

## The brain hand thing - by Peter Westwood -

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*White is like an infinite space. There is a backlit quality to line drawn on white paper. This idea of the backlit is a model for the type of space that emerges. Forms and shapes spring up into this void forming an image that's also grounded in the plane.*

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*Painting is a feeling about alternative things ... it's almost that paintings are a separate reality and therefore somehow devoid. In some way the artist is separate from this, in trying to get the sensation of the body into the picture ... somehow paint becomes flesh.*

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*Painting also has this kaleidoscopic aspect - where nothing's grounded; it's where valuing up is just as important as down. **1***

Peter Westwood: When you're making a painting do you always work from one drawing, or do you use a combination of drawings?

David Palliser: Each picture is usually made from one drawing, but sometimes I might work from separate drawings. (*Pointing to a recent painting*). That painting for instance has a few elements from a number of drawings. And some paintings are made with no model at all; improvised.

PW: Although you approach your work in various ways, I've noticed that the paintings have some of the qualities that groupings of your drawings on the studio wall seem to have when they're placed together. When you work from different combinations of imagery is there a type of fusion of individual elements you know will come together? And how do you approach making the painting from the imagery in the drawings?

DP: Instinctively I know that there are certain possibilities between various elements of imagery in the drawings, and in making the painting I just push to resolve the surface of the picture the way that paint allows you to relate one thing to the next. However, the formal concerns are paramount and the imagery becomes secondary. It's like trying to get the whole thing to mesh, working out the logic. Yet the imagery remains ambiguous - so that you get a glance of the picture and think, 'Oh, that's a composed thing' - and then look at it again and think, 'Well, what the hell is it?!'

PW: So, in thinking about your use of imagery in both the drawing and painting, is it that the relationship between the various elements of imagery is in some way left hanging?

DP: Yes. It's left in a state of flux, or some sort of state of equilibrium. The imagery is left to speak for itself, whatever it is.

PW: All the works seem to suggest the idea of possibility. What I mean is, they all hint at a fascination with the inherent possibilities of working responsively, so that the final painting or drawing isn't necessarily held as a complete entity but is more like a series of approaches. But, as you've suggested, it is complete in another way - as a painting - it's formally resolved.

DP: Yes, I aim to establish a sense of inter-connectedness between disparate things.

PW: Do you think you're somehow trying to find a space where the drawing and painting can sit in the same sort of territory?

DP: Yes. I try to make the paint have the vitality of the drawings. But I also try to find an envelope of space where they coexist, fusing elements from the drawings with the way I paint. The paintings are *the moment* of the drawings, they come from that moment the drawings existed in when they were made. For me painting is strung out through time - there is a strange phenomenon in a painting, where it finally presents itself over time and where you can feel the density of time through the two-dimensional surface. There's a balancing act between quick and slow that connects drawing and painting.

PW: How do you approach making such immediate drawings?

DP: They're just made. I think the drawings are somehow this simple, plain state and the paintings are complicated to work out. There's a lot more brain-sweat with the paintings, and the drawings not so much.

PW: Yes, I respond to the drawings because they're so fresh - but I also respond to the paintings because of the temporal qualities that you've indicated painting can have - where there is evidence of a type of struggle and the

completed painting almost shows the way it has been made.

DP: Yeah. Freshness in drawing can also be translated in another way in painting, there's a quality in something that might exist in one medium that undergoes a metamorphosis through another medium. You could say that drawing is line and painting is mass, so the freshness that's in drawing has to be translated in an entirely different way in a painting. But the paintings are much more difficult to do – they arrive through their process – and then there is also a nice thing about an awkward picture. I think it's engaging; just looking at Ensor's paintings [James Ensor] in America, there's a weird difficulty about them. I think they're great.

PW: In some ways your approach to painting might be thought of as a less immediate means of arriving at the point where you half recognise something, as well as a process of negotiating various phases or options. Those signs are there when I look at this work. How do you approach making the paintings?

DP: The paintings are more invested. They're more considered. They start simply from a few marks or washes, but it depends. In some of them I'll put in a wash of 'turpsy' colour to interlock things. Shapes and forms will bleed, lines will intercept. And then that often becomes a ground for working just straight up, making the picture from a raw canvas – a basis to work from. And then I'll start wiping bits back and putting other marks down – and maybe feel frustrated and go for a walk.

I'll go home, come back, and the painting slowly builds, and then I'll put something like one of those forms in somewhere and think, 'Oh, that's interesting' and get carried away with that, and then probably scrub most of it out. There might be a fragment, an inch and a half square that stays, and it will stay for the whole picture. Then I'll move my attention over to another part and try and make some relationship between the first part and the second part, and then it doesn't work and I'll do something else. The momentum of putting stuff down is often the only way things are ever going to be resolved; to add another element to it rather than to keep chiselling away at one spot. I'll see something, some spatial thing, some quirky shape or something that is alive to me in my head, which is always just eluding me – and I try to chase this particular image, and often it will lead nowhere. But, in fact, the remnants of that stuff all come back and that's kind of ... the picture. And then it's also the formal considerations. Well actually the whole thing is formal ... and I also try to work to get a dynamic into the picture.<sup>2</sup>

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Afterwards, when I walked away from Palliser's studio and thought about his drawings, I reflected how appealing it was to see an artist's work that didn't merely address some chic criteria. There is a sensibility within the drawings developed from a sense of urgency. They are decidedly immediate – hand-built and conceptually hand-sketched – and not asphyxiated by some lengthy self-conscious process, or contrived manipulation. The drawings are awkward and kooky, and fused with an anxiety that derives from the task of putting something transitory to paper. But they also strike the self-assured pose of an artist having fun with a preposterous moment. And it's this sense of absurdity and curiousness, an awareness of the awkwardness of something seen in the first instance, but never fully recognised, that carries across to his strongest paintings.

