probably. The marks can be really beautiful, but wrong.'

**AB:** 'So even if you do like it, you'll rework it if you feel it's wrong?'

The idea that there is a rightness and a wrongness to mark-making comes from Millar's views about the contrivance of expression. What she effectively says is that mark-making is a code like any other, a language, a vocabulary that can be read and understood graphically. It may seem a strange thing for an abstract painter to concede or accept— that what they do is contrived and decorative rather than deeply intellectual or emotional. But Millar's acceptance of this is arguably the main reason for the turn her work has taken. It has been a way for her to explore issues she's always been interested in— the beauty of the mark, colour and light, gesture and scale— without feeling as though the work is nostalgic. In short, the work is honest. But it's also full of tensions, frustrations and cliché.

An acknowledgment of the contrivance of expression has been one of the ways Millar has justified her current series of paintings, not only to her audience, but also to herself. Again, a reference to Greenberg seems resonant given that he was the great theorist and defender of gestural abstraction, essentially arguing that *gesture is an expressive act of self*. Yet for Millar, this isn't the case. Instead her *gesture is an act of expressive self*. The shift is a convenient word-game more than anything else, but it does hold some potential ramifications for the viewer confronted with Millar's works. In the Greenbergian view, there is the notion (false or not) that there is an inherent honesty in the mark, a connection between its physical presence and the intellect that brought it about. But in Millar's revision there is an acknowledgment of the artist as actor, playing a role. This doesn't necessarily mean that the mark becomes 'dishonest' and indeed in Millar's case I'd suggest just the opposite. But her marks are intended to be read as referential and graphic rather than personal. In this, there is a clear connection between her current paintings and her earlier masking-tape works, which were about deconstructing the painting process, laying bare the act of making for scrutiny by showing it in reverse.

The 'backwards' nature of her process reflects her historical awareness and her awareness of historiography, both of which have informed her practice throughout her career. But there is also a real tension in her act of looking back to move forward, no more so than in the way she aligns herself with Gordon Walters. Or perhaps, more accurately, the way critics have aligned her work with his. Much has been made of the way she has responded in the past to the 'Walters tradition' (whatever that might be) and she has played a role in this, with works like *P-pop*— a masking tape-reinvention of Walters' koru paintings. She acknowledges the profound impact his retrospective in 1983 had on her but the 'problem' her quotation caused was a somewhat unusual one. She gained a fair amount of critical recognition for the works, something most artists welcome. Yet, for Millar, it was a depressing experience because it was an attempt on her part to 'play the game' and, I think, one she on some level hoped would fail. But what it proved was the need on the part of critics for points of reference,

which in this case, Millar (reluctantly) supplied. Conceptually however, there wasn't a lot of difference between this and her other masking-tape works, but now there was something for critical discourse to pin her to. Since then, and indeed in the current work, Millar has manufactured a more subtle relationship to Walters, ever-present, but nevertheless riddled with tensions.

The way she's been positioned and the way she's positioned herself in relation to local critical discourse has actually been used by Millar as the content of her works over the years and her quotations, codes and self-consciousness have meant that her paintings have often been used as an example of the emergence of a postmodern visual discourse in New Zealand. The commentators who've referred to her or written extensively on her work are testament to this- Christina Barton, Allan Smith, Peter Shand. It is interesting to note that Allan Smith identified Millar's 'Acting' long before the current series began. Consider, for example, his statement from the mid-nineties that she 'combines directness and clarity with a slow lyrical gesturalism, but without a whiff of that false humility of the masterstroke posing naively as expressive honesty.'<sup>1</sup> Now compare Smith's comment to Michael Dunn's suggestion that Gordon Walters was 'a painter of uncompromising honesty,'<sup>1</sup> one of the earliest evaluations he makes of Walters' character in his famous catalogue for the ACAG retrospective, the same retrospective that had such an impact on Millar. The distinction between Walters and Millar represents something of the way painting has experienced a postmodern reinvention in New Zealand art since the early 1980s. Her marks are seen in a 'postmodern' light, ironic and self-aware gestures. While I accept that his statement is valid in relation to the mid-nineties works like *Speak*, I can't help thinking that her new marks have as a strong element that very expressive honesty that Smith disparages.

