

MICHAEL GREAVES

*TIME STEALS SOME THINGS, BUT
GIVES US BACK OTHERS*



RDS Gallery 2021

Essays on the occasion of the exhibition

Michael Greaves

*TIME STEALS SOME THINGS, BUT
GIVES US BACK OTHERS*

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RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin

Occasional Essays Series
Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner, Editors

Cover Image: *Von Zimmer*, Michael Greaves (2013-16), oil on linen, 1830 x 1370 mm.

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Untitled Object Study #3, Michael Greaves (2015-16), oil on linen, 430 x 365 mm.

Time Steals Some Things, But Gives Us Back Others

By Michael Greaves

The making of a painting that serves to represent a given object requires that the artist observes—that is to say, measures, and rationalises—a multiplicity of variables. This object is repositioned as a proxy for—as an image of—the original object. This new object (reconceptualised as an image that conveys an idea, a representation, a ‘sign,’ of the original object as it was observed in a specific time and space), one that is entombed in the material of paint, incorporates the minutiae of the subject’s perceptions, initially those of the maker ... and, then, eventually, the viewer for whom the painting is always destined.

Viewers reconstitute the object anew with each viewing, bringing to bear their biographies, with the multiplicity of variables that this inevitably entails. This transaction has always been of interest to me and my practice as a painter. The process of painting offers me many occasions on which to unravel and think about the myriad of relations generated by the observer, and the object observed. Painting surprises, shifting the object to ‘thing’ in its depiction of that object—from an identifiable entity having form and function in space

and time to a two-dimensional mass of colour, line, and shape.

In *The Road*, a novel by Cormack McCarthy, which takes place in a post-apocalyptic world, in which civilisation as we know it has disappeared, a series of instances arise in which the description of things no longer in existence becomes an impossibility. The protagonist attempts to recreate these objects through analogy and association. More accurately, he underlines how the loss of things results in the loss of the language that names the thing, for there is nothing left to “name.”

The protagonists in the novel are coming to terms with the loss of the world as they knew, and, with this, the loss of the “objects” that had once inhabited it. I see this as a wonderful metaphor for the process of painting and the outcome of painting. This complex, in which the deterioration of the memory of named “things,” and the subjective (hence biased) construction of new ways to identify and describe things, mimics the way that painting does not record the object it represents. Painting gives the viewer an entirely new and different “thing” that has little or no relation to the original perceived object, now entirely absent.

In these collected paintings “on” and about “things,” exhibited as *Time Steals Some Things, But Gives Us Back Others*, “objects” become “things,” occupying some sort of

unidentified and unknown space. The paintings flirt with representation while announcing the impossible position of the 21st century painter. Painting becomes self-referential, the loop again is opened and the strategy that is played out is intangible and hermetic.

Dunedin, 2021



Raft, Michael Greaves (2014), oil on linen, 360 x 350 mm.

Michael Greaves: The Artist Philosopher

by Hilary Radner

For a number of artists, dating back to the beginning of the 20th century, if not earlier, making art is intimately linked with an array of ontological and epistemological issues that have preoccupied philosophers for centuries. Michael Greaves is among them. As such, he exemplifies what we might appropriately call the “artist philosopher,” though he himself would deny this categorisation. The exhibition *Time Steals Some Things, But Gives Us Back Others* (RDS Gallery, 1–23 October) underlines and illustrates how these concerns are fundamental to his practice. Michael kindly plundered his archive for us in order to offer a show during the pandemic, thereby extending to viewers a rare opportunity to explore the aesthetic and philosophical journey undertaken by this artist over the past decade.

Born in 1976 and a native of Dunedin, Michael Greaves exhibited a facility for drawing and painting while still an adolescent, which garnered him attention, praise and even sales. While this early initiation may have fuelled his initial desire to become an artist, much of his subsequent work as a painter over the past twenty years has revolved around exploring what painting might be once it throws off the

burden of representing reality in accordance with what and how we see. In a 2017 essay, Greaves wrote: "For me, this 'window to the world' idea of painting, a mode so similar to the ubiquitous photograph, does not accurately present the position that painting occupies, although it was the pathway and the projected road to a successful painting promoted during my early years, emphasising correctness to the representation of sight."

