

BLACKWOOD SKYLINE

Stephen Bush work in progress #5 Blackwood skyline. Stephen Bush: work in progress #5

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foreword

Dr Chris McAuliffe

The Work in progress exhibition series at the Ian Potter Museum of Art commenced in 2001 in a spirit of advocacy; we wanted to share our interest in the achievement of artists we admired. In practice, the series has brought us closer to the artists involved. Staging the exhibitions has required careful discussions with artists about their projects, their careers and their ambitions for their art. Along the way, the word 'work' has taken on subtly different meanings. Initially, we wanted to emphasise the ongoing nature of an artist's practice. Increasingly, the word directed us to something very simple; that, in many important ways, art was a matter of what artists do. This is not meant in a dumb, literal sense. Reducing art to a mere job of work is just as deceptive as the opposite pole - envisioning it as a mysterious, alchemical process. The Work in progress series has directed us towards what has been called 'the daily practice' of art: the ongoing reflection on materials, making and meaning that emerges when artists work at their art.

Presenting the art of Stephen Bush triggers further resonances of that word 'work'. His paintings depict sites at which work takes place, the tools and machinery used in the course of work, the products of various work prectices, and even the aftermath of work. Certain of his strategies, such as repetition, evoke the forms of work peculiar to industrial economies, while others, in his history paintings, reflect on the conventions by which paintings 'work' as narrative or allegory. And throughout this exhibition, visitors are invited to meditate on the combination of mental and manual work peculiar to painting

Art is often spoken of in ways that imply that it is a task involving immense sacrifice. We read romantic accounts of artists working in isolation, working obsessively or at the expense of their health. It's been my pleasure to see Stephen Bush at work over many years; a pleasure heightened by the knowledge that he will have nothing of such myths. In Bush's art I see purposeful, challenging work; work that is never fully left behind but which, in its everyday quality, is at the core of his life, rather than being at odds with it.

We are grateful for the insightful and generous response to Stephen Bush's work developed by Peter Hutchings in his catalogue essay. The work required to present this exhibition has, once again, been undertaken by diverse staff at the Potter Such an exhibition brings together staff in the curatorial, administrative, technical, educational and collections management divisions of the Potter. It is their work, alongside that of the artists, that has made the Work in progress series such a positive experience.

hegel after warhol

Stephen Bush and the spirits of the age

It was the beginning of an end, and after it everything would bear testimony to what had been lost. Turning to art after philosophy, the German philosopher Hegel would find that art was already over, as he stated in his first lecture on the subject:

The peculiar nature of artistic production and of works of art no longer fills our highest need. ... it is certainly the case that art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone ...

In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place.

It's an extraordinary opening to a course of lectures on art, amounting to an announcement that the subject was finished and that everyone could now go home. And yet the class stayed on to hear how art had ended, and to consider what they might do for the remainder. In poetic terms, Hegel's aesthetics establishes elegy as the dominant mode of all future art. Henceforth, art would always be concerned, to a greater or lesser extent, with loss.

Read again today, Hegel's pronouncement is an untimely meditation: at once relevant, obsolete, and relevant again. At the opening of a discourse on aesthetics – that is, on the perception of art – Hegel speaks of a disenchantment in a viewer's relation to art that might now be equally pertinent to an artist's relation to art (here, to painting). For the viewer, art is less a part of everyday reality and so more abstract and less immediately meaningful. Painting after Hegel seemed to play out this logic, moving from representational practices still referring to reality to practices of abstraction, confirming art's transfer into the realm of ideas. At one stage in this story, it seemed that painting could only continue as a form of idiocy, as the solipsistic pursuit of art for its maker's own sake.

As if inspired by Hegel's general reflections upon art, first delivered 180 years ago, Stephen Bush's art works to reinstate painting, and to reiterate Hegel's specific view of the capacity of that medium, which answers:

the demand that a character should develop and proceed outwardly to deeds and actions, and inwardly to a deepening of the soul. For this reason we are at once more at home in painting. Painting, that is to say, opens the way for the first time to the principle of finite and inherently infinite subjectivity, the principle of our own life and existence, and in painting we see what is effective and active in ourselves.²

Painting, then, rather than sculpture, introduces both a particular, progressive form of external historicity and internal subjectivity to art. It's worth noting that Hegel wrote this after dismissing classical sculpture, which he misunderstood as unpainted, for 'leav[ing] us somewhat cold'. His chief objection was to the apparently sightless, unpainted eyes of classical statuary. But this repudiation of monochromatic art alone suggests the extent to which Bush's practice is no naïve neo-hegelianism, neither an arch, nor simply ironically retro-chic, repetition of romanticism. For Bush has sought exactly those historical and spiritual dimensions considered by Hegel to be the exclusive preserve of polychromatic art through and in monochromatic, representational painting.