By now you'll have noticed that I can't decide whether she's acting or being honest. And, as a result, her awareness of the effects of critical positioning has made me somewhat suspicious of her request that I write this essay. How will my posturing be critiqued by the next writer she lines up? And maybe I have been sucked in. Look at the way I've used the Greenberg quote, a quote I found after our conversation that raised issues like 'Judgment,' 'Taste,' 'Value' and 'Pleasure' because I, foolishly, thought that these were the important aspects of the works we were looking at. Yet if she is acting and the works are wholly contrived, then surely that conversation was too. But this is surely too harsh on Millar and I think the reason that the conversation took the directions it did was because there were elements of truth in the references we were making. And this is really the whole tension of her current series; the contrast between a critical self-awareness and a desire to be honest to one's 'self,' whatever that might be. What I'm saying is, Millar's willingness to fuck things up means she hasn't decided what she's doing. And this is precisely what makes it work. She's realised that not deciding what to do can be more subversive and open the work up more than conceptualising it to the point that it can be read referentially. Take, for example, a recent group exhibition at Auckland's Gus Fischer Gallery, in which one of Millar's current works was placed alongside a small Francis CHECK SPELLING Hodgkins, the idea being that Millar was in some way responding to the earlier painter. This, to me at least, was a curatorial stretch of the imagination because it's this sort of objective criticality and linear narrative that the 'inside-out-ness' of the paintings attempts to deny. Instead, she shows us how to paint backwards, arguably making a subjective, physical response the only appropriate commentary.

And yet up to this point I haven't really said anything about the works themselves. So. Here Goes. There's an overriding penetrative relationship set up between object and body, both Millar's and ours. I'll explain this aspect of penetration shortly. When she and I first discussed them, there was an underlying frustration for Millar in that her gestures were limited by her armspan, which was limiting the size of the canvas and keeping the forms fairly closed. So there's always been the desire to get bigger, to be in the work more. Millar getting inside the surface is helped by the fact that rather than using rag or brush, she's been using the side of her hand. This is a big development from her stripe paintings of the mid-nineties, which hold so much information about the current series. This tension between closed form and physical contact is, to me, the thing that makes her relationship to the Constructivist and Walters traditions so problematic and these are the first works that are really honest about that. Walters has been talked about in terms of the formalist maxim of 'dynamic restraint' whereas in Millar's current works you can't help thinking it's more that she's restrained by the limits of her own body. So, unlike the traditions she's so often placed within, her restraints are more a source of frustration than a key to composition.

It's interesting to look at the way the more recent works in the series have opened up and gotten

bigger. There seems to be more breathing space and this, to me, is one of their key physical effects. In a lot of big abstract paintings, particularly those with a heavy emphasis on gesture, there's a sort of stickiness to their surfaces, an oppressive and overwhelming atmosphere. Instead, Millar has managed to avoid this claustrophobic feel. It's interesting that even four years ago, Allan Smith spoke of her surfaces as being 'permeable membranes'.<sup>1</sup> The current works clearly carry that sense of the viewer being able to penetrate the fluid surface with relative ease and it's this fluidity that creates a desire for immersion rather than merely surface contact. When I first saw one, I thought about walking into it. This may seem a strange reaction and probably just evidence of my own perverse attraction to big abstract paintings more than anything else, but, regardless, this is the response I had. The point I'm trying to make in saying this is that, despite them looking warm and thick, they are actually cool and thin, which therefore makes them more penetrable and is another example of their 'inside-out-ness'.<sup>1</sup> My reaction, is, I suspect, a similar sensation to the one Millar has in making them. This experience partly comes from the 'cleanliness'<sup>1</sup> of her materials, which is the main reason for the seductiveness of her marks. The paints she's been using are specially imported from Holland, oils totally uncut by filler or other chemicals. Then they're 'washed'<sup>1</sup> on the surface with turps, and the whole thing is executed quickly, ending up dominated by fluid, moving gestures, records of Millar's bare hand pushing around thin, runny paint. Her ruthless selection of expensive, high-quality materials is also what gives the paintings their glow, as though they're creating their own light.

The construction of space within the works is yet another example of Millar's reversals. Like her selection of paints, there's an almost obsessive preparation of the canvases, which are primed and gessoed to near complete smoothness, then a layer of wax is applied. The wax is crucial, because as it's cut by the turps, it allows the pigment to grip the surface, resulting in the globules that occur at the end of her strokes. These are also the points of light in the works, much like the breaks in the lines of her mid-nineties paintings, which marked the end of her rag-strokes. Like Gordon Walters' bulbs these points rupture movement, acting as 'full-stops'.<sup>1</sup> The wax also allows the whole surface to flatten out as it dries. Those that haven't seen the paintings other than in reproduction will find this strange, as they do appear to have a certain lumpiness when photographed. But an actual physical interaction with the paintings leaves the viewer with the opposite impression. Further, the wax is also a controlling mechanism in the way it seems to enclose the gestures. By gripping the paint it makes the marks seem graphic and machine-like, as though limiting Millar's body and the instability it attempts to insert.

