

SOME THING SAYING SOMETHING

**An essay on Mikey Thomas
'Shapeshifters' solo exhibition**

Scott McCracken



A painting should have many facets. A painting can also have many faces. Facets. Faces. Some show themselves immediately, others remain hidden, only to disclose themselves to the beholder slowly over time. Cy Twombly said, 'each line...is the event of its own materialisation'. In Mikey Thomas's recent paintings, we are given an accumulation of materialisations. Materialisation. Material. Matter. The emerging figures in Thomas's paintings convince us of their existence only superficially. They are bits and pieces, removed and detached, that hover independently from any fully connected body. Bodies not of flesh, only paint manipulated to look like flesh. But just enough so as to look like it, never becoming overly imitative or completely naturalistic. There is an unrelenting sense of 'a just enough-ness'. One element within each work looks like that which it purports to represent; a face, a belly, a foot. And while they can be readily identified, they have the mien of stock images. They are generalities rather than specificities and yet they have been tasked with carrying out quite a specific role within the painting - to become an imaginal anchor, to sever the paintings from a locus of abstraction.

In 'Jester' an amorphous torso with limbs stretches outward; its own frame extending beyond the frame of the canvas. We see only what we can see, only what Thomas wants us to see. Only what we need to see. The rest of the figure-shaped form is obscured, knowingly denied to us. With its crucifix-like positioning, it could

Jester (2023)

Oil on Calico, 180 x 135cm



You're/he's always dreaming (2023)

Oil on Calico, 180 x 135cm

be escaping or embracing, leaping outwards, floating upwards or slowly sinking. There is no head, it is a body without the capacity for thought. We are left wondering if the head may have extracted itself only to find its way into a neighbouring painting.

In several of these recent works, a solitary face appears. A sfumato application creates a soft haze, as if the image has not fully rendered yet. These cut-out visages are reminiscent of the potent image created by director David Lynch in his most recent series of *Twin Peaks* (2017) where otherworldly beings effortlessly remove their faces from their heads, revealing that which is inside. An unexpected inside. Nothing particularly gruesome or even too bodily; there is no blood, tissue or viscera. This is a shared attribute with the 'just-about-figures' in Thomas's paintings. We could be seeing into their insides, insides that are made up only of pigment, binder and solvent. Or perhaps their insides are also their outsides. There is no exterior or interior to their bodies. They are without weight and mass. In 'You're/he's always dreaming' the outside/inside form crawls towards the edge, the gaze of the face correlating to its direction of travel. These faces give nothing away. They all have the most impeccable poker face. This apparent expressionlessness belies a kind of clinical precision with regards to the final appearance of the paintings themselves. Elements have been placed, their arrangement is the outcome of an equitable thoughtfulness, where every painting - where each part of every painting - has been given due attention. The surface of the painting could be likened to a kind of makeshift autopsy slab; a site that necessitates a process of extraction, examination, and discovery.

It's almost as if the heads in the paintings don't realise that they are made of paint, as if they aren't aware of their own limited and trapped existence within a plane of two dimensionality. It is a similar scenario outlined in Edwin Abbott's novella 'Flatland', where each tier of dimensionality struggles to accept



Poser (2023)

Oil on Calico, 180 x 135cm

that there are entities who can exist in an even greater number of dimensions, that there may be a space out there different to their own:

“Outside his World, or Line, all was a blank to him; nay, not even a blank, for a blank implies Space.”

Edwin Abbott Abbott, ‘Flatland’ (1884)

When being with Thomas’s paintings, we feel ourselves having to make continuous minor adjustments, of entering and exiting different parts of the paintings, of having too much space then immediately not having enough. A claustrophobia countered by an agoraphobia. As we spend time with the work, we become aware of our own facility of looking, we become watchers. It is an obvious comment to make but paintings are made to be looked at. And paintings are made to look the way that they do. They look like themselves, and not like anything else. The task of looking at paintings is not an easy one, it is fraught with pitfalls and possibilities. We have to sift through what is before us. These are paintings that have been made with a great degree of exactitude, and exactitude is what is demanded from those who look at the paintings:

“We see distinctly or confusedly. We look at near or at a distance. We behold with wonder and attention. We view with care and exactness”

John Trusler, ‘The Difference, between Words Esteemed Synonymous’ (1766)

Exactness. ‘L’exactitude n’est pas la verite’, said Henri Matisse, translates as ‘accuracy is not truth’. But maybe exactness provides a different type of truth. This exactness of these



