



## does it do what it says on the tin?

The painter should not only paint what he sees in front of him, but also what he sees within himself. However, should he see nothing within himself, he should refrain from painting outwardly what he sees before him.

Caspar David Friedrich

It's never been easier, quicker or more convenient to create, consume and reproduce visual images than it is today. Amidst this flood of impressions Peter Neighbour nevertheless manages to resist sensory overload by looking inwards, investigating his own thoughts and memories and so avoiding being overwhelmed by the breakneck speed with which ever newer images confront us - a constant over-stimulation that could so easily result in a numbing of the senses. Neighbour's work counters this frenzied onslaught of imagery with thoughtful reflections on that intersection between how we understand the world around us and how we remember it – between perception and memory.

He explores the question of how art might represent such an intersection and how a transition from one realm to another – a threshold - might be recounted in visual form in a single image. In the exhibition **does it do what it says on the tin?** the question is presented with imagery that reveals how the artist sees his environment, his memories and himself. By means of painting techniques used in his artistic practice Neighbour draws attention to a here and now characterised by contradictions and not always easy to make sense of. The question of how we might improve and change our view of the world is addressed he believes by freeing ourselves from the constant pressure of having to re-invent the wheel – always having to produce something new and exciting. As an alternative Neighbour values silence and the sort of solitude which allows him to exploit to the full his own unique capacity for looking at things.

Peter Neighbour paints landscapes and places that feel strangely abandoned. As source material he uses his own lived experience from which - supplemented by a personal archive – he produces images that amount to a collage of memories. These are places and landscapes in which an oddly dreamlike atmosphere prevails. With the mountains of Antarctica and its rocky terrain as inspiration, Neighbour manages to fix what is personal – both as memories and emotions - on to paper and canvas. By conveying simultaneously a sense of emptiness and of rapture he engenders in the viewer a state of limbo difficult to put into words.

These empty, apparently abandoned places are a recurring theme - metaphorical thresholds located somewhere within our lived reality as transitional spaces or transit points that seek to hold on to a unique situation or a unique moment in time. Inspired by memories of his 2020 journey he uses the reality he saw there to present places and memories of his own as metaphor, by abstracting and transforming the landscape he experienced with his dynamic use of narrative and formal processes. In a departure from the linear approach to story-telling he deploys fragmented imagery marked by rapidly shifting angles of view – but isn't this exactly how the promise of unlimited access to images and content brings with it the risk of exhaustion as our memories become distorted and inauthentic and their images, endlessly "on repeat", fragments of memory referring to themselves even as they re-invent themselves?

Peter Neighbour says his work is about conserving memories and emotions not about a slavish attempt to depict or reproduce in the manner of a photograph. He simultaneously deconstructs what he has seen into fragments of remembered imagery that are then re-configured in multiple new ways from multiple angles in order to suppress a constant striving for novelty. Neighbour sees his artistic practice as dynamic whereby an idea for a work begins with a single pictorial fragment or element which he then builds upon by adding and layering other, unrelated fragments until these multiple elements come to constitute a new image – a collage of memories. As the work progresses every mark made is done with consideration for how it relates to what is already there on the paper, for its own structure and for its place within the composition. His canvas can be interpreted metaphorically as a three-dimensional space from which matter and subject matter are constantly extending outwards.

By merging or layering one motif with or over another this interplay sets up a dialogue between linear elements in the composition and small-scale colour fields to give the effect of a landscape viewed from very different angles - be it from far away or suddenly right up close. What the artist has seen – once broken up into fragments – now looks like a puzzle waiting for a solution as we struggle to make sense of what is before our eyes. And yet we don't need to make sense of it. Neighbour deconstructs and reconstructs different shapes and motifs that come together again and again as new images. His work is strongly influenced by a mode of expression that is process-based and that seeks to tell a story. In telling the story his work hints both at the fragility of a self-evidently changing natural world and at his own fragile existence.

