

Now Now

By Andrew Lamprecht



Sunny Fever, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 130cm diameter.

In "Now" Neill Wright presents a seemingly bright and psychedelic vision through canvasses that break the boundaries of the square and sculptures that (quite literally in some cases) seem to have been 'knocked off the pedestal' by this iconoclastic young artist. The works on exhibition form part of his 'Wilderness' series and in this body of work we see, upon closer examination, a darker reality beneath the apparent funky, blisteringly bright, surfaces that are presented to our gaze. For if Wright has presented us with a view of paradise, it is Paradise after the fall: after we have eaten our fill of the Eden's apple, our stomachs sickening at our excess. Now, shamed by our own nakedness, we realise that we are alone and must make our own way in the world, unprotected, having lost our innocence and terrified by the knowledge we have thus gained.

It is significant that Wright never uses the conventional rectangular format in the paintings that form part of the 'Wilderness' series. Rather, makes extensive use of the circular, tondo, form of painting. Tondi were usually utilised in the Renaissance to portray the Virgin and Child or the Holy Family and it was believed that the round shape of the panels aided in heightening emotion and concentrating focus in such works. While Wright's subject matter is different in 'Wilderness', here he too has used the form to concentrate our attention and present an intense, even overwhelming scenario to our view. The artist himself describes his new work as 'reach[ing into] a space where it exists somewhere between the second and third panels of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*: a veiled, swampy, slightly abstract and seemingly happy-go-lucky contemporary "world".' I would suggest that this is 'religious' painting about very secular subject matter.

Similarly to tondi he is also drawn to organic shapes in canvasses such as *Bend to its Will* and *Sugar Snap*. These heighten the link to nature whilst simultaneously exposing and making plain their own artificiality. Only just constrained by their boundaries: curvilinear, meandering and sexy, the images that explode before us, one atop the other, seduce us and promise a life beyond the bounds of the painting itself. But what sort of life? Euphoric, perhaps, but also threatening and menacing, it would seem. Wittily he unmistakably references the painter's wooden palette in *Navigating*

the Swamp – a reference to his own painterly actions (complete with a heart, the emoticon of love) as much as to a dystopic future created by artistic artifice.

The culture of excess, consumerism and abundant consumption in which we all live (or in some cases aspire to live) is a condition that affects Africa as much as the West – though often the Western indulgence in such a condition is usually at the expense of the global South. Wright, in his botanical shapes, tondi and bitten-into apples, unfurls a dizzying, bilious series of explosions of colour, swirls and symbols before us. On one hand these seem to be playful things but on closer inspection we see that what lies beneath the heady splashes of colour and intersecting abstract forms are hints of devastating things, as if in being dazzled by the bright lights of contemporary life we are simultaneously being blinded to the future that such indulgence and carelessness will manifest.

Almost as a counterpoint to his 'Legacies of Liberation' series in which the most horrific situations experienced in contemporary Africa are evoked through Lego-like figures, in 'Wilderness' Neill Wright portrays nuclear proliferation, genetic manipulation and the constant, unremitting environmental disaster that we are all heir and progenitor to through happy, bright, even cartoonesque layerings and juxtapositions. In the series lactations and ejaculations; explosions and implosions compete for our attention with lush foliage and sunny vistas about to turn dark. And constantly we are presented with grasping hands, perhaps signalling for the artist the act of play as much as manipulation and control. In the sculpture *The Remains of the Day* we see a hand – or rather the shadow of a hand – as it seems to be withdrawing from a discarded apple, eaten down to its very core. I would argue, given the absence of natural forms portrayed on this work, that this is suggestive of our lot as humanity after we supped to our fill on nature's bounty, leaving nothing much behind.

For in this work we are not in control. This dreamscape is a fever dream, and we are rushing headlong into a painted world whose flatness and abstraction belies the complexities that the artist has embedded into the deceptively easy-going surface that he paints. Like the 'superflat' artists of Japan, headed and theorised by Takashi

Murakami at the turn of the twenty-first century, who wished to critique the superficiality of their time through the post-painterly abstraction of extreme flatness in their work, Neill Wright seems to have developed a new language a painting to consider the space in which we live today, often torn between Western desires and demands and the needs, iniquities and aspirations of living in South Africa.

Is Wright's 'Wilderness' a jungle of our own making? Or is there, beneath the surface, a hint of an Eden to be seen? If so, have we bitten into Eve's apple; or popped the cap of a fizzy, heady drink that will make us sicken at its sugar-free sweetness as it gushes over our hands and indeed, in viewing it, over our eyes? No, rather I think we should look at the detritus and see what is clearly before us: hope in the form of new growth. These forms still hold their seed and are promising to burst forth into a new generation.

Andrew Lamprecht is a senior lecturer at UCT's Michaelis School of Fine Art. He is active as a curator and writer with focus on contemporary South African art.



The Allure of Paradise, 2017, Spray paint,, wood dyes, Jacaranda wood 25 x 27 x 53cm

S U L G E R - B U E L L O V E L L

Published by Sulger-Buel Lovell
51 Surrey Row, Unit 2 La Gare, London SE10BZ
+44 203 268 2101
www.sulger-buel-lovell.com