Say Something (2023)

Oil on Calico, 180 x 135cm

paintings may indicate a process of scrutiny, of fine tuning. Thomas tunes each painting to a point where they give and take in equal measure, these exist in a place where underworking and overworking are just different types of working. There are what may appear to be minor considerations, such as the handwritten text that is not immediately visible and remains entirely illegible. There is the unexpected roundness to the edges of the canvas, a curved lip which defies convention, and which may ultimately be overlooked by a casual viewer of the work. These are paintings that reward the viewer for their efforts. And, when we consider the titles in relation to the paintings, we find ourselves plunged into the unpredictability and the unknowability of the worlds that exist before us.

The titles, or names as Thomas prefers to call them, do not necessarily describe what is happening in the painting – a narrative may be required for that, and these are a type of painting that move and act without narration. But nor do the names seem ill-fitting or arbitrary. Their names seem to have a kind of ambiguous relevance and specificity to the corresponding painting but there is something that continues to elude us; a missing link in the chain of our own cognition. Almost as if these paintings were bestowed their names a long time ago and the rationale for naming each one is now arcane or anachronistic. These are paintings that have lived with their names.

In 'Say Something' a mask-like face turns its gaze downward. Its eyes and lips are mere suggestions rather than complete descriptions. It cannot look at us, it cannot speak. It cannot say anything. But it can still do something. It can still act upon us, it can engage us, it can convince or repel us. This is the zone that Thomas's paintings inhabit; a space of denial and refutation, where nothing is as it seems, and nor should it be. It is a space for artifice, where a logic of painting can be trialled and established. Tested against reality and tested against itself only to then be ripped apart. 'Say Something' is a painting which offers up its



Deep Fake (2023)

Oil on Calico, 180 x 135cm

space, a space that has been untouched but not abandoned. It gives us very little, where we think we may want more...more description, more paint, more naming. And yet, it resists our pleas. Its identity is informed by its own making, but also by its negation to just be the one thing. It's a many thing.

“Pictures are houses of cards”

TJ Clark, *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica* (2013)

The pictorial space in ‘Deep Fake’ is continually shifting, where a newly found world is unfolding and overflowing. The vertical bands down either edge insist on containing this interior, localised world, but an acute angle pierces its way through as a misty elliptically-shaped stain trespasses the imagined boundary between illusion and flatness. Art historian TJ Clark, in his book ‘Picasso and Truth’, remarked that pictures are houses of cards. This is particularly applicable to Thomas’s paintings. Much like a deck of cards, they demand a kind of surface flatness. They have not been built outward from the surface; it is an image that must exist in the surface, in the very fabric of itself. Image is surface, and vice versa. Playing cards have what is referred to as new deck order when first opened, where all the cards are organised according to their ascending number and grouped by suit. But cards, by their very nature, are made to be held, made to be shuffled, to be reordered into new sequences and unrepeatable patterns. A similar shuffling appears to be happening in and through the paintings, where elements can be restacked, where the space can be cut, with how forms are dealt. The paintings themselves may even have their own kind of ‘suits’ allowing us to group them between those with open, lighter arenas and those that are unilluminated terrains.

‘Judgement You Can Have My Eyelashes’ depicts three formless forms (another descriptive contradiction). Only one form has a



Christmas Mourning (2023)

Oil on Calico, 180 x 135cm

face of its own. A face belongs to a body but here, as with many of the other works, each shapeless body is a painterly construction; strokes, smears, smudges, stains diffuse into each other. And who is offering their eyelashes to whom? What strange invasive process is about to take place? Is it surgical or cosmetic? In 'Christmas Mourning', the body is possibly at its most fully realised - apart from the hands which appear to be vanishing over the horizon off in the distance. Perhaps the horizon itself could be picked up – deadlifted - by the bodybuilder before us. Dead lifting. Body building. Again, we are returning to a site of quietus, but within that there is also the space - and the potential - for renewal, for some kind of on-going existence.

*“Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up,
but a comedy in long-shot”*

Charlie Chaplin

In Mikey Thomas's paintings, we aren't given either the close-up or the long-shot. We are given something in-between. The tragicomedy. Perhaps this justifies the neutrality of the expression on the faces...the interplay between the light and the dark. And perhaps it's a metaphor for painting itself.

Scott McCracken, 2024