

My mind is made up

On a visit to David Palliser's studio, I took a photo of a list he'd made of possible titles for artworks and exhibitions, scrawled in a notebook. His handwriting is a slightly gawky combination of cursive and print, gestural and sculptural at the same time. He says he has always written these lists and that doing so is one of the processes that contribute to making his work. "Multi Moment Moving Means Most Must Musk." Letters change ever so slightly and make new meanings. "Suppose crossed criss crisscross." The elements in his paintings also overlap, resist hierarchies, turn on their head and change form. "Missing shoes Track training Steering wheel." The pathos, poetry and propulsion of painting.

Endless Conditions was the title of one of David's old paintings. I forgot to ask him if it sold and therefore stayed complete, or if it returned to the studio where he reworked it into a different version of itself – paintings given back to artists often have second lives. Now recycled as the title of this exhibition, Endless Conditions speaks of an ongoing process of decision-making displayed in a series of small, dynamic and characteristically complex paintings. I asked, "Do you make bodies of work? It seems like all these pictures come from the same place." By all these pictures I mean all the works in the studio, not just those for his new show. I refer to large, medium and small canvases that jut out of huge painting racks with repeated zigzagging forms and conveyor belt momentums that push geometric oddities up and off the edge of the plane, like the vertebrae of Brancusi's infinity columns. Squiggles and architectures and compositional corkscrews. "Yes, they come from the same place," he said.

Colours are also rehashed and roleplayed in different relationships. There are expressive German-looking ones, earthy tones and hints of sci-fi. There are eccentric combinations that someone prudish once declared should not be seen together; orange, green, lilac; lots of yellow; and indescribable browns that make the higher keys pop and bounce about. "Figuring out the colours," he said, "is the hardest part."

When David presents a pile of black-and-white drawings, some collaged, I see how it all begins. Stripped of colour, these drawings contain handfuls of odd alien forms dotted about in seas of negative space. These strange figurations don't seem to be any particular thing or being. Instead, they are the artist's gestural micro-inventions – lyrical, with sharp teeth – that remind me of the biomorphic geometries in Miro's pictorial worlds. These drawings are stark and strong and strange, completely successful as they are. But the paintings – with their living errors, wild colour relationships, tightness, looseness and repetitions – flesh out the spaces between those original forms, folding them in on each other and out again until some kind of magic-logic happens.

Looking back, I remember standing with an artist friend in front of one of David's large works at an opening a few years ago, both of us thrilled with how he dared to leave in the most bizarre painterly moments. And while there were these windows of loose and manic gestures, other sections were laboured over, tended to, articulated through gradients, impasto paint and wound-up string forms. Building this tension is how David sculpturally constructs his spaces – what falls apart is drawn back together through another colour, a repeated form, a different process or a tiny section of washy paint left from the first day he started making the piece. Everything flexes between any number of dualisms: violence and jubilation, micro and macro, punk and jazz, tightness and looseness, the beginning and what's to come.

I now see that the awe I have felt when looking at David's paintings is a reverence for his ability to improvise. Those who know David know he plays music, and that he plays with music too.

He uses it like a material. Improvisational music requires the composer to have a spontaneous and bodily connection to sound, and I wonder if that means it can easily take over other senses and become visual. He says, “Sounds jump out at you and then recede.” I think about how he weaves audible textures together in different ways to make joyful and calamitous music, similar to the way he manipulates the formal elements in his paintings. As he describes, painting becomes a kind of module to be broken – the rectangle, a sturdy container for impulsivity.

David’s paintings perform and come from endless conditions. The tensions he builds have been developed from years of turning up to the studio to see what shapes, colours, gestures and materials do in their myriad combinations. His work reminds me how painting can give so generously if it can only think highly enough of its own strangeness and imperfections, learning to work with and not against itself. I look back to the photo of David’s handwritten list. One line says, “My mind is made up.” A final and ironic gesture amid endless conditions.

By Laura Skerlj

David Palliser’s exhibition Endless Conditions runs from August 25th to September 17th, 2022, at Jacob Hoerner Galleries, Melbourne, Australia.