



NEW WORK: BRADD WESTMORELAND RIVER OF BLUE

Bradd Westmoreland's new exhibition traverses the undulations of art history and the imaginings of a personal, interior world.

By Ruth Learner

The subterranean starkness that marks Bradd Westmoreland's new body of work, *River of Blue*, comes from a world where pure colour defines the form and the feel. Colour coheres and fractures space, expands and contracts space, dislocates and relocates space; reds, blues, yellows and greens act like a hyper thermal imaging of mood and movement.

In this work, the Melbourne artist shifts the view from perhaps a more formal consideration of light, shadow and composition explored in his 2012 exhibition *In the Light* to an inner theatre of colour, with very little else to deflect our attention. Light bleeds from colour in these exacting works; dense shadows hug their makers and multiple shadows converge as hues.

Westmoreland's play on historical art narratives, his contemplative Greek classical figures and intense fauvist colour is disrupted by compositional symmetries and incongruous geometry. Here there is no set time or place to these works; space is at times inverted, at other times flattened. Here, there are fewer figures, from a classic triangle of three to an opposition of two, often in counterpoise on either side of the blue river that gives the show its title.

The blue river cuts through nearly all the works – at times a great swathe, at others a meandering channel. The form ruptures and unites the works, the blue shades casting a striking and perhaps melancholic note that resonates across the landscapes. The blue river might also be an extended reference to Matisse's *Bathers by the River* (1916), a painting whereby “the sobriety and solemnity of the canvas, the treatment of the female figures without exoticism or eroticism, all point to the expression of an ‘interior vision’ profoundly affected by World War I”, as Catherine Bock-Weiss wrote in her 2009 book *Henri Matisse: Modernism Against the Grain*. In Matisse's work, the river is painted as a black band dividing the soft greens and blues of the past from the flesh pinks and greys of the present – a white snake perhaps an allusion to the fall of man.

This reference is underlined in Westmoreland's *Spring*, where a red snake rises against the blue river, which divides two figures. The standing figure heads off-frame towards a seam of light, seemingly seized up by an unnaturally curved spine and contorted arm, perhaps suspended in a state of doubt. Deep in the frame, the seated figure is balanced on a scaffold, the body angled to a central green gorge, the head turned the other way, beguiled by a chasm of liquid golden light. Here he reaches out an elongated arm, a shadow of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, his hand melting into a spidery form, figuration surrendering to abstraction.

Westmoreland's passion for art history is clear in the works. Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture, the Venetian School and Modern French painting, and his enduring influences – Cezanne, Van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso – are broached throughout his practice.

In the smaller canvases, the ritualised actions of the figures in relation to the river – figures lie alongside it, squat near it, walk over it – conveys a sense of theatre and of unity, both landscape and figure melding into purely sculptural forms. In the larger paintings, figures play on S curve and *contrapposto* poses, exaggerating the twisting torso and seeming to be in states of ponderation. For Westmoreland, the nude is both essentially human and essentially timeless – an idyll. This humanness and classicism encapsulate something of the paradoxical sense of lineage in the work and point to its intensely personal nature.

In *Slow River of You*, a standing figure harmonises striking vertical bands of blues and yellows and is counterpoised against the centaur-like abstracted seated figure, which is on the horizontal and contained by tight frames of reds and oranges. There is opposition too in the gestures, sprung for movement and yet suspended in a state of reflection, creating a tension and dynamic that shifts with each viewing. This painting encapsulates something of the paradox between an inner life and a sense of the boundless, visceral joy in colour and paint.

In one of many sinuous digressions in the book *A Death in the Family* (2013), the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard compares his “longing to open the world by writing” with feelings evoked by certain works of art painted before the *fin de siècle*: “When the world seemed to step forward from the world. When you didn't just see the comprehensible in it but came very close to it.” After 1900, “Man took up all the space... everything is coloured by humanness. Not human action and external life, but human feelings and inner life.” Knausgaard acknowledges the essentially paradoxical position that says, on the one hand, “we understand everything because we have turned the world into ourselves” and yet we continue to seek through art something other than the knowable, to express that fleeting insight of something beyond, when “the world seems to step forward and show itself for a brief glimpse”. He does so because he himself has experienced those, “sudden states of clear-sightedness...where for a few seconds you catch sight of another world”.

There is something too in Westmoreland's interplay between art history and an intensely private memory or identity that opens up such possibilities. ▽

Bradd Westmoreland's *River of Blue* shows at Niagara Galleries, Melbourne until April 26, 2014.

niagaragalleries.com.au

osite:
DD WESTMORELAND
boys riverside, 2013
n linen
97 cm
tesy the artist and
ara Galleries, Melbourne

D WESTMORELAND
2013
nen
30 cm

D WESTMORELAND
ver of you, 2013
hen
t cm

y the artist and
Galleries, Melbourne

