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INCANDESCENT MOLECULES

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## INCANDESCENT MOLECULES

Linda Cook

*What you want is an experience of making something that you haven't seen before.*

Philip Guston<sup>1</sup>

This essay offers insight into my Master of Fine Art project, which I completed at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic. My inquiry centred on paint: why does paint continue to fascinate and captivate? To answer this, I needed to untangle painting, abstraction and new materialism. My relationship with paint runs deep; I need to paint. Even when there is no foreseeable end goal or project conclusion, the discipline of working in studio keeps my mind and body well. For me, this does not mean mimesis, the replicating or copying of things; rather, I yearn to be completely immersed in oily, viscous colour. Getting my hands and eyes involved with raw matter is stimulating. As the body and eye engage, my awareness of the opportunities existing within the various substances at my disposal increases.

Contemporary abstraction and paint does not necessitate 'understanding' or receiving a message; it is fine if the viewer is puzzled. My hope for work-viewer engagement is a connection beyond the purely decorative, one which arouses a physical response – a feeling that comes from the gut or throat when you see the work. I am satisfied if you pause and connect with the object in front of you.

So where do these feelings come from and how do we understand this phenomenon? Could they originate in primal arousal, a corporeal connection, or something beyond our intellect? Gregory Minissale, in *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism*, discusses the maker's moments of immersion, "unthinking" and rhythm during the creative process, as if meditating with eyes wide open.<sup>2</sup> This period is often referred to as flow time,<sup>3</sup> a period of being absorbed by the action of doing. Minissale references both Michael Fried and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi with regard to the losing of self and connecting with otherness. Minissale posits that as we relax cognitive control, matter and mind meet, and this opens the door for all elements on the table to have agency.



Figure 1. Linda Cook, *Incandescent Molecules*, 2022, mixed media, 600x490mm.

Following this time of intense immersion, I find it useful to detach and take time to walk away. Leaving the work to sit is one of the most valuable tools I have adopted as a painter; the work needs to have its own space and I need to detach from it. Like any relationship, as we separate, we appreciate each other more. On returning, I see more clearly what is needed. Sometimes the work is done and needs nothing more. At other times, it needs a longer period of reflection.

I began this project working by distance in Te Tai Tokerau. Moving to Ōtepoti with my whanau in 2020 meant that I could explore new materials and surfaces and not be restricted by freight. I started to consider the durability of aluminium and builders' products. Some satisfactory textures emerged but there was, for me, a lack of love. It was through COVID lockdown that I found my raw material.

Locked out of studio and stuck for materials, I found the supermarket to be a source of copious quantities of free cardboard. I had virtually nothing else to work with and so began trialling, prepping and painting on discarded packaging. Constructing the porous surface was a challenge and seemed to take forever. There were times when I began to wonder why I had put myself through this. Cutting, sealing, gessoing and bracing ... it just went on. Although I had set myself a difficult task, I found the whole process of working with stubborn, obstinate cardboard far more pleasing than the rigid and industrial character of aluminium. Cardboard offered the potential of layering and constructing the surfaces, and I was excited by its malleable, chewy edge.

The challenge of constructing the sandwiched surfaces began to fascinate me, and became an obsession. Layering the cardboard in opposing directions added strength to the structure and helped counter any warping. I worked with found cardboard shapes, mixing them up and looking for awkward and unusual moments within the structure, finding pleasure in the unpredictable. I wanted my paintings to visually challenge, and sought un-pretty relationships, the clumsy, squanky and confronting. Due to the investigative nature of the making process, several factors required consideration: surface, fluid colour; fillers, detritus. Sensitivity and awareness of the various elements grew as I became attuned to the materials, considered their ability to cooperate and began extending colour and tone by experimenting with reactive colours. There were moments when the materials began to coalesce, when the extraordinary clunkiness in the work became a matter of intrigue and pleasure. Herein lies the enjoyable part of the process. The various cardboard components and textures are juggled around until the combined layers become a cohesive unit or 'sandwich.' Once the construction is satisfactory, I can immerse myself in the painterly part of the process.

