

Artist Peter Madden is curating *Abstract (Here is The Thing)* at Ahuriri Contemporary and it's a show about painting. Even though Madden is best known in New Zealand for his intricate and teeming collage work, he has a deep reverence for and understanding of paint; its languages and intensities, its materiality and intimacies. The exhibition compiles a group of contemporary practitioners that confirm Madden's thesis that to paint is to *research*, and that this research is carried forward by those that seek to adapt the project of capital-P Painting to new times and environments.

Featured in the show are two wonderful late paintings by Allen Maddox (1948 – 2000). Nevertheless, Madden insists that this show isn't an *homage* to a great dead Modernist artist by a bunch of living contemporary ones; instead he wants to break down such implied hierarchies. It's an interesting position to take because it puts the emphasis squarely on the *commune*; that is to say the community of practitioners across time and their *communing* via their common medium. It also brings to mind paint's own will to power - a medium both yielding and demanding enough to reveal the desires and anxieties of its handlers.

“Simply put, it's about the adventures of paint. About its sensations, joys, critiques, rigidities, flows. It's a celebration of all that.” With this Madden proposes a remembering of paint's ontology as a luminous physical substance able to convey the fleeting and the intangible. Paint has proved itself to be robust in this respect – much more robust than some art theorists of little faith once thought. You might say that its anachronisms ultimately ensured its lasting relevance: Paint can't help but mount a perfect critique of *mere images*, those incorporeal, infinitely traded packets of pixels that look just exactly *like* things or happenings or encounters, all those simulations. Because paint reminds us, in its smeary, clotty, goopy, pooling, skinning glory, that before a painter is anything, a philosopher, a storyteller, a picture-maker, she is the technician of a very non-virtual substance.

Interestingly, Madden consistently refers to the picture plane not as a canvas, but as a screen. Rather than confusing matters, this tends to sharpen our awareness of paint's behavior as a visual medium. The restless tides of pixels that surge through our phones, always on their way to something else, in a painting become stilled, held, units of pure sensation. The paradox of the permanent gesture. The crossings of synchronous and contrasting forces. A flake white plume over a cadmium red depth. An ultramarine event or lemon yellow fact forever in front of, forever outrunning exegesis or explanation.

You'd be pressed to find a clearer exponent of this than Allen Maddox. His motif, the unit of his expression, as recognizable as Billy's apple, is his swift "X" – a replicating t-cell, adaptive and malleable, a scaffold capable of supporting any amount of responses and interpretations. "I've always thought of Maddox's "X" as an acknowledgement of the canvas weave" says Madden. "There's a suspension of time. A tension in the structure." This is precisely *the thing*, and it's a terrific lens through which to see afresh the constantly shifting fabric of painting's contemporary practice.

Michael Hawksworth, 2022