

PETER CLEVERLEY



BLUE DAISY CHAIN

**RDS Gallery
2020**

Peter Cleverley: Holding the World

by Joanna Osborne

Confronting the Human Condition: The Mythopoetic

Art of Peter Cleverley

by Alistair Fox

Essays on the occasion of the exhibition

Peter Cleverley

BLUE DAISY CHAIN

9 October – 7 November 2020
RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin

Cover Image: Peter Cleverley, *blue daisy chain* (2020, gouache & water colour on Bockingford paper, height 275 mm x width 380 mm).

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Peter Cleverley: Holding the World

by Joanna Osborne

Peter Cleverley's practice is the summation of a life: lived experience and the present moment are enfolded in the labour of painting. A decade of international travel and cross-cultural encounter established his approach as a painter of empathy and attentiveness to the human condition. Continued travel over the years has maintained this sensibility.

As conduits from the specific to the general, Cleverley has developed a sustained symbolic interconnectedness across his oeuvre: examples include the vase, bundles of flowers, vessels, the head of a dog, the human face, and the cross. Each element becomes an avenue for a greater concern as specific memories and experiences manifest in nonlinear fashion through the painter's painterly task.

In this show, the cross, for example, can be seen in a number of works, including *blue daisy chain* (2020) and *Indian Flame Tree in Totara* (2020). Ironic for Cleverley, the cross also taps into centuries of shared cultural meaning. In his work this symbol often seems to have a way of calling attention to injustices in the world. Perhaps it reads as an anti-theodicy – a

questioning of injustice in the face of divine presence and meaning?

In a work like *knitted flowers – Bangkok* (2020) the cross also holds the space of compassion. The work recalls a humbling experience the artist had in the Siam region of Bangkok Thailand, where most days he passed a young woman with severe cerebral palsy, knitting and selling exquisite hand-crafted flowers from the stall of a rickety chair on wheels in the bustle of the city. One day he offered her an amount he thought her craft was worth, well beyond the expectations of her circumstances. In this painting, as with many others, the individual face becomes the face of the many.

knitted flowers – Bangkok (2020) is one example of the ways particular memories and experiences coalesce into paintings that hold the world. They all begin in the studio, formed through the process of forging medium and composition (reworked by the splash of a bucket of water on occasion) then left to find their own integrity – through intuition, empathy and process, Cleverley 'lets them be'.



knitted flowers – Bangkok (2020)

Medium: gouache & water colour on paper

Dimensions: height 275 mm x width 380 mm



The Poor List (2020)

Medium: gouache & water colour on paper

Dimensions: height 275 mm x width 380 mm

Confronting the Human Condition: The Mythopoetic

Art of Peter Cleverley

by Alistair Fox

When asked about his paintings, Peter Cleverley will quickly affirm that they deal with the human condition: the place of human beings in the context of time and space, the vanity of the way they treat Nature, and the sorrows and the joys of human life. To express his feelings about these dimensions of our existence, Cleverley has, over time, constructed a poetic world composed of metaphors and symbols that recur from one painting to the next, conjoined with a treatment of colour that invest his works with a highly personal and idiosyncratic character; a painting by Peter Cleverley is instantly recognizable as being by him, and him alone.

The elements in Cleverley's mythopoetic world are steeped in memories lingering from a long, rich, and varied experience. One can discern traces of his childhood in the North Otago seaside town of Kakanui; of time spent in the company of indigenous people in Australia; of sights witnessed during extended periods in South East Asia and various European countries; and of his enthusiasm for contemporary New Zealand art by painters such as Frances Hodgkins, Doris Lusk, Tony Fomison, Colin McCahon, and Bill Hammond.

Cleverley's art reflects his personal history in many ways. The striking presence of blue in his paintings, for example, with colours ranging from a light turquoise to a deep azure, comes from the impact of viewing the Pacific Ocean from his house as it shades off, metaphorically and literally, into a fathomless deep. Similarly, the artist associates the flowers that are ubiquitous in his paintings with his mother, who was a gardener and would arrange flowers for church. The title of this exhibition, 'BLUE DAISY CHAIN', with its accompanying images of daisies, associates to a memory of young Peter as a child stringing these beautiful little flowers together in a chain, leaving an impression so powerful that the idea of a chain has since become a permanent metaphor for continuity in Cleverley's imagination, appearing in several different configurations.