But to discuss Stephen Bush's painting specifically is, at this point, to get somewhat ahead of a discussion of contemporary painting, the very field advanced and disrupted by his practice.

On the way towards the abstract endpoint of Hegel's trajectory for art, painting's visual dimension took over from its conceptual aspects. Marcel Duchamp, whose practice responded to his rejection of the increasingly inward focus of art, put in a plea for an art capable of moving from eye to mind:

Since Courbet, it's been believed that painting is addressed to the retina. That was everyone's error. The retinal shudder! Before, painting had other functions: it could be religious, philosophical, moral.³

Similarly, and perhaps surprisingly given his exceptional technical proficiency, Bush yearns for a form of painterly complexity that doesn't begin and end with the eye:

... part of me wants to escape from a lot of the painting of this century because it seems to be so well picked over. Painting in earlier eras was complex, it was about telling a story, or recording an historical event, and I find that a lot more involving.⁴

Abstraction may have presented ideas about art, but its visual minimalism ensured that the eye wasn't too excited, or busy. Bush doesn't turn from delighting the eye; rather, his paintings provoke thought through their visual pleasures, exciting both retina and brain. The difference here is that abstraction refers to ideas about art, whereas Bush attempts to refer to history and ideology even as his work necessarily refers to ideas about art. In reflecting upon a form of art that was part of a more complex reality – and not just the resident of a rarefied, weightless aesthetic dimension – Bush's painting tells stories of a lost world, of a lost art.

While this account of Bush's practice might be seeming to stray into hyperbole – almost as if repeating the Napoleonic rhetoric of *This big in the afterlife*, 1990 (p. 21, cat. 28), featuring Stephen Bush as the new saviour-hero of painting – let's consider how a contemporary commitment to painting might be able to redress the many stupidities of art.

Humour is a key element as should be expected from a practice organised around travesty. Courbet might have appeared in his own studio tableaux, but history painters have not usually dressed up as their own subjects, both male and female. Nor have they presented us with baggy, elephant-suited burlesques of romanticism. It would seem that Bush takes himself sufficiently seriously to not take himself seriously. The result is that his paintings often disarm with their charm and, by their humour, connect us with our own experiences of his images (art-historical and/or comical). As Jonathan Goodman put it:

Bush is, of course, making fun of the whole business of memorializing an event, yet he is deeply serious about the role of the art as witness. Even in a sepia-coloured depiction of so mundane an object as a tractor, his wish to justify and immortalize is as powerful as his desire to lampoon. It's the balance Bush constructs out of these opposing impulses that make him interesting as an artist.⁵

These paintings have great entertainment value: they are often crowd pleasers in the nineteenth-century style of the theatrical grand tableau (now enjoying a renaissance within the museum's walls in the hucksterish curatorial concept of the 'destination painting'). The presentation of history paintings in the context of a diorama – a popular nineteenth-century spectacle – is one of the artist's reference points. Painting as a popular entertainment involves a commitment to art's immediate impact, and to an expansion of painting beyond its museal, post-hegelian limits.

Labour is the other part of the package: these are 'works' in the artistic and mundane senses of the word. Stephen Bush is both artist and artisan, and part of his disruption of the general fate of painting (irrelevance) can be linked to his re-enactment of artisanal practices within a contemporary situation for painting. In the studio, nine to five, five days a week, the production of a series of 'unique copies' (*The lure of Paris* series, 1992 onwards), the working through of a single colour (*Venetian red*, pp. 8–9, cat. 20–26). This labour is another travesty – Bush dressed up in a nineteenth-century artist's smock, donning the garments of the history painter, of elephants, of styles – and it is both sincere and sardonic, a form of 'method-painting'. Bush both poses in borrowed garments within his works, and within his studio practice (re-enacting a mode of working taken from the nineteenth century).