So they're flat and controlled but there is still an invitation in, what I've called a need for immersion. Now the key to this is the weird spatial relationships between gesture and ground. In fact, even making this distinction is misleading, because the large blocks of colour that appear to be underpainting below her marks are in fact overpainting, in effect making the gestures the base. By some weird reversal the painting literally appear backwards, which then opens them up, allowing them to breathe, arguably the clearest evidence of the way she turns painting conventions back on themselves. Then there are the 'nineteenth century colours she uses. Millar recounts the way she spent a lot of time before the series just mixing paints, these rich uncut oils she was flying in from Europe. In her studio there are boards covered with different combinations of colour. So again, she seems to strive through her actions against the restrictions of her own perfectionism, whether it be in paint-mixing, mark-making or canvas-preparation.

So they're fluid instead of sticky, spacious instead of claustrophobic, and they seem to create their own light. These seeming contradictions are largely the result of her willingness to turn her own processes around. But this 'looking back'<sup>1</sup> can hold the danger of creating frustrations and cliché. Both of which Millar does. But by acknowledging the tautology of her marks through referencing both the Constructivist and Expressionist traditions, she makes a concession to seduction, creating an honest space where she can explore an openly expressed pleasure in materials and colour. The question really then, is why the change now, and why has it been so rapid? There are two major factors that caused Millar to take radical new directions. The first is her interaction with young German painter Katherina Grosse, who was Artist-In-Residence at Elam in 2001. Grosse is gaining a significant reputation internationally (including a recent article on her work in *Parkett*) because of the way she intervenes with spray-paint in architectural spaces, working directly on the walls. When in New Zealand, her major project was a painted billboard, executed with the assistance of Elam students. There were really three things about Grosse's practice that have impacted on Millar's current work; her use of colour, the subtlety of her mark-making and most importantly the emphasis

on process resulting in a massive output. Millar's new studio testifies to this final point. But what Grosse also articulated was that it was okay to take pleasure in materials and that being seduced by the beauty of marks could still result in the productions of 'good' art.

In a talk Grosse gave at the Auckland Art Gallery near the end of her time here, she spoke about the impact the New Zealand light had on her work. She was particularly struck by the 'blueness' of the sky. So the billboard, dominated by layers of pink spray-paint had a much stronger natural backdrop than it could have had in Grosse's native Germany. Not long after Grosse's visit, Millar actually went to Germany and set up a studio for a few weeks. She describes one of the major features of this experience as her feeling as though she was going blind because she was surrounded by so little colour. So what Grosse gained in New Zealand, Millar lost in Germany but for both their respective experiences resulted in an increased awareness of the importance of colour and light. The problem for Millar however, that Grosse didn't have to face was the 'cheesy-ness' of this response based on the specific critical environment she operates in. Alongside Walters' use of koru and the consequent debate about the modernist use of Maori motif, the 'harsh New Zealand light' has become a New Zealand art cliché. All that's left for Millar is a few burnt tree-stumps to round out that Poundian triumvirate of New Zealand modernist icons, a subject she says (jokingly?) she hasn't ruled out. Maybe this is what we'll see in her next show at Gow Langford. And it's the nature of the current series that really poses that question: what happens next? This is something her earlier work never asked and, ironically, it's the conscious instability of the current works that testifies to a new maturity in her painting process.

And so I end up where I started, at Judy's studio, still not really having answered any questions about the paintings. And we talk about some of these things- fluidity, light, Walters- and I'm looking out her window at her view of the Tasman Ocean, and it all comes together.

And two months after we started talking about her work, I'm standing in Gow Langsford looking at works that are totally different to the ones we started with and I realise how they've derailed my own approach to the project. I've been chasing reasons and tried Greenberg and Judgment, Barton and Pound, Shand and Smith, Grosse, Germany, Walters, Constructivism and west coast beaches and the ones she does tomorrow will be different anyway. So in twenty minutes I'll show Judy this draft in the café where she first asked me to write a catalogue essay about her most recent work and we'll start making changes.

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