

## Peter Bonner's Louvre: Working to See

To be in a room with Peter Bonner's paintings is to feel part of some endeavor that began before we got here but is coming to life now. Like a pop-up ecosystem or a factory that employs us as soon as we walk in the door, what we are looking at is also what we are in, as visitor and participant. Something is happening here, a bellows-like breathing, a pulsation as of stars, a massing of pink and yellow shapes, and blue shapes, and shapes like tailfeathers in a wheeling black space—and it all shifts position as we look at it, seeming to change its import. Whatever is going on is specific, insistent and vitally in partnership with us.

And yet these are also just paintings. They are flat (though in some cases a thickness of paint makes them into reliefs), messy rather than measured, one or two of them probably still wet, this one finished this morning, that one a dark horse that made it onto the wall in the last seconds. They have energy and they make a bold impression on us. We can see that an artist with a strong working style and work ethic has made these, and of course the success of each individual painting matters.

There is that feeling in the room, of precision and awkwardness, a flash of story and the shifting understory, a biotic machinery starting and stopping.

My notes to myself detail the problems in writing about art. Even the best writing seems to pursue only an aspect, in a kind of match-up with the sensory experience of beholding

the work that is always at least slightly off registration. As a critic you can even skew things by addressing the basics, though you have to. What do the paintings look like? What do they do? Do we want to look at them, be in their presence, and if so, why? When speaking about them, what is it that is interesting to say? This last question raises issues of responsibility, authority. Writing about art is like eating flowers. You can do it, but you feel funny about it.

What is interesting to say about the paintings in this exhibition (Peter Bonner's solo New York debut, titled "Louvre," about which more below) is not exactly a compendium of the many illuminating and lesser but still interesting things that could be said—about the artist's background (he is an Australian who has lived a good while in New York), influences on his work, the ways these paintings (and drawings) might call to mind *x* or *y*—but instead something that seems to me not so sayable and that takes some time to assess. The experience of being in the room. The versatility of pictorial language, the way a dog will know how to approach each person differently to obtain the desired outcome. How the works invite attention all at once, yet reasonably. Focus on a little one, a clear and distilled image in stripes with one big eye. Right away know something the way you know green grass, both here and on the hillside, seen in sections through the fence.

Looking through things. It is notable that several paintings in the show appear overlaid with stripes or a network of lightly animated turning or bending lines. Other paintings wear a kind of patterned scrim of short, emphatic marks or large dots. Sometimes the small, patterning marks are what make the behind space. Complex and changing varieties

of space, we realize, are being made everywhere in these paintings. Peter Bonner uses the word “louvre” to mean louvres (louvers in American English) as in blinds, slats, openings. (He speaks of growing up in Brisbane where the light was strong and windows covered with blinds.) In his paintings there is no unobstructed view, no preference for a standardized object beyond the wild work of perception. It’s possible for us to begin experiencing these works, or many of them, as places in which because something is happening in and with the space, something is happening in another way, a narrative way. A story is emerging from the specificity of the space, or threatening to emerge (I borrow this word, “threatening,” from the artist) as all the while we equally threaten to grasp it.

It is interesting, certainly, to listen to a painter discuss his own work, especially when, as is the case with Peter Bonner, there is a charismatic openness that informs his explanations. In conversation he will describe what it’s like to paint with a chosen set of obstructions, such as the idea of looking at things through other things rather than directly, and will mention contemporary Australian Aboriginal painters, whose process he has learned from: they must be careful with what parts of their age-old stories they allow to be seen and this problem becomes something formally brilliant. (On seeing a painting by Makinti Napanangka: “It was everything!!!!”) To Peter Bonner, an obstruction— an impediment to and part of seeing—may also be another, prior painting: a clue comes from the fact that an early title for a large, three-paneled work in progress is “The Bellini.” And he has learned, also from the Aboriginal artists, to paint with the canvas flat on the floor, the better to let the painting develop in the doing. (Peter Bonner

studied in Australia, in London and formatively at the New York Studio School, which suggests some legacy from New York School painters, especially Jackson Pollock.)

He will name other influences, including Paul Klee (he admires Klee's work's variousness) and his own Australian compatriot Ian Fairweather, who is identified both with the beauty of his paintings and the religious strength of his compulsion to make them. (Fairweather's studio was on Bribie Island, very close to where Peter Bonner grew up.) There is the important fact, too, of an artist not in exile but yet in a different, foreign place, and so having a conscious relation to place, as Peter Bonner does. A painting of Australian desert is also a painting of memory; memory is part of all these works' mechanics. And there is drawing, its primacy—the finding of the right notation to connect with the moment and world—which conceivably could be talked about exclusively. There is a lot to say, and a lot is said. Meanwhile, if you back up too quickly, red shapes like fritillaries will transfer to your raincoat.

What's interesting—most interesting—is what's happening here, in the room, the spaces we share, in the paintings as a group and an environment. Our own participation soon feels part of the other language: scratchy here, intense and bright blue there, a surprised falling into some pink fretwork. There might be vertigo, a sensation of many questions, and also of recognizing something. Maybe it is a sense of purpose we recognize, that corresponds to one of our own—a personal and daily bursting in and out of revelation and how we set out after that, at least temporarily, on some luminous path—but fail and forget—but remember at some unexpected point—this being just the kind of thing

enacted by Peter Bonner's work, just getting up and getting at it again, going back and coming forward, the process responding to its own haphazardness with new and concentrated attention.

In fact there is an intelligence and a knowingness to these paintings that seems the product of a very particular goal-seeking. The painted space resists giving up the secret story it nevertheless must have us here to work to see. By these confounding, physical means, life's work continues.

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