The lure of Paris series embodies the confluence of contradictory attributes of the post-kantian artist (painterly skill, the imitation of classical models, the development of a signature style, the poetics of the sublime), yet it sets against those more traditional attributes a series of moves more familiarly part of a post-warholian idiom: travesty, pop culture pastiche, the explicit engagement with photography, serialism. Bush set himself the task of painting the 'same' image (and even considered painting nothing else for the rest of his career) from memory. The project recalls the Jorge Luis Borges story Pierre Menard, author of Don Quixote, in which a modern author sets himself the task of writing Cervantes' Don Quixote. Although a literally exact reiteration, but not a copy, Menard's Quixote is a significantly different text because of its authorship. Bush's reiterations are inexact, but their similarity transforms the meaning of their painter. In working on this series of reiterations of an image – produced from memory alone, in the absence of previous efforts or any other visual cues – Bush absurdly extended a variety of artistic logics and, in the process, reduced the contemporary artist to an artisan. The work of painting – and this would also be the case with the Venetian red paintings – frees painting from its historical levity, reinstalling it into a working reality. And this is what sets it aside from the Taylorist seriality of Warhol's Factory silkscreens, the studiously superficial work of an artist-entrepreneur; that, and its critical reframing of photography through painting.

Throughout Bush's career, his work has been engaged in a constant dialogue with photography, painting's referential rival since the simultaneous arrival of photography and industrially-produced oil paints. While not subscribing to the standard story of photography's displacement and disruption of painting, photography and painting affected each other, conspired with and against each other, throughout the last 160 or so years of their coexistence, a relationship explored throughout Bush's work in both its form and content. Here, photography serves as a surface upon which painting works (like a canvas), while the painter's painstaking labour and technical skill uncover and highlight the lost auras of these objects and images.

For over twenty years, Bush's painting has delineated a lost world – of progressivist, technological optimism, of colonial expansionism, of modernist agrarian values – through its simultaneous engagement with painting's own lost world of range and relevance.

Despite an apparently explicit rejection of nostalgia, Bush's work has resolutely turned away from the merely contemporary to examine the pathos of cultural history. If these images, the longing is for a time in which aesthetic complexity seemed to be more available. At stake is a restoration, a reinstallation, and a reiteration of aura; a re-evaluation of those projects, of those myths of which Bush himself seems sceptical. The sardonic humour of his paintings is balanced with a rueful appreciation of the positive aspects of some old forms of cultural and social confidence (now lost, or at least displaced by new, and equally fallible – if less charming – certainties). In his early work, this interest led to paintings of dated images of farm machinery, and, more recently, to produce a series of chromatically distinct images of obsolete computers (such as Cassel earth, 2000, cat. 6 and Japanese green, 2000, p. 12, cat. 7).

As distinct from the bravura humour of the reanimated history paintings, these studies of machines touch more nearly upon feelings of loss. Alex Gawronski has written that these images 'provoke a certain subconscious dread'. One reading of this dread is that it is provoked by the recognition of loss associated with our sense of the already-obsolescence of these machines, an obsolescence that has occurred within living memory and so is implicated with our own experiences of loss. The time passing is also our own passing: the world lost, our own. Alongside that sense of loss, is a dread provoked by the recognition of the fallibility of these machines' confidence in their own modernity: the same pathos that might be provoked by old photos of ourselves in the outmoded clothes which we once thought were the very signs of our contemporaneity.

For the twenty-first-century painter, a similar pathos arises out of the framing of work by the context of a retrospective which yet looks toward the future. Stephen Bush's strength is his painterly fidelity to the honour of the lost worlds of art and everyday life. To use a characteristically apt oxymoron, his work is a grandly modest achievement.

Dr Peter J Hutchings

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1 GWF Hegel, Aesthetics: lectures in line art by GWF Hegel, trans. TM Knox, vol. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, pp. 10-11.

2 Hegel, vol. II, p. 797.

- 3 P Cabanne, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, trans. R Padgett, Thames & Hudson, London, 1971, p. 43.
- 4 P Cripps, Stephen Bush/Janet Burchill, the Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Art Gallery, Emu Plains, 1988, p. 8.
- 5 J Goodman, 'Stephen Bush at Fotouhi Cramer', Art in America, vol. 85, no. 5, 1997, p. 128.

