

Passages

People who like to look at paintings sometimes say that a painting can be 'read', as if it were made of words. Other times people say that someone's face can be 'read like a book', meaning that nothing is hidden in the person's expression, and that like writing, their 'meaning' is obvious and clear. And, when we talk about images, we say that they are 'legible' – that's to say that they contain forms that are recognisable, rather than obscure or uncertain.

In other words, seeing things involves finding meaning in what one sees, and the act of looking at things involves a process of connecting the things that are there in front of us with things that are not. Written words, like these here, are visual forms that connect to the experience of speaking – a voice in your head as you read. And they also connect to the experience of things; think of a book; think of a painting; the word 'book' recalls the experience of a book – holding, opening, leafing pages. The word 'painting' recalls the experience of a 'painting' – a type of surface, a type of material, and a type of thing to be looked at.

Nick Malone's recent paintings can be looked at, and they can be 'read' too. Not in the metaphorical sense of the word, but in the literal sense – they actually contain writing. In among the complex, restless structures and patterns of paint, in which hints of images appear and dissolve, Malone transcribes fragments of text, fragments of a text by him, the extended narrative poem *Jason Smith's Nocturnal Opera*.

The question is, straightaway, how should we look at these paintings? These large canvases teem with dense networks of branching structures, appearing to emerge from the darker ground, but which are really the clear areas of the canvas which has been loaded with translucent accumulations of coloured paint, pooled and dispersed from the lighter areas. These patterns are sometimes organic, like thickets of thorn bush or sub-

terranean root systems. In others their darkening recesses and angular beams suggest architectural spaces of a distinctly pre-modern kind, visions of a labyrinthine world of buttresses and spiral staircases, disappearing into unlit corridors built of sandstone. And in others still, they suggest a tangle of limbs, of bodies tumbling or piled up or interlocked.

That's not all, though. If there are suggestions of such spaces and things, shaped from the pooling and dripping of the paint, Malone has overdrawn and painted more emphatic and legible elements, sometimes giving more precise definition to parts of the beams, branches and arcs emerging from the painted darkness, sometimes adding a new layer of meaning to the underlying layer – a series of narrow strokes becomes a staircase; pointed arcs become the beaks of birds, blots of paint are circled to become their eyes. And elsewhere, more forthright images are added – swarms of insects appear across the surface, painted on – not into – the image below.

But beyond these shifts of pictorial activity there are the text fragments. In some places easily legible, in others fading or fugitive, these couplets and other lines from the *Nocturnal Opera* work their way around the painted contours and other visual incidents of the paintings. Malone's long text is a disconcerting, gothic mythical tale of transformation, following the path of Jason Smith's hallucinatory exploration of the building around him, a building which provides the shifting backdrop to a series of scenes full of surrealistic symbolism, in which mutation and metamorphosis are recurrent themes.

These written fragments might refer us back to the text of the *Nocturnal Opera*, but they can't offer us the entirety of the text. So, how to look at these paintings? At a distance, their webs and networks of paint dominate; the eye scans the orchestration of shapes, finding rhythms and movements, clusters and hollows of visual activity that

emerge as we look to find the whole in the parts. This distributed, all-over painting surface is indebted to the abstraction of a painter such as Jackson Pollock; like him, Malone begins these paintings on the floor, which accounts for their lack of vertical or horizontal emphasis.

So there is one level of visual information in these paintings which exists when we are furthest away from them, and which requires a visual attention which is purely speculative and exploratory, as we look at a surface which seems to contain only a chaos of visual events, but within which provisional forms and spaces appear. But by moving closer to the surface of the painting, other registers of information come into view.

Malone has suggested that he would rather think of his current practice as that of a painter who writes, rather than a writer who paints. Perhaps he is more a painter now than a writer, but the insights and competences of writing are not simply abandoned or cast off when an artist changes the emphasis of his professional activity. The purposes and outcomes of writing are different to that of making paintings, but that doesn't mean that they are by definition to be excluded from the activity of painting. In the painting series of *The Kingdom* and *Nocturnal Opera*, one is offered a question which mirrors Malone's shift between writing and painting; whether one should be a spectator who reads, or a reader who looks.

That we should shift between looking at and reading these paintings is not simply an effect of putting text next to image; in Malone's paintings, whether one reads or whether one looks is a decision made by the shifting scale of our physical distance from them – looking at the painting as a whole happens at a distance, reading can only happen close-up. This is to say that these paintings contain different activities encoded in their material form – forms of image-making and looking at one level, forms of writing and reading at another. Present in each of these paintings

is a succession of types of meaning; at first, the chaotic form of the underlying paint, which provokes the eye into finding images of forms which, like faces in clouds, are the product of association and imagination; then there are images formed by the painter using the language of pictorial illusion – paint used to make images, of birds, of insects, of stairs. This form of image making is presented to us, rather than being the spontaneous product of our search for form and structure; and lastly, close-in, there are words – little marks that look like nothing much except themselves, and yet carry meaning which is vividly apparent as we read.

These marks don't attempt to represent the *Nocturnal Opera* in its entirety. What they do is pose us the problem of moving from reading off the painting's surface to reading the text away from the painting; looking at a these paintings is an activity that is completed by not looking at them, and reading elsewhere. If the *Nocturnal Opera* has in it the theme of perpetual transformation, of the passage from one state of being into another, and that those passages are both literal (doors, rooms, staircases) and metaphorical (physical metamorphosis), then in Malone's paintings there is a similar passage, from looking as a reader, to reading as a spectator of paintings. These are not examples of 'pure' painting, as if painting was always supposed to be a purely non-verbal act. Malone's paintings explore the points at which painting passes into inscription, is transformed, and passes back again, and where we might reconsider what we look for, and what we might read, in a painting.

JJ Charlesworth, February 2008