

ALUN LEACH-JONES' AFTERLIFE

It's an uncanny coincidence that we are having this posthumous exhibition of Alun Leach-Jones at the same time as the restaging of *The Field* because in many ways that show can be understood to have brought an end to the careers of such artists as him. The abstraction that gets discussed and critically ratified today explicitly starts after that exhibition, as though it brought something to an end. The first monochromes of John Nixon are dated 1968, as though to make clear that they come after *The Field*. The Queenslander Robert MacPherson only started making his first works some time in the mid-1970s. Ian Burn more or less gave up making art – and certainly paintings in any sense of the word – for some two decades around the time of *The Field*. And Syd Ball, who exhibited along with Leach-Jones in the show, is the exception that proves the rule, recently being included in the Biennale of Sydney alongside a Dutch artist re-investigating Grace Crowley and Roy de Maistre, almost as though he was his own archaeologist, or insofar as he did not come with this mediating historicisation his own parody.

Museum director and critic Patrick McCaughey puts it very well in an essay he writes for the Paul Taylor-edited anthology *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*. In his 'Surviving the '70s', McCaughey traces the fate of a number of the abstract artists of *The Field*, including Leach-Jones, throughout the following decade. His initial point is that, far from battling resistance and incomprehension, as in the usual story of avant-garde art, they were almost immediately accepted. Both curators and the art-loving public saw in them a refreshing alternative to the then-dominant Antipodean expressionism of such artists as Albert Tucker and Arthur Boyd. But, cautions McCaughey, this often took place before this younger generation of practitioners had fully completed their artistic development, with the result that after this initial rush of enthusiasm and in the changed social and political circumstances of

the '70s their work struggled. This is McCaughey's summation of Leach-Jones at the time, an observation that Leach-Jones has consistently faced throughout his career: "Leach-Jones enlarged the scale of his paintings, exploited highly suggestive *trompe l'oeil* devices and vulgarised his colour... but the paintings were simply more complicated (rather than complex) and more elaborately crafted (rather than ambitious)". For McCaughey, Leach-Jones eventually finds his way in the '70s thanks to the simplifying effects of the Canadian Colour Field painter Jack Bush and the incorporation of collage into his work, but his more general point is that in the new post-modern conditions for abstraction the artist must neither simply repeat nor entirely break with themselves. Rather, his paradoxical advice is that they must constantly "start all over again": "Once their identity was given to them – they were the young Turks – now they must seek it in their work and in their experience. Like every artist of substance, each has to learn how to start all over again".

We could not perhaps get a more perfect example of this "starting all over again" than this current suite of paintings, entitled *The Country Beyond the Stars #1-8* (2017), the final works made before the artist's death. Take, for instance, *The Country Beyond the Stars #8*. In it we look down on a desk that tilts inexplicably up into the air. On its top is a collection of overlapping papers, twisting away down the canvas. Standing up on the left-hand side of the desk – whoever uses it is obviously right-handed – is the silhouette of a desk lamp, toppling precariously from the titled arc of its shade. To the bottom right, a set square, whose rigid black right-angle is echoed by what seems to be the right-hand edge of the lowest of the papers on the desk. At the very bottom of the painting – which of course is saturated in the devices of Cubism – is the perpendicular front of the desk, running straight down the canvas and by contrast pushing the top of the

desk back into space, even as it runs straight up the canvas. The selection of colours Leach-Jones uses at once confirms the “real-world” disposition of the various elements of the painting – the blue on top of the black to the upper right – and acts against this – the blue underneath the black at the lower centre. Of course, the desk is something like the seemingly split cupboard of Cézanne’s *Still Life with Commode* (1885), just as the series of papers spread out across the desk with each somehow still readable finds its distant precursor in Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), with its translucent newspaper, folded napkin and thin slices of lemon on a table set out for a morning coffee.

This recent *The Country Beyond the Stars* series is a remake of Leach-Jones’ earlier *The Country Beyond the Stars* (2003), a work that he had always kept in his private collection, perhaps as something of a personal touchstone or something whose potential had not yet been exhausted for the artist. In *The Country beyond the Stars* we have a similar series of overlapping coloured planes, but this time more ambiguously set on a background simply divided up into four equal quadrants. Here, however, in contrast to the later version, amongst the various elements assembled on the tabletop there is a much stronger emphasis on the filigreed or curvilinear. There is the pale concertinaed spine of a paper file leaning precariously to the right, the root-like tendrils of india red and delft blue writhing around the bottom, what appears to be a nut or even an oyster opening up and revealing its inner sheaths and of course the blurred and hazy pink of the two stars that give the painting its name. For all of the rigidity of the net-like lattices that run across the lower half, the work continues to waver and vibrate, especially in the camouflage-like grey and olive green of the plane-shaped shadow that flies underneath the stars. There is little of this in the later version, in which irregularity is to be found only in the red watermelon-like semi-circle to the left, the smallhawk-like head atop the

multicoloured swoop of stripes in the centre and those two floating circles or haloes in the netherspace to the right.

The Country Beyond the Stars # 8, I think, is a much better painting than the original on which it is based. It is, to use the criteria McCaughey sets out, much less “complicated” and “elaborately crafted”. And it is also a lot wittier. One of the ingenious things about the painting is that what we are looking at is undoubtedly the table on which the artist actually devised his work. It is as though, in a slightly mise-en-abymish way, the drafts for the work become the work, although nothing could be more fixed and predictable than the way Leach-Jones actually makes his paintings. Indeed, if we needed another artistic comparison to throw at it, we would point to not just the obvious Cubism and American Hard-Edge but something like the 17th-century trompe l-oeil of someone like Evert Collier, in which papers and postcards are pinned up on a letter rack to become the painting itself.

And, behind all of this, the undoubtedly visual pleasure of deciphering Leach-Jones’ work and making these complex aesthetic connections. But what of this pleasure? Has it – this is McCaughey’s real question –any place in the post-aesthetic ‘70s and after? This is the real anachronism of Leach-Jones’ work and the generation of abstract artists like him. And it is undoubtedly what we will discover with the rehang of *The Field*: that we can no longer look at the work in the way it was originally intended to be. So that Leach-Jones’ work exists now in a kind of after-life, and we visit it in our increasingly neo-liberal world like a place we no longer inhabit. Another realm, a higher place, that is now lost. But that is where Leach-Jones lives now. And we find the sign for this in that halo floating to the right-hand side of *The Country beyond the Stars # 8*, a ghostly reminder of the artist’s presence or signature.

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