



# SPECIAL MOVES

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**MOP**

LEAH EMERY IS REPRESENTED BY SULLIVAN AND STRUMPF, SYDNEY  
AND HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE  
CHRISTIAN FLYNN IS REPRESENTED BY THE HUGHES GALLERY, SYDNEY  
JULIE FRAGAR IS REPRESENTED BY SARAH COTTIER GALLERY, SYDNEY  
AND HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE  
MILES HALL IS REPRESENTED BY GALERIE AL/MA, MONTPELLIER  
ARRYN SNOWBALL IS REPRESENTED BY HEISER GALLERY, BRISBANE

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COVER MILES HALL, SPLICE (SIBELIUS BLUE), 2009, OIL ON ALUMINIUM, 120 x 100 CM

BACK COVER CHRISTIAN FLYNN, UNIFICATION THEORY 2, 2012, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 50 x 100 x 3 CM  
PHOTO KARL WARNER.

ALL QUOTES FROM THE ARTISTS ARE TAKEN FROM CONVERSATIONS AND EXCHANGES THROUGHOUT 2012.  
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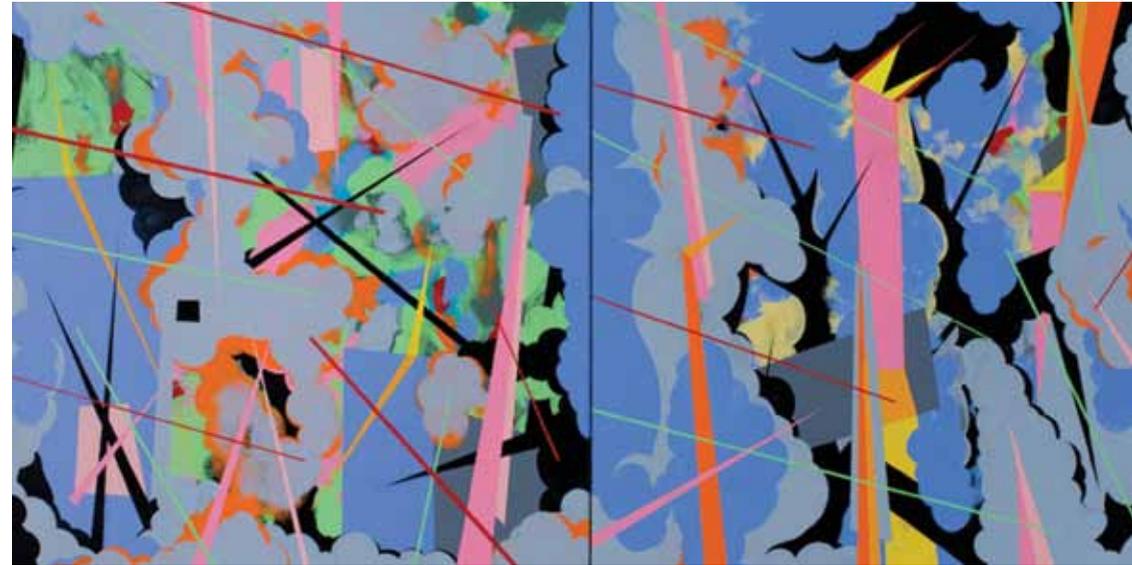
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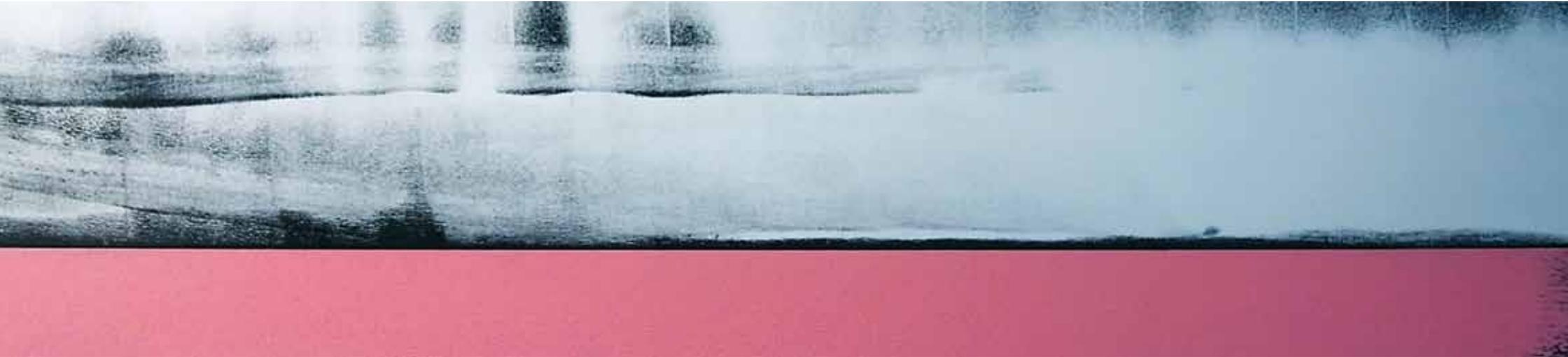
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CHRISTIAN FLYNN, UNIFICATION THEORY 1, 2012, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 50 x 100 x 3 CM.  
PHOTO KARL WARNER.