6 See JL Borges, Fictions, Calder & Boyars, London, 1974.

7 For a detailed discussion of this project, see C McAuliffe, 'Stephen Bush: serial originality, Stephen Bush: the lure of Paris, ex. cat., Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne, 1994, and also 'Stephen Bush: producing the goods', Art + Text, no. 53, 1996, pp. 54–7.

8 See, for example, his response to Peter Cripps: [Cripps] You say you dislike nostalgia, instead you talk about the optimism of the 50s.

- [Bush] Nostalgia is really a spooky area, so many creepy things have been branded nostalgia. Nostalgia rather than being seen as a 'longing for home' has come to imply a negative yearning where just the shell (exterior-look) is embraced. We now realize that the 50s were propelled by blind optimism and as such we have shifted that belief in purpose to the point where our scepticism is counter productive. (P Cripps, Stephen Bush, Janet Burchill, the Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Art Gallery, Emu Plains, 1988, p. 8.)
- 9 A Gawronski, 'Stephen Bush', LIKE, Art Magazine, no. 16, 2001, pp. 57-8.



Venetian red paintings stacked before being installed at Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne, 1995



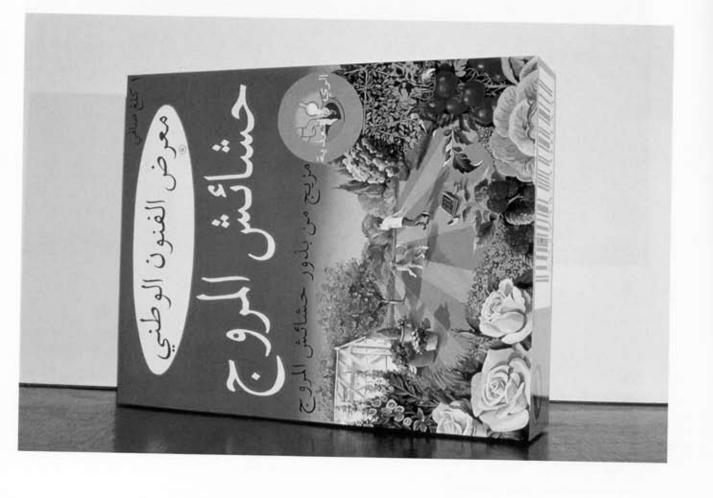


cat. 15 Pornine de terre #6 1998 oil on linen, 78.7 x 119.4 cm Collection of Rupert and Annabel Myer © Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003

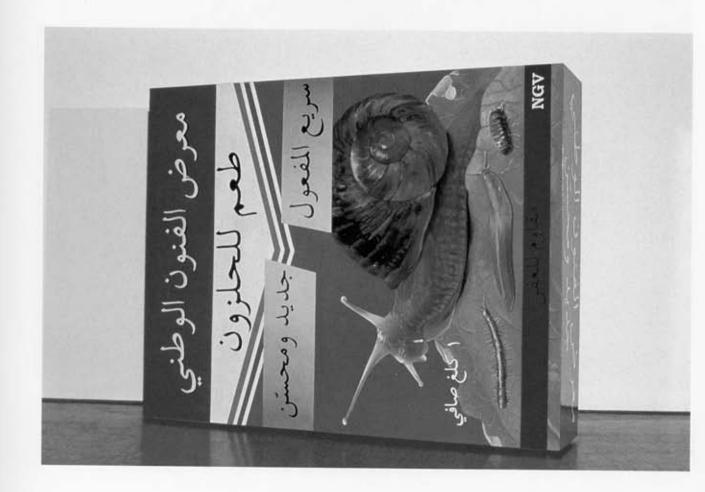








cat. 5 Bair 2000
oil on MDF, 183 x 140 x 40 cm
Courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Mori Gallery, Sydney
© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003



cat. 12 Sounds like Nebelhom 1999 oil on linen, 198.3 x 198.3 cm Collection of Bendigo Art Gallery RHS Abbott Bequest Fund 2002 © Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003