In *One Way to Skin a Cat* (Figure 2), the awkwardness and slippage of the boards is balanced by strong horizontal lines which pre-existed in the cardboard packaging, while a bold blue stripe up the centre delivers dynamism to the lumpy red field.

As the fundamental utilitarian materials cohabit, they emerge as novel objects, their role re-evaluated. This 'curatorial' process of repurposing and re-imagining is evident in *You Can Only Indulge in Conjecture* (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Linda Cook, *One Way to Skin a Cat*, 2021, mixed media, 1450x1200mm.





Figure 3. Linda Cook, *You Can Only Indulge in Conjecture*, 2022, mixed media, 800x590mm.



Figure 4. Linda Cook, *It Gets in Through Your Eyes*, 2022, mixed media, 570x410mm.



Figure 5. Linda Cook, *Before I Was Born I Met You*, 2022, mixed media, 1200x1450mm.

Balancing colour, form and texture, *You Can Only Indulge in Conjecture* is the result of a thought process built upon new-materiality and neo-casualism.<sup>4</sup> Neo-casualism is present in the elements of humour arising from the unrefined, quirky form of the piece. In the practice of painting, neo-casualism works with the unfinished or incomplete, the awkward and clumsy imperfections that result seen as pleasing elements in the work.<sup>5</sup> In my making process I adopt the approach of new materialism which accepts that all matter, whether substance or object, has agency and presence: "The 'I' of new materialism is no longer the sovereign human subject, but is conceived of as a material-semiotic actor, an articulation that, according to Donna Haraway (1991) encompasses the human and the non-human, the social and physical, and the material and immaterial."<sup>6</sup>

After establishing the base layers, the paintings soon progress to embrace the awkward and asymmetric slippage of edges, clashing of complex colours and the slip-slop of viscous matter. At this point, I create a dense mixture of pulp, combining a variety of available substances such as hair, powder clays, plaster, glue and pigment. Once these are mixed, I succumb to the fleshy fluidity and corporeality of the pliable goop, to the abject bodily associations of the materials. As the work approaches completion, I try to retain the sensual presence of the materials so that it is apparent to the viewer.

In *It Gets in Through Your Eyes* (Figure 4) the pulp was rhythmically fashioned with a blade. *Before I Was Born I Met You* (Figure 5) has a more organic flow, as the pulpy goop was caressed, pushed and folded, the abject surface revealing the intensity of the human and non-human encounter in making.

Going big and moving beyond my favoured domestic-scale works was a real challenge with these materials. For instance, *Before I was Born I Met You* required multiple strengthening bars sandwiched between the layers of cardboard, along with tri-sided square aluminium guttering glued to the back. The larger works proved to be a physical challenge; the seemingly simple act of moving the large-scale layers around, spreading and building the surface, took weeks of negotiation.



Getting lost in the relationship with the work is where the pleasure factor surfaces. In real time, in the space and place of working, I deliberately set aside self so as to find the work, waiting for it to reveal itself to me; here, I am able to physically connect with the viscous fluids and colours. As my senses are stimulated in the act of painting, I am absorbed by matter, rhythm and colour: Minissale explains this phenomenon in terms of external vibrations which stimulate the brain and the body so that "light literally enters the eye, and photoreceptors in the visual cortex turn these wavelengths of light energy into electrical signals and aggregates of sensation."<sup>7</sup>

There are times when I enter the studio with an idea of where a painting is heading, then suddenly I find myself led by the materials and a complete turnaround with the work occurs. Situating my practice within new materiality, or neuromateriality as Minissale calls it, acknowledges the political world of the actant.<sup>8</sup> Jane Bennett writes that all the elements involved in the making process are agents or actants and that "all forces and flows (materialities) are or can become lively, affective and signalling."<sup>9</sup> All matter has a vitality which flows through everything, eliciting cooperation from all the elements involved which thereby deliver a collaborative end product.