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MILES HALL, HORIZONTAL (LIGHT MAGENTA), 2012, ACRYLIC ON HONEYCOMB ALUMINIUM, 28 x 112 CM.

This exhibition began to form while I was brainstorming possible themes for my postgraduate study. Drawing, the primary focus of my thesis, acts as loose connective tissue between artists and their work. This idea is vindicated throughout the history of art. Drawing is a continuum that, due to its unique integration as a pedagogical and preparatory tool for artists, and its eventual evolution into an autonomous medium, has maintained value and essence through centuries of art making. Moreover, it has linked the different iterations of the fine arts, as it has linked their historical contexts. Although the function of drawing varies from artist to artist, it is a fundamental component of the creative act. However, this exhibition must not be mistaken for a survey of broader drawing. Rather, it's a consideration of how crucial, in this digital age, drawing and the qualities of drawing are to contemporary art practices. While the world embraces the digital with increasing necessity, artists are able to retain some semblance of autonomy through the (very human) tactile experience of art making.

Consider the strengths of drawing: intuition, improvisation, gesture. These qualities are growing more essential in response to the slick, disembodied experience of the techno-capital image bank. Of course the digital has a place within art, and is a form of metadrawing itself (Photoshop, Illustrator, 3DS Max and Final Cut Pro among others all employ drawing strategies within their programming), but the difference between the hand-drawn and the virtual mark grows more pronounced with every digital advancement. As the digital mark becomes more 'real' looking, it moves further away from the actual act of mark-making itself, becoming a representation of a representation. This exhibition positions drawing—an inherently and undeniably human instinct—as a resistance, or alternative, to the digital status quo. Above all, these artists revel in this instinct. Their work is profound, heartfelt, personal and yet somehow universal.

Before I continue, let me state from the outset that I do not consider my role in this exhibition to be that of a curator. Yes, I have assembled artists whose work I believe is complementary, exploring ideas and philosophies that connect through their respective studio practices. But this exhibition—and indeed this group of artists—means far too much to me on a personal level to distance myself enough to embrace this role. It is my opinion, which I am sure many would consider antiquated, that the role of the curator does not extend into actual exhibited work. Call it professional distance. In fact, the more I ponder the shifting role, and indeed the very definition of the curator, the more I am convinced that it is a term that's had its day in the art world and, like many ideas adopted by the mainstream, perhaps should be retired. Music and theatre festivals are now 'curated'. I recently read a press-release for a new Janis Joplin compilation that was 'curated'. Perhaps the selectors for the next Australian test cricket team will also adopt the term. I consider this exhibition far more exegetical, in that these artists form an important circle upon whom I rely for straight-talking advice, as well as for critique and discussion about art and, often, about life.

*Special Moves* is an exhibition of the work of six artists, myself included, whose studio practices observe drawing as key to their art making. As these artists are at their happiest in the studio, it seemed obvious to base the structure of the exhibition on the exegesis. That is, while the exhibition features artists who may be connected through a general conceptual, media-specific, ideological or thematic membrane, it also explores the connections between the artists and their practices. These artists have influenced my own studio practice dramatically, and have been teachers, mentors, rivals, colleagues and, of course, friends. As such, the selection of Leah Emery, Christian Flynn, Julie Fragar, Miles Hall and Arryn Snowball was simple.