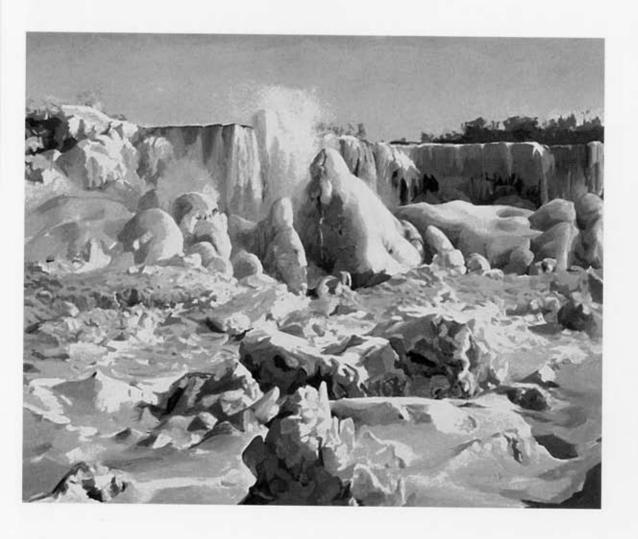


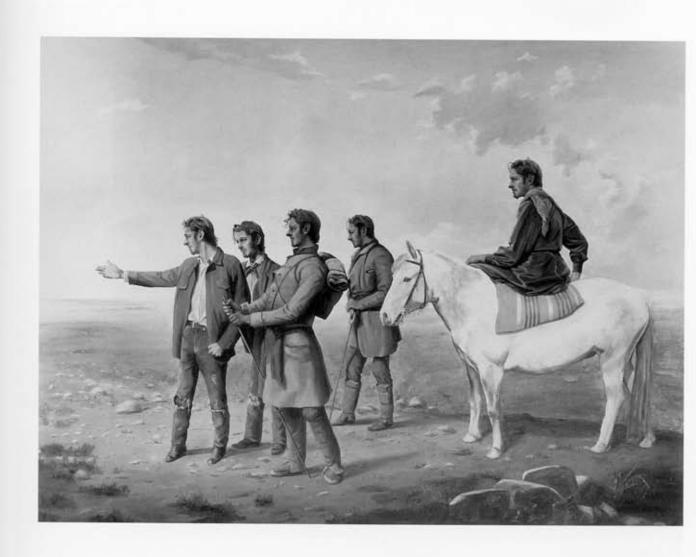
cat. 4 Pornme de terre #9 2001 oil on linen, 78.7 x 119.4 cm Private collection © Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003





cat, 34 Sunday at the Eclipse Mill 1983 oil on linen, 102.2 x 152.4 cm The University of Melbourne Art Collection Gift of Leslie Rowe 1997 © Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003

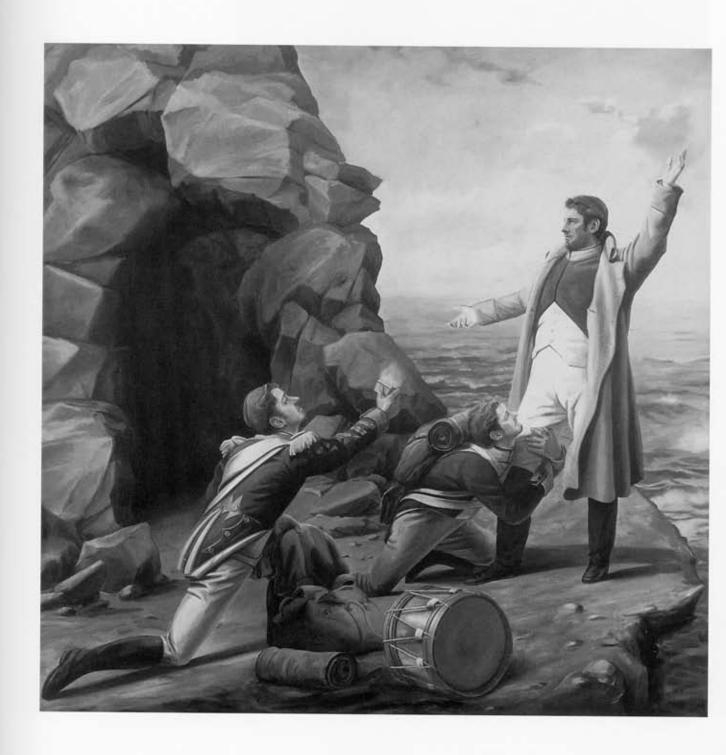




cat. 27 Plains of promise #1 1990 oil on linen, 150 x 200 cm Private collection © Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003



cat. 16 Deep deeper 1997 oil on linen, 117 x 137 cm Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne © Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003



cat. 31 Ploughing the second land 1985-86
oil on linen, 137.5 x 203 cm
Geelong Gallery Collection. Purchased with the assistance
of the Victorian Regional Galleries Art Foundation Fund
and the Friends of the Arts, 1993.

© Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003.





cat. 29 Claiming 1989 oil on linen, 193 x 193 cm Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne © Stephen Bush/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003

Dimensions of work are given in centimetres; height precedes width precedes depth

1. The lure of Paris #22 2002

oil on linen 183 x 183 Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

2. Pomme de terre #13 2002 p 11

oil on linen 78.7 x 119.4 Collection of Greg Rosshandler

3. The lure of Paris #21 2001

oil on linen 183 x 183 Private collection

4. Pomme de terre #9 2001 p. 17

oil on linen 78.7 x 119.4 Private collection

5. Bait 2000 p. 15 oil on MDF 183 x 140 x 40 Courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Mori Gallery, Sydney

6. Cassel earth 2000

oil on linen 91.5 x 122 Courtesy the artist and Mori Galley, Sydney

7. Japanese green 2000 p. 12 oil on linen 91 5 x 122

Courtesy the artist and Mori Galley, Sydney

8. The lure of Paris #19 2000

oil on linen 183 x 183 Private collection

9. Seed 2000 p. 14

oil on MDF 183 x 140 x 40 Courtesy the artist, Sutton Gallery, Melbourne and Mori Gallery, Sydney

10. The lure of Paris #18 1999

oil on linen 183 x 183 Collection of Darren Light and Sara Graham

11. The lure of Paris #16 1999

oil on linen 183 x 183 Collection of Rupert and Annabel Myer

Sounds like Nebelhorn 1999 p. 16 oil on linen

198 3 x 198 3 Collection of Bendigo Art Gallery RHS Abbott Bequest Fund 2002

13. The lure of Paris #14 1998 p. 13

oil on linen 183 x 183 Courtesy the artist

14. The lure of Paris #13 1998

oil on linen 183 x 183 Private collection

15. Pomme de terre #6 1998 p. 10

oil on linen 78.7 x 119.4 Collection of Rupert and Annabel Myer

16. Deep deeper 1997 p. 20

oil on linen 117 x 137 Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

17. Got a foggy notion 1997 p 18

oil on linen 147 x 182 Collection of Athol Hawke and Eric Harding

18. The lure of Paris #10 1997

oil on linen 183 x 183 Collection of Brendan Shanahan

19. Just wait till now becomes then 1996

off on linen 198 x 239 Private collection

20. Venetian red #44 1995

oil on linen
51 x 76.5
Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery,
Melbourne

21. Venetian red #41 1995

oil on linen 91 x 101 Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery. Melbourne

22. Venetian red #9 1995

oil on linen 51 x 56 Private collection

23. Venetian red #7 1995

oil on linen 61 x 51 Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

24. Venetian red #6 1995

oil on linen 122 x 122 Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery. Melbourne

25. Venetian red #5 1995

oil on linen 91 x 122 Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

26. Venetian red #2 1995

oil on linen 91 x 107 Collection of Athol Hawke and Eric Harding

27. Plains of promise #1 1990 p. 19

oil on linen 150×200 Private collection

28. This big in the afterlife 1990 p 21

oil on linen 183 x 183 Private collection

29. Claiming 1989 p. 23

oil on linen 183 x 183 Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery. Melbourne

30. From the field to figuration 1987 oil on linen

183 x 183 Collection of Sir James and Lady Cruthers

31. Ploughing the second land 1985-86 p. 22

oil on linen 137.5 x 203 Geelong Gallery Collection Purchased with the assistance of the Victorian Regional Galleries Art Foundation Fund and the Friends of the Arts, 1993.

32. Cinnamon 1985

oil on linen 50.5 x 83.5 Courtesy the artist

33. Yellow 1984

oil on linen 122 x 198 Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

34. Sunday at the Eclipse Mill 1983 p. 17

ail on linen 102.2 x 152.4 The University of Melbourne Art Collection Gift of Leshe Rowe 1997

35. Vacuum 1980

acrylic and oil on linen 122 x 122 Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery. Melbourne