

Local Colour

We approach Forthun's work initially as an architectural plan. The titles instruct us to consider the paintings like maps that might guide us through space. 'Through the Heads' directs our eye to the connection between harbour inside and ocean outside. The world laid out on a horizontal pane commands our gaze.

Within these plans themselves there is an unsteady oscillation between presence and absence, land and water. Is it a map of the harbour or the land surrounding it? Like the famous illusion, is it a vase or the outline of two faces? Such ambiguity is striking giving the Melbourne grid that has so often featured in Forthun's work. The Cartesian Melbourne eye is more easily disrupted by the confusion of river, harbour and freeway that snakes through the orderly rectangles.

But there will come a point when our eyes are arrested by the wash of colours that lies underneath these plans. The bold cadmium gradations lift our eyes up along the vertical axis. In "Travelling in the Eastern Direction", we have colour proportions resembling the horizon line, marking off the blue earth from a yellow sky with a horizon that bleeds green. These 'local colours' respond more to our own verticality as upright bodies standing in the gallery. Their bands are parallel to the lines where floor meets wall, and wall meets ceiling, which structure our gaze in this space. The reference in 'Green Belt' to the environmental movement of Jack Munday evokes the collective endeavour otherwise invisible from maps, yet intrinsic to place.

While standing in Forthun's studio, I asked myself what it means today to experience the kind of dizzying shifts that occur in her works. Talking about the process of creating stencils, she told me that her phone has become a useful device for referencing GPS maps. This reminded me of the comment I heard about GPS navigation systems in cars. Some of them have a setting that allows you to change orientation. Does the map point up to the north or to the direction in which you are currently heading? Apparently there's a strong generational difference in selection. Older people are more familiar with the static vertical axis, while younger drivers take their bearings according to their own trajectory. I thought of this with the orientation of 'Green Belt' where the north-south axis is reversed. Technically the painting is upside down, though aesthetically it makes perfect sense as it is.

In the past, planning a trip used to be a matter of studying a map to the point where the journey could be internalised as a series of turns. Now it is possible to avoid planning, but instead to regularly monitor progress through a GPS phone or car device. But this has its own skill as we must quickly orient our currently position in this space. One of the skills we've had to acquire to inhabit these new augmented realities is a capacity to make the kinds of shifts that we experience in Forthun's paintings.

I realise this may seem a reductive reading of art works. Certainly they can stand up as autonomous experiences. Baxandall's analysis in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* accounted for Renaissance masterpieces as opportunities for merchants to exercise their skill in calculations. As our orientations shift vertiginously in Forthun's paintings, so our readings of the words can alternate between pure optical play and practical exigencies of navigation.

With *Local Colour*, Forthun continues to evolve her shifting processes. Ian McDougall found a fusion of the figurative and the abstract in her *Shadowlands* (2008). Rosemary Hawker noted the way her show *Urbana* (2010) moved between painting and photography. And Corbett Lyon identified the interpenetration of 'freeways, urban streets and laneways' in her *Into the Light* (2011). Forthun's work continues to provide a marvellous by-product of the urban gaze, producing canvases that exercise our phenomenological capacities for their own sake.

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