LEAH EMERY, IN BETWEEN (DETAIL), 2012, EMBROIDERY THREAD AND AIDA CLOTH, 3 PANELS 6 x 4.3 CM EACH.

The work of these artists avoids the Postmodern contrivances of irony and cynicism. Instead, forging ahead in mediums often considered prosaic—drawing, painting, printmaking, cross-stitch and sculpture—they focus on their own personal visions and processes within the studio. Their work achieves a balance between the perceived arrogance of virtuosity, and a conscious reluctance to laze into dull, overt didacticism, or to dumb-down in a misguided attempt to become more cerebral. In other words, the work does what art should, but often doesn't: it speaks for itself, effortlessly wielding equal part body, mind and spirit—that unexplainable, wonderful *something* inherent in all great art.

Snowball's videos are the only 'recent' technology appearing within the exhibition, yet even here the format merely acts as a picture plane for a hand-made, hand-manipulated experience. So as well as a return to materials widely considered outmoded, *Special Moves* is a strong argument for a return to sincerity and the search for meaning in and through art making. These are six young artists with complete and absolute dedication to the studio and their art.

CHRISTIAN FLYNN'S ethos sits uneasily between that of the Modernist ideologist and the pop-culture mercenary. Flynn exposes the Modernist ideas of utopia, unity and fundamental truth as an extension of meaninglessness propagated by consumer culture. For Flynn, the scenario where art and consumer culture are united reduces the possibility for meaningful cultural production. In spite of this position, Flynn believes that a genuine contemporary struggle for meaning is essential to contemporary art making. It is in the face of overwhelming vacuity that hope for cultural production for art exists. Flynn takes refuge in the immersive qualities of the studio, allowing process to dominate the direction of the work. Personal concerns are distanced or disguised through abstraction, or disassociated through quoted text in the form of titles. These cunning feats of visual sleight-of-hand offer a glimpse into a practice that is essentially troubled in its search for truth or meaning through studio work, yet is vindicated through this labour.

Flynn is a prolific painter, draftsman and sculptor, often having multiple works in progress at any one time. Recently working with super-flat, hard-edged geometric shapes, his work pushes and pulls the gaze through colourful, intricate and sometimes violent abstract configurations of form. The works are made with a layered process that sees the artist beginning with loose gestural marks and washes of paint. After this layer has dried, Flynn begins to dominate the surface with progressive layers of hard-edged geometric forms, which become more refined with each layer. Recently, however, the organic has begun to resurface over the final layers.

*When I begin I'll have a vague idea about how much visual information I need in the painting, but that's about it. I ask myself the question, what do I need / want this painting to do? Should it be simple or complex? Loud or subdued? But it does take on its own life eventually and the painting dictates what it becomes. Sometimes it seems that I have only so much control over how these things turn out. That's a good thing though.*

Flynn's titles are as sharp as the shapes in his work and, influenced by films, science fiction and video games, they are only slightly tongue-in-cheek: 'I Want to Believe', 'Wrong Way, Go Back', 'Moderately Authoritarian Composition'. These are often drawn from the

artist's own journal writings, which shift between poetic lyricism and brutal statement. 'My attitude to the phrases ... is much the same as my attitude towards the titles of the paintings. So they can be accurate but also misleading depending on what I feel like putting out at the time', says Flynn. The artist employs drawing as a way of preparing for larger works. While technically they could be considered preparatory sketches, they function as rehearsals for the intuition and process of painting itself, rather than compositional plans.

*Drawings are a great way to be more automatic about making. The small paintings on paper are a good way to experiment in preparation for the larger works. I only use them to warm up. I don't replicate them in the bigger paintings. Paper is a wonderful surface to work on and the smaller scale makes them more intimate.*

The intensity and drama of Flynn's paintings can easily suggest images of unexplainable refractions of light, or lasers firing endlessly in some galactic future war, but Flynn insists on the primacy of the art object over any secondary concerns.