However, even in a democracy there are levels of power, participation, and influence; someone has to hold the steering wheel. Following the immersion phase, a time of withdrawal from the process is needed, to look and consider. I am thankful for my mobile phone, as this enables me to take photographs of the works in progress, which I then toy with, editing and changing aspects of colour, cropping or adding a layer.

Once a satisfactory result is achieved, I reconsider the work and attend to how it might engage the space around it. My intention is to set up relationships within and without the painted surfaces, and for the edges to come to the fore and break away from the central, pictorial focus. The edge of these paintings is not merely a frame, margin or sign of containment, but an essential active component. My intention with these works is to connect with the viewer in their present time, communicating with their sense of self and place, isolating and removing them from all other distractions.



Figure 6. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on linen, 795x795mm. Part of a section of Suprematist works by Malevich exhibited at the "0,10 Exhibition," Petrograd, 1915. Wikipedia Commons.



Figure 7. Linda Cook, *Remaining Adamantine*, 2022, mixed media, 880x860mm.

In September 2022, while sitting in Wave Project Space planning an exhibition, I became aware that there were more corners than walls around me. This 'white cube' was barely a cube, with right-angled structures invading and disrupting the straight walls. The space was quirky, filled with corners, some small, some large and most seemingly unnecessary. All rooms have corners and, much like the edge of a painting these, too, can be acknowledged and engaged as active forms. I began working with hinged diptychs to be hung in the many nooks and crannies of this space. In doing so, not only would my works draw attention to their own edges and margins, but they would pull the architectural corners into the centre of the room, as with *Remaining Adamantine* (2022, Figure 7).

Other painters have worked with corners; consider Russian artist Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915, Figure 6), hung high in the corner of the Petrograd exhibition room as an icon. By contrast, *Remaining Adamantine* is hinged, it hugs the corner; this is where it belongs. I wondered why we don't typically put paintings in corners. By engaging the room and exemplifying the space, the physicality of the painting is evidenced as it enters the realm of the object.

Choosing to work in this way has brought with it a variety of challenges. Some viewers are preoccupied with the use of cardboard as a base material, unable to move beyond the raw elements, looking for assurance that the works will endure. The fact that the paintings were once cardboard seems to test their ability to accept the transition or metamorphosis of the work. This puzzles me, as we know that nothing endures.

My original intention was to untangle abstraction and materialism in painting. This inquiry has been built on theory and making; my understanding came about through immersion of mind and matter. Abstract painting may remain a mystery and beg the question: why does any of this exist? The finished works will stand for themselves; each viewer will form their own valid connection and interpretation.

**Linda Cook** holds a Master of Fine Arts (with distinction) from the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic. She shares a studio with painter Anita DeSoto on Dowling Street in central Dunedin. She has exhibited throughout New Zealand and in England and is the recipient of several art awards. Having travelled extensively, Linda Cook now calls Dunedin home and lives in the city with her family and dog.

- 1 Michael Blackwood Productions, *Phillip Guston: A Life Lived 2k Remaster [Trailer]*, Youtube video, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pn1CmhMvoHA>.
- 2 Gregory Minissale, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 120-121.
- 3 Minissale, *Rhythm in Art*, citing Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1990), 109.
- 4 John Yau, *Thomas Nozkowski* (London: Lund Humphries, 2017).
- 5 Thomas Micchelli, "Painting on the Cusp: Abstraction of the 1980s," *Hyperallergic*, 6 July 2013, <https://hyperallergic.com/74885/painting-on-the-cusp-abstraction-of-the-1980s/>.
- 6 Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts* (London: IB Taurus, 2013), 3.
- 7 Minissale, *Rhythm in Art*, 83.
- 8 Ibid, 12.
- 9 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 117.