The exploration of what "came after" was undoubtedly not easy for this artist philosopher. "Painting can never be what it intends. It is always mediated, always constructed, always comes with baggage," he writes in 2008. "How then," he asks, "can you even begin to approach painting without faltering at the first step ...?" This concern animates the works included in the current exhibition. A painting such as *Raft* (2014) "asks the viewer ... to interpret and play a vital role in completing the painting." The viewer struggles, a certain discomfort notwithstanding, to recognize the object, depicted with a restricted palette, and situated in an amorphous and ill-defined space. Is it an abstract painting? Or a set of randomly de-constructed pieces of cardboard and paper? Or an object that we should recognize, but don't? The painting's title is of little, or no, assistance.

This small painting stands in contrast with the joyous chaos of three large canvases, a riot of colour, line, and shape, that record the movements, the activity of painting itself. These

paintings appear to offer a moment of redemption, or at least respite, from the state of existential angst that informs the earlier work. Yes—the uncertainty subsists, but is subtended by an ebullient anarchy that justifies its existence through a pleasure in painting as an activity—an activity that evokes the reactions (termed “vitality affects” by Daniel Stern) of the *infans* before the advent of language.

Two larger paintings, *Untitled (object)* and *Untitled (garden object)* are dated 2017; however, of particular interest in this context, the third, *Von Zimmer*, was commenced in Berlin in 2013 and finished in Dunedin in 2016. Each painting presents a palimpsest of at least two, if not more, pictorial planes, which assiduous viewers will take up as an invitation to exercise their cognitive capacities. Others will respond with delight to the resulting exuberant dance of line, colour, and form that arises out of this particular strand in the artist's exploration of the relations between perception by a given subject and an object.

The remaining three smaller paintings in the exhibition, *Untitled Object Study #1 (2015-16)*, *Object Observation, 2016*, and *Untitled Object Study #3 (2015-16)* provide a conceptual link between *Raft* and the three large paintings. In these transitional works, geometric shapes suggest a second pictorial plane, a semi-transparent overlay that points to painting's origins as a medium devised to present three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane. In so doing,

these works highlight the essentially deceptive nature at the origin of European oil painting, summarised in the technique termed "*trompe-l'oeil*,"—literally [that which] deceives the eye. The choice to add more colour, even a single colour, within an otherwise monochromatic palette points to the emergence of another line of inquiry, on the part of the artist philosopher, into the nature of memory and its relations to colour, one that underpins a series of paintings exhibited in 2020 under the rubric of *I Suddenly Remembered My Grandmothers' Words*.

Too often we see a painting as a single object, or perhaps part of a set of objects coalescing into a discrete event, the exhibition. Only when artists *dans la force de l'âge* enjoy a retrospective, do viewers gain insight into painting as producing a body of work that grows and develops over time, with the end result greater than the sum of its parts. *Time Steals Some Things, But Gives Us Back Others* represents an unusual juncture in this process for an artist philosopher, now mid-career, leaving us eager to see the next iteration of works arising out of the set of concerns that motivate his project.

Dunedin, October 2021

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Note: Some material in the essay "Time Steals Some Things, But Gives Us Back Others" appeared in a different form in Michael Greaves, *RAFT* (Dunedin: Batti, 2014).

Contributors

Michael Greaves (b. 1976) currently lives and works in Dunedin where he graduated from The Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in 2017 with a Masters of Fine Art (Distinction) and holds the position of Senior Lecturer in Painting. He has exhibited nationally, and internationally, and has work held in the James Wallace Arts Trust, the Otago Polytechnic Collection and in numerous private collections in New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Europe. Recent work by Greaves has been exhibited in Berlin, Auckland, and Dunedin.

Hilary Radner began her career as a video artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with work shown at MOMA (1981), and the Biennale of Sydney (1982). In 1988, she completed a PhD at the University of Texas, Austin and was awarded the position of Assistant Professor, and later Associate Professor (1995), at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. In 2002, she was appointed Foundation Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Otago. She currently holds the title of Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, and has published widely in the areas of visual culture and cinema studies, most recently *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image*, with Alistair Fox (Edinburgh UP, 2018). She and Alistair now run RDS Gallery in Dunedin.

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