*For me paintings are objects first, not surrogates for other things. Even though they do stand-in for non-material things such as ideas. It is a balance between the two and I do try to balance my subject matter with the presence of the object. I want the material to fuse well with the ideas without resorting to some sort of illusion or con. I want compromised truths operating parallel of one another. So I guess I do abstract from things but I hold no preconceptions about trying to capture any sort of truth or purity in my paintings.*

LEAH EMERY appropriates and adapts the very topical (and fertile) visual matter of pornography to create a unique artistic discourse critiquing the dominant visual culture. Her work questions and explores the relationship between art and pornography in content, form and media. Using another popular, but somewhat archaic art form, the cross-stitch, to create detailed hardcore sex scenes, Emery challenges the distinctions between art, craft and culture. These works suggest that pornography has become as permissible as knitting. Perhaps it has. Because of the intricate grid-based nature of the cross-stitch, the works simulate dot-matrix offset printing, the grain of photography, or pixelated screen graphics with uncanny precision, challenging our conceptions of the graphic, whilst still engaging with tradition. Emery's work exploits the meditative, hypnotic qualities of the practice of drawing by breaking down the visual elements of photography and video and processing them back into the physical world, much as these images once imitated life. Her work requires a fastidious attention to detail, and many working hours.

The hunt for particularly interesting source imagery no doubt keeps Emery's artistic hunger burning, fuelling the energy to charge into the endless repetition of cross-stitch, but with an unusual eye for a pornography aficionado, looking for interesting compositions or aesthetic flourishes to translate, rather than the most titillating situation or biggest erection—unless the composition is right, of course! 'Sitting down at the computer with my treasure trove of bizarre pornography folders mapping out thematic series, or scouring sites and video stockpiles chasing an idea or notion that might be almost impossible to find is such an *Indiana Jones*-style treasure hunt for me that it takes on quite a clinical nature'.

JULIE FRAGAR, GHOST SKIN, 2013, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT ON HAHNAMUELE, 45 x 30 CM.

JULIE FRAGAR, POKING THE GHOST SKIN, 2013, ARCHIVAL PIGMENT PRINT ON HAHNAMUELE, 45 x 30 CM.



Of course, the initial excitement for an idea or composition soon gives way to the reality of the rigours of the practice itself.

*It's always such a tease to concoct a work and prepare it to be started on, and then get to it with the enthusiasm of making the first mark on a blank canvas, only to see your first day [or] night's work amount to several centimetres of produce. These days I'll usually prepare a series to work on, and when the end point is several months of hard slog the initial enthusiasm abates along the way. I've been experimenting with different scale lately, so there have been a few works I made ... which could be completed within a few days to a week while the heady fervour still had a grasp on me.*

Emery's work is graphic almost by default, its form demanding comparisons to photography, drawing, and the digital.

*The link between the pixelated nature of the work and the sourcing of the imagery is very apt. The internet is the ultimate destination for pornography in our time, to the degree that no other formerly prolific avenues come close to the authority the net has. So it's by choice, but also by default that I mostly use the vast resources of the net to source the images I use in my work. Seeing as I err to the side of vintage imagery, beards, body hair, big bushy human landscapes, I'm free to collect away from niche websites instead of scouring dusty second hand erotica, which sounds far more romantic and appealing, but time consuming and most likely near impossible.*

A special thrill is reserved for those who observe first-time viewers of Emery's work in the gallery. Gravitating toward the colours or detail and attempting to penetrate the abstracted form itself, viewers will often lean in for that closer look, before the intricate, pornographic penny drops.

**JULIE FRAGAR'S** work has a deep emotional resonance, partly due to her subject matter, which is predominantly her family and friends, and intermittent text works, which are situated throughout her figurative works. Fragar's formidable virtuosity comes from a strong studio ethos.

*You could say it's autobiographical, but self-reflexively so. It might be more accurate to say that I am interested in human relationships, on the effect we have on each other—this also includes the artist/subject/viewer relationship. I'm interested in how you choose to show yourself to a viewer, how intimate it can feel and the kind of solidarity or otherwise that can be born of seeming to GIVE of yourself. At the same time I am a formalist—so I'm interested in the shape of broadly human experience and the way it operates in relation to art.*

Fragar's studio practice makes use of images usually chosen from her own personal family photographs. Images are gathered and allowed to gestate for a long time before the artist begins to 'believe in an idea', as Fragar puts it. 'So I might notice a photo or a bit of text or a feeling and I write it down and stick it on the wall and let it come back to me over time and check if it is as poignant or complex as I first thought it was', she says. Often intersected with text pieces, Fragar's work (sometimes inexplicably) avoids suggesting the straight autobiography typical of the family-snapshot-as-source-material.