The great overarching theme in Cleverley's art is the fragility of human life when considered against the vastness of time and space in the rest of the universe. His imagination is arrested by the relative duration of landforms that outlast the fleeting existence of the human beings that arrogantly populate them – people who, in their vanity, frequently subject the natural environment to unspeakable abuse, such as spraying the roadsides, killing the wildflowers, with the unintended consequence of eliminating bees and the honey they make (again, metaphorically as well as literally). He is also haunted by a powerful awareness of the reality of death and decay, and

of the sadness that attends the suffering of those who are afflicted by poverty or disability in the face of adversity and society's false values and indifference. This heightened social awareness means that Cleverley regards his paintings as a means by which he can give a voice to those who don't have one, or who live in sad circumstances; as he puts it, he likes 'fighting for the underdog'. Cleverley's sense of mutability and the sadness that can be found in human life, in fact, is as strong as anything one might find in the art of the Middle Ages, with his skull-like heads functioning like a *memento mori*, reminding us of the reality of death and the capriciousness of Fortune and her wheel.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Cleverley's paintings are full of suggestive tensions, paradoxes, and ambiguities. His multivalent sense of the diverse contradictions inherent in human life finds expression through a variety of means. At a fundamental level, he makes heavy use of binary oppositions, which can be seen at a micro level in his striking use of complementary colours, and at a macro level in the juxtaposition of symbolic images that have opposing latent significations. Whereas dark colours intimate the tragic dimensions of life, the presence of radiant colours of an incandescent, luminous brightness immediately countermand the negative implications of the former by asserting the presence of beauty and regenerative life force to be found in the natural world that is represented in the latter.

The same sense of antithetical possibilities can be found in other symbolic images that recur in Cleverley's paintings, serving to invest them with a range of possible meanings that remain open for the viewer to interpret. As Cleverley insists, invoking Colin McCahon: 'A painting needs to be *read*, not just looked at', and his works challenge one to do precisely that. For example, the cross that hovers over many of his paintings is simultaneously, in its allusion to Christ's crucifixion, an emblem not only of suffering, but also of the possibility of redemption, while for Cleverley, in addition, it serves as a literalized metaphor of the Southern Cross, a constellation that we see from our location in this place, our place, in the clear skies overhead. Likewise, the hands that rise up from the bottom of a painting can appear skeletal, suggesting death, but at the same time they are also beseeching, inviting compassion.

Peter Cleverley has observed that painting is both 'agony and ecstasy'. It is agonizing not just because of the care and toil involved in bringing a work to fruition, which is necessary in order for an artist to attain the reward that comes with its satisfactory completion, but also because the subject matter requires one to confront the tragic as well as the joyous aspects of the human condition. Nevertheless, in spite of the unflinching directness with which he addresses the sad dimensions of life, Cleverley remains an irrepressible optimist, which makes his art as inspiring as it is complex.

Artist's and Authors' Biographies

Peter Cleverley was born in Oamaru in 1954 and works from a studio at his home in Kakanui, North Otago, having gained a Diploma in Fine & Applied Arts in 1974. As well as lecturing at the Dunedin School of Art since 1987, he has exhibited in Wellington, Ashburton, Gore, and Dunedin, with recent exhibitions, including 'Smoke & Mirrors', curated by the Forrester Gallery, Oamaru, in 2010. His works are held in the permanent collections of many New Zealand public art galleries, including Te Papa, the Dunedin Public Art Gallery; Forrester Public Art Gallery, Oamaru; Suter Gallery, Nelson; Aigantighe Gallery, Timaru; Hocken Library, Dunedin; and the Manawatu Public Gallery, Palmerston North.

Joanna Osborne recently completed a doctoral thesis that considered the nature of interdisciplinarity at the nexus of art history, religion, and theology, titled "'Black light' / 'Whiteness rests my mind': Evocations of the Spiritual in the Art and Practice of Ralph Hotere and Joanna Margaret Paul' (University of Otago, 2019). She has published on Joanna Margaret Paul, Ralph Hotere and Allie Eagle, most recently "'The flowers remember / the sugar bowl remembers', Quotidian Wonder and the Painter/Poet Joanna Margaret Paul', in *Thresholds of Wonder: Poetry, Philosophy and Theology in Conversation*, ed. Jennifer Reek and Francesca Bugliani Knox (Routledge, 2019).

Alistair Fox, Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, began his career as a university lecturer, moving to Dunedin in 1974. His initial area of scholarly expertise was English Tudor literature and history, in which he published a number of foundational texts. His later work focuses on New Zealand literature and culture, and cinema studies, extending into contemporary literary and film theory and New Zealand art. An interest in the creative process lends coherency to his published research as it extends over forty years. Among his numerous publications, he counts 7 single-authored and 2 co-authored monographs, numerous articles and book chapters, several co-edited volumes, and four volumes translated from French into English.