Before committing any compositions to paper he will take the time to select and deconstruct images found either on line or as print-outs lying around the studio. The harder he can make it to recognise the original image as a piece of visual information, the more effective these fragmented ideas and memories become for his work. These distorted fragments are layered and stacked, twisted and inverted until they coalesce into a new composition with its own landscape architecture.

When it comes to narrative in an image Neighbour doesn't follow any predetermined way of reading, or any set order or any rule. Instead he encourages his viewers to experience a feeling of movement in the way he deploys multiple and confusing viewpoints while at the same time highlighting his painting practice. The layering of colour, the way in which paint is applied and the intense, gestural brushwork are evidenced again and again by corrections and adaptations made as the work proceeds. The dynamism in a line, in a brushstroke and in the application of paint together results in a feeling of space he deploys to give the composition a sense of movement and depth of field. This is especially clear in the stop-motion video installations which explicitly highlight the role of dynamic gesture in the unfolding narrative.

The way he paints, the way he remembers his encounters with nature and the rawness of the Antarctic landscape all come together as dialogue within work full of personal memories. As far as Neighbour is concerned creativity is not about laying down a convincing image of one's surroundings. For him it's much more about how he can narrate by visual means the different processes in the evolution of his artistic practice.

Neighbour has been on an intense artistic journey from figurative representation all the way to abstraction. This development in his painting can be seen against the backdrop of his expedition to Antarctica in 2020 but begins before this back in 2018 with a journey through Chilean Patagonia coming together in work of colour and texture that places colour itself in all its subtle variety at the composition's heart. During this part of his artistic journey Neighbour uses colour in order to reveal patterns and structures in the canvas ground itself to make these very features central to the composition.

Clearly fascinated with the notion of incorporating non-figurative shapes into his work he then begins to produce abstract shapes and forms derived from the world he sees around him all the while consciously avoiding representation as he does so. As an alternative to an artistic recreation of spatial depth and perspective he instead stresses the flatness of his compositions itself the result of reducing or abstracting the source image to its visually essential elements. Two-dimensionality in Neighbour's work is seen with its emphasis on structural and textural flatness in order to establish a sense of calm and clarity and to challenge his viewers to revisit the very complex way they experience their own world.

If Neighbour's early focus for his compositions was the figure and the human condition it was also the means by which he depicted the emotions and thoughts that make up our human condition. Over time abstract forms and patterns start to appear in this work in terms of texture, the interplay of line, patterns or the use of variable perspective.

Ultimately Neighbour's style moves away from figuration, through chromatic abstraction and to a position according to which forms and figures are derived by the of abstraction of images of the natural world. The focus is on flat planes which he places at the centre of his work. In **does it do what it says on the tin** these abstracted forms no longer stand isolated in abstract space as before but have become fragmented elements of landscapes intermingling and constantly changing appearance as the composition develops. These abstractions have been subjected to a process of constant change and transformation and invite viewers to follow Neighbour's world view as his work again and again tests the boundary between figuration and abstraction.

Experimentation continues with a series of smaller-sized compositions that show focus and concentration and for the first time his work features the rectangle motif. Pairs of transparent colour are layered in glazes to combine optically on the canvas to form a third, new colour. To illustrate the change in style, he exhibits an entire series of his studies and observations.

Neighbour forms the view that his art needs more than motifs. It needs also the kind of fluidity familiar to us from comic and cartoon drawings. In sketchbooks Neighbour begins to fill pages with cartoon-like sketches with recurring motifs evolving into a visual language of his own. Other sketches are schematic representations of snow-covered glaciers, ice floes with seals, whales, penguins and rocks made of ancient volcanic rock.

Initially these sketches and cartoons are mainly monochrome, but then Neighbour decides to experiment with colour and develops several of these motifs further in the form of watercolour studies. During this process the original motifs become even more simplified and abstracted as he seeks to distance them visually as far as possible from their Antarctic origins. Individual pieces that stress landscape as their theme around gain expressive force by the way they seem to confront each other. Minute contradictions, misalignments and incongruities oblige his viewers to re-set their expectations of drama in a composition. Neighbour's work plays with our sub-conscious expectations when we look at painting by his use of flat two-dimensionality referencing the graphic quality of a traditional woodcut.