The text, often ominous, is completely devoid of spacing or punctuation. For example, ALLOFA SUDDEN STARTED TO LIKE IT, adds a disquieting element to the narrative of the works. The term 'narrative' here applies to a story of Julie Fragar rather than Julie's Fragar's story—the work just happens to be cast with the artist and her friends and family. While Fragar doesn't paint strangers, her work does not fit neatly into portraiture.

*I never paint anyone I don't know because it would be uninteresting to me ... Not to say that I am interested in portraiture as a kind of capturing of an individual spirit, but that the process would be too dull for me to make a decent painting—painting someone is like spending time with them, and this is an aspect I enjoy, obviously later, it becomes something else; it becomes a painting of something much more retinal, and universal ... All relationships are ambiguous, I try to be careful about exposing too much. Some people would think I give away much too much ... Art comes from the deep and sometimes secret places.*

Interestingly, the act of painting friends and family has repercussions brought about by the assimilation of the self-editing and autobiographical capabilities of digital photography and social media into the everyday world.

*I have recently started to get a great deal of flack from the people I paint. I think it used to be okay because not many people saw my work, but the more people see it the more the subject cares how they are represented—and rightly so. In the past I used to think I owned those images in the photos I took, but really people own their own representations and so I try to be more careful with that than I used to be. It has led me to relying more and more on my own image. It's simply easier, and it can be interesting too, to think about your image as separate from yourself.*

Source images are often deliberately composed, a contemporary variant on the traditional studio portrait painting. 'I definitely pose most of the time these days. In the beginning I cared about the snapshot, but more and more my work wants to say something to do with human relationships that I need to set up quite purposefully. You can only get so far with accidents', says Fragar. In this way, the paintings operate in a similar way to 'machine' paintings—each inhabitant, object and locale is a code working in tandem with the rest of the image's composition. However, in this case, these codes are not explicitly explained, and therefore the work retains a mystery, increasingly rare in contemporary art.

**ARRAYN SNOWBALL'S** practice, though typically identified as that of the painter, employs a diverse array of studio processes in the development of an artwork. Snowball is an enthusiastic experimenter, who plays with text, collage, drawing, watercolour, photography and video in order to solidify thoughts and push boundaries, before settling at his destination. Long periods of thought and consideration are spent before committing to an intense period of studio time to execute a series. Snowball's oeuvre is seemingly broad, yet fits together in a surprisingly singular body of work. *Special Moves* sees the coming together of two of Snowball's investigations, his recent photographic / video works and what he refers to as his 'sheet paintings'. Snowball describes the creation of the sheet paintings as 'implementing'.



ARRYN SNOWBALL, SLOW DANCE (STILL), 2012.



*The layers are built up over time, so each layer means you've got a week to dry, so they take a couple of months... I basically draw the shape with masking tape, and then fill it in. I've got about a week to think about where the next shape is going to go ... and how it's going to interact with previous layers ... you don't know until you take the masking tape off, and see what's happened. It's a process of going 'enough'.*

Snowball's work contributes to the white square investigations of Malevich and Ryman. In particular, Snowball engages with the idea of painting as a reductive endeavour, of abstract painting reducing down to the simplest form, *the white square as the last painting*. While Snowball acknowledges his interest in reductive practices, he ultimately rejects the politics of the idea and looks for new ways to contribute, attempting to escape the pristine qualities of the white square by breathing imperfections, by breathing life, back into its pristine form.