I also thought about the visual complexities within Pallier's paintings and how they hovered somewhere between constant reinvention and accumulated technique. I thought about the difficulties of thinking about them in any one particular way and the work made me recall that as long as I can remember I have been suspicious of the word 'reality', knowing that everyone has their version.

### **The difficulties in seeing this as one thing**

While David Palliser remains acutely intrigued by the reconciliation of the formal relations of scale, composition, the relating of forms and, particularly, colour, he seems overwhelmingly sentient to the historic legacies and ambiguities of the pictorial space. He often refers to the tense relationship he perceives between *the backgrounds* in his work and *the imagery*. He has remained intrigued by this perception for most of his working life. In referring to terms like *image* and *background*, he identifies an underlying sensitivity to a type of illusory space as a foundation in his work. Yet this may be as much a projected or *backlit* space as it is a deep space. The fusing of this aspect of space with abstract shapes, awkward and cartoon-style forms, and a classical sense of composition and technique prompts the initial uncertainty I always hold in looking at his work at first viewing – *what is it?!*

Greg Pryor has remarked on Palliser's work: 'If we were to transcribe this world into sound we would be treated to the most cacophonous barrage as well as tiny sounds which disappear slowly beyond audibility.'<sup>3</sup> Palliser listens to a lot of improvised music: 'There's a formal resolve about something that is almost chaotic, ... a sense of progression, ... of things transforming to other things. It's almost like sums, ... cells of improvised music joined together. So there is a sense of spontaneity, but also of a formal join.'<sup>4</sup>

While it's difficult not to be aware of the individual eccentricity of the shapes and forms within Palliser's work, there is always the accompanying feeling that they *should* exist together although little of his imagery is unambiguous. Palliser avoids confusion, and the possibility of nihilism, in his paintings by carefully managing the equilibrium of elemental aspects of painting: balance of colour, relative scale and composition. The world he presents is a strange environ, where perplexing imagery makes specific conclusions unreliable and even irrelevant. Yet Palliser's work evokes trust: through the simple material substance of paint; its handling and ability to metamorphose.

Most artists search for an understanding of what it is that they work within, of how to think about their medium, and this in turn can contribute to the very character of their work. Phillip Guston worked 'for a long stretch until a moment arrives when the ... arbitrary vanishes, and the paint falls into positions that feel destined'.<sup>5</sup> 'It's like a gong sounding; it puts you in a state of reverberation ... But painting is "impure". It is the adjustment of impurities that forces painting's continuity.'<sup>6</sup> David Palliser sees painting as an accumulation of mistakes, an ordering of an essentially haphazard methodology. For Palliser painting is about trying to use the fullness of the inherent ambiguities within painting as an expressive potential.

There is an anxious and obsessive preoccupation in Palliser's working methods as he constantly seeks 'a sense of inter-connectedness to disparate things, working out the logic'.<sup>7</sup> He relies on uncertain relations to serve his desire to glimpse other possibilities. He works with something impure to imply transcendence, possibly to propose moments of the Ideal, yet remains aware of the necessity of playing with 'collapse' to avoid didacticism and the banality of perfection. Essentially Palliser's work proposes alternatives to what we understand and what we know, suggesting substitute models of a world rather than the reduced reality of daily experience.

In thinking about the conundrum of *what is it?!* these paintings require us to settle on more than one approach. One way of thinking about them is to work through an analysis of the perceptual language, to try to understand and enjoy the pictorial logic or the technical facility, but eventually having to confront the unreckonable challenge of the imagery – characterised by a strange otherness. Another way is to recognise through Palliser's work a simple acceptance of all realities as indefinable and inexplicable. Palliser trusts the medium he works with to reinterpret reality. His paintings suggest reality in transition with its other versions or imagined alternatives; a world glimpsed through a confluence of multiple views, visions and possibilities.

'There's a sense of disbelief about what a painting is or what you're actually doing in the studio.'<sup>8</sup>

Peter Westwood

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## Notes

1. David Palliser, in interview with the author, RMIT University, Melbourne, December, 2005.
2. Peter Westwood in interview with David Palliser at his Flinders Lane studio, Melbourne, 17 November, 2005.  
Gregory Pryor, *David Palliser*, online essay [www.kalimangallery.com/web\\_pages/Frame\\_total.htm](http://www.kalimangallery.com/web_pages/Frame_total.htm), March 2001,  
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Musa Mayer, *Night Studio, A Memoir of Philip Guston*, Thames and Hudson, New York, 1991, p. 63.  
ibid., p. 141.  
David Palliser, op. cit., John McBride Collection.  
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