

REVIEW - 17 NOV 2013

Helen Johnson

BY KIT WISE



Helen Johnson, *History Problem*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 2.5 x 1.8 m

'Meantime' is Helen Johnson's recent foray into the complex territories of Australian identity and painting. Both are problem-rich, offering abundant resources for plunder and Johnson performs a

daredevil raid. The country's history overflows with narratives of appropriation, whether through colonization, resource exploitation or fashion. Johnson's extraordinarily intelligent work finds pivot points between these concerns, generating a contested field that mirrors contemporary Australia.

Hands and islands, loaded with possibilities for political readings, proliferate across her diverse body of work. We're familiar with the corporeal rhetoric beloved of our leaders, for whom the handshake or victory salute are often more rehearsed than their policies. After Duterrau's *The Conciliation: The Qualification* (all works 2013) quotes from Benjamin Duterrau's 1840 painting of an imagined meeting between George Augustus Robinson, the Chief Protector of Aborigines during the early days of the colony in Tasmania, and a local Indigenous community. Floating in a field of multi-tinted brush marks, the handshake and the finger-point are as much calligraphic abstract flourishes as nation-defining signs: perhaps that is all they ever were. Elsewhere, the hand emerging Monty Python-esque from behind a palm tree on a supposed desert island makes the sign for 'thief'. Given the lack of audience on the island, it gestures towards the viewers of the painting, presumably recognizing its address is to history rather than geography, a vacuous flourish in the middle of nowhere.

The Australian mainland is itself a vast island, subject to what Geoffrey Blainey famously described as the 'tyranny of distance' in his 1966 book of that name. Terrible things have happened on Australian islands, as the history of the Tasmanian aborigines tells us, and continue today, with the highly contested Pacific Solution to the asylum seeker 'boat people' crisis. Johnson's islands read as Godot-like destinations, cartoon mounds where history and language fail us. The use of sign language in *Island (Thief)* alerts us to the artist's focus on the visual – here, painting – as a sign system. Johnson states: 'I have an increasing interest in painting not as a means of representation but as a ground where representatives can play in a more pluralistic visual language which deals in suggestiveness, distortion and ambiguity rather than depiction and statement.' Meaning reverberates across her networks of 'suggestiveness' through an intricate play of mark, texture and colour as much as sign, image and motif. In many respects the show is a virtuoso study in technique, an immersion in the communicative potential of her medium. *History Problem* calmly opposes the thick paint of the scene quoted from *The Arrest of Governor Bligh* (1808) – a key event in early Australian history, depicted by an unknown artist – with the dappled, pastel tones of the contemporary foreground figures; in *Island (Time Flies)* palm fronds are quickly sketched with thin brush-marks against a spray-painted sand dune, alongside ridges of stencilled, sculpted paint indicating tree bark. Johnson engages the mind, teases the eye and triggers the gut, stranding us between competing responses and intuitions.

Inheritance is a large canvas that combines flat and textured monochrome surfaces with broad, liquid brushmarks and diffused spray paint. Each is sectioned off, or only marginally overlaps, providing another account of spatial territorialization. Volume, weight and pressure interact in a psycho-dynamic as complex and compelling as the more legible histories found in Johnson's iconographic works. Arguably, the paintings also focus self-consciously on their status as commodities, aesthetic devices that, in their own way, fuel the wider play of power and politics that her work addresses. *Corporate Hopper* presents a black, textured monochrome field alongside what appears to be the corridor from some industry headquarters – as if the painting is thinking of its own destiny, marooned on an expensive wall, somewhere remote.

Perhaps the most striking element of Johnson's work is her handling of the figure. Often depicted in delicately rendered profile but without facial features, her images resonate with the precise outlines of Egyptian and Hellenistic painting. Clothing is described through subtle colour and texture, with careful attention paid to footwear and folds of cloth. Seemingly off-balance, if not deliberately ungainly, Johnson's figures have little of the usual poise found in magazine shoots, film stills or history paintings. In this series, they occur in pairs and appear to be female, but there seems little communication between them: in Postcolonial Feminist Drama this is deliberately impeded through one being blindfolded. Her figures provide no easy answers but, like us, are left to ponder their constituent sensitivities and illegibilities.

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frieze magazine

First published in Issue 159

November-December 2013

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