The themes and issues raised in his art range from formal questions about colour, texture and form to how one's own memory may be distorted and fragmented as motifs drift apart to combine as new images, the illusion of a flat surface, the dichotomy of interior and exterior space, of depth, place and how we remember them. In playing with this very ambiguity and ignorance, new viewpoints and perspectives emerge from these imagined places (or rather *non*-places) which themselves resist definition but instead are solely there to be experienced. In *Des Espaces Autres* (1984) Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984) describes spaces unseen in society as so-called "other spaces" as *heterotopias* - places that are located within society yet are simultaneously "other" or outside society. These are places where a person breaks with her traditional or conventional time in order to experience and relate to the world differently.

Heterotopias need to be distinguished from utopias: the latter are sites that have no real location. They are the subject of a belief in progress that has persisted throughout Western history until today. The heterotopias, on the other hand, are sites that really exist, but which are at the same time different, contradictory, ambivalent, in relation to normal or everyday reality.

Michel Foucault, *Des Espaces Autres*

Such ambiguity leads to a situation where certainty and facts become unsettled and unstable as they give way to other concepts such the familiar or the identifiable with the result that sometimes the self-evident appears contradictory. Neighbour may attempt to fix his memories on canvas but made up of impressions and emotions as all memories are they remain in constant state of flux a case in point being the painting *humanist (genderfluid) with saints* (2021). Neighbour uses his work to investigate what we actually can remember with all its accuracies and the inaccuracies, our illusions of surface and perspective and, above all, those places and structures as they lose themselves within both our inner and outer realities and become indistinguishable.

Are we now looking at thought in visual form – ideas that are scenes from a remembered landscape where the memory has become blurred and the viewers are allowed to zoom in or zoom out as if they were floating? In such a state of suspended animation one might latch on to a part of the composition, say a rock, stone or glacier and in trying to hold on fast to that idea wonder if actually it's more likely to be a seal, a penguin or perhaps even an oversized nose?

But despite (or perhaps because of) an energy that firmly resists attempts at interpretation there is a curiosity too and a wit all of its own. It may be true that Neighbour's work can evoke feelings of being hopelessly lost within a landscape, they nevertheless invite you to step back and not only see but enjoy the forms and structures within the work. Neighbour requires the viewer to notice every little detail, whether edges, textures and shapes, as well as certain colours - because after all, it is these details that inform and highlight that everything is but a detail of something bigger that Neighbour has zoomed us into or out of.

His work aims to convert painterly processes associated with three-dimensional space to that of two-dimensionality. An image's sense of space and depth is thus altered by alienation and playing around with context and meaning to modify the sense of space while referring back to what came before. However it doesn't offer any escape from that afore-mentioned ever-present everyday overloading of our senses. Instead of an escape Neighbour offers a sense of dynamic two-dimensionality in order to relocate this feature of the human condition in a new context by challenging us to analyse our received ideas of space, time and place so as to engage with the complexity before us in a new way.

The flat structures and perspectives of his work invite the viewer to embrace a world abstracted and reduced to its elements making clear we are to distinguish between reality and its painted image taking us with these ideas to probe the speculative limits of what we can imagine.

His work seem to be both a search for memory and perception and the visual expression of what it means to lack belief in either concept: the possibility of illusion and where and what leads us ultimately to **the vanishing point** (2022), as one of Neighbour's works is called. In this painting he presents a delicate, lace-like pattern that begins to dissolve on the canvas itself as it changes into large, richly textured brushstrokes, in contrast to **into a field of blue** (2022) a painting on the opposite wall of the **projektraum** show in which similarly blue brushstrokes remain unambiguously unresolved. His work offers the viewer a new perspective on the interplay between what we see, what we remember, sense and understand yet at the same time allowing us an escape from all of it.

Ultimately the viewer is left with the question only she can answer:

**does it do what it says on the tin?**

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