*The white square and that relationship to minimalism and the history of reductive painting, [is] sort of a basis for the work in a way, but it's not really what's interesting about the work for me—it's a fairly didactic beginning point. But then what's interesting is how other things take over, like how a sense of movement takes over, and the light embodied in the sheets, and that is not just something that enlivens the image, it almost has a bit of critical weight, in a way ... But if it is taken in the context of the rest of my [sheet] works ... it's just one little bit of stillness in the whole dynamic array of movement—things fill up and pare down again, and move and shift across and it's not this reduction down to an end.*

Appearing alongside one of the sheet paintings are three of Snowball's videos from his *Slow Dance* series. Deceptively simple, the works are abstraction in motion. The velvety black forms appear to be moving through negative space with digital fluidity. However, they are in fact entirely sculptural, being manipulated by hand and wheel, filmed by the roving camera eye, which is also being steered by hand, thus creating an illusion of movement. The sheer graphic qualities of the stark black structures and their deep shadows over the negative space conjure action painting, another illusion of movement.

The practice of **MILES HALL** is a meditation on the defining characteristics of a variety of media, and how they can be manipulated to create a meaningful, tactile, visual and personal experience for the viewer. Hall's work posits the practice of painting as a resistance to the disembodied experience of the digital paradigm through its continued use of the archaic medium of paint. Hall describes the beginnings of his studio processes with characteristic clarity:

*I like to establish a particular relationship between what I hold in my hand and the physical encounter it has with the chosen support. This relationship is at once visual, but also tactile, emotional and temporal ... I like to play with the tactile qualities of the chosen medium, to see what range of marks I can achieve and on what kind of support. There is a certain quality in the mark and line that I look for, usually the work emerges from this very basic physical dimension.*

In fact, Hall's practice had its beginnings in representation. As a young man, Hall invested innumerable hours in life drawing, which has had a lasting effect on the artist not in terms of subject matter, but as a conceptual approach and strategy for art making.

*There is a direct continuity with the past through drawing and I think drawing the figure seems an intelligent thing to do for any artist today concerned with visual form. The process of drawing the figure awakened me to the abstract qualities of line, tone, gesture and scale. These are components that I now explore in a non-representational way. In relation to continuum, the haptic, abstract quality of a Rembrandt line drawing, for example, becomes a fascinating thing to reconsider in light of what's happening with the rise of digital technologies and the marginalisation of the physical. The presence of such a drawing is as much felt today as it was in the seventeenth century. Drawing establishes a continual dialogue between the past and the present. So it is out of a significant respect for the history of drawing that I endeavour to participate in its history ... The physical presence of a line, its ability to evoke pictorial form while maintaining its arbitrary constituency as mark, provides an endless array of visual possibilities.*

Hall's use of abstraction, particularly when drawing, is interesting in that it is suggestive of representation. Hints of forms emerge through the highly gestural, intuitive charcoal marks. Hall then partially dips the works into a carefully mixed paint that flattens into a pure surface, offsetting any illusions of representation and firmly stating the work's purpose as an art object. Hall explains his attraction to the abstract by saying,

*Painting that is concerned with process—the how rather than what—appeals to me more than an occupation with mimetic realism or symbolism ... All painting is a construction really, what we call figurative realism is actually just a very clever form of illusion. Realism has become confused with representation. What I value with what we have come to call 'Abstraction' is its ability to present a visual experience rather than represent an existing reality.*

Hall has adapted several new grounds into his processes, including, most notably, sandpaper and aluminium, as a way to challenge the forms and preconceptions of abstraction.

*I think the only thing left for painting is its ability to transform materials in interesting and unforeseen ways. Photography and digital technologies have the mimetic role of representation pretty well covered. There are two obvious tensions in my work that have developed out of a love of modernism, notably the school of gestural expression and the heritage of minimalism. One based on a highly personalised, subjective response to the world, the other an austere, reductivism.*

**MY OWN WORK**, which operates as a personal codex of complex, but freely interpreted images, comes to form what I consider a meta-autobiography—fictitious, yet entirely true, a personal apocalypse. Viewed alongside Flynn's meditations on chaos and control, Emery's intricate questioning of art and erotica, Fragar's personal-yet-universal metanarratives, Snowball's poetics of time, space and movement and Hall's deft manoeuvres of form and gesture, my melodrama of sex and death completes our exhibition, our *Special Moves*.

Jonathan McBurnie, April 2013



JONATHAN MCBURNIE, WELCOME TO THE FUTURE, 2013, INK AND CORRECTION FLUID ON PAPER, 99 x 36 CM.

