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TOM POLO: Emotional Portraits

28 July 2017 | Melissa Pesa

Through the semantics of text, satire and a broadening of portraiture, Tom Polo's paintings engage with the emotional characteristics of the human condition and disclose hidden, or inner, conversations. Here, the Sydney-based artist discusses his practice ahead of an upcoming exhibition at STATION, Melbourne.



Tom Polo, *Liar Liar Lying Down Dropped Mask Slow Coach*, 2017, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 183 x 214cm. Photograph: Andrew Haining. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne

In these paintings you find aspects of 'being' – failure, anxiety and expectation. Is humour an instrument of entertainment or does it serve as a coping mechanism?

While I wouldn't call the humour that may be read in my practice 'an instrument of entertainment', I do consider it a tool of sorts; a way into the work for myself in the process of making it and the same for an audience who is looking and unpacking it.

I think the strand of humour – whether it's lighthearted, absurd or self deprecating – is as equally honest and authentic as any other emotional feature that is built into the works and translated by an audience. I promise that I don't sit with a notebook writing down all my best visual gags and one-liners to strategically smuggle into the works! I just use my iPhone notes app for that instead.

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Tom Polo, *Emotional Patrol (The Trial)*, 2017, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 180 x- 140cm. Photograph: Andrew Haining. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne

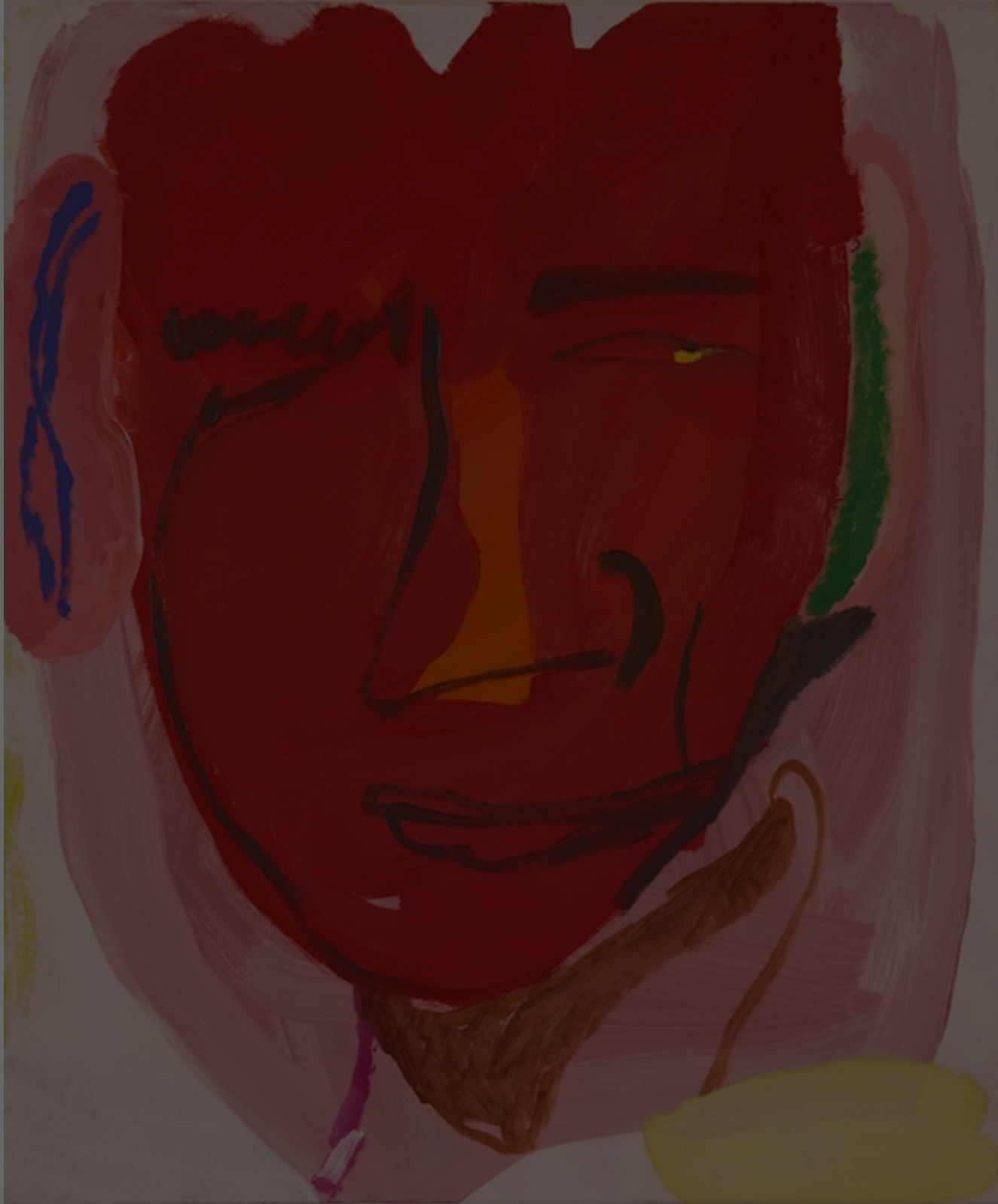
Is your practice autobiographical or a commentary and observation of society?

Both, and I suppose, how can they not be either? The more that I work, the more I realise, or affirm, that these things are connected and emotionally fluid. The works are collective narratives shaped by me, my relationships with others and what encircles that personally, socially and culturally.

Do the images and text reflect a narrative of one another?

While they aren't always exhibited in equal measure, I see the use of text and image in my practice as one and the same; one drives the other and back again. I think the text helps to initiate a narrative and the image proceeds to discourage this through absurdist and illogical physical forms. Sometimes vague and occasionally more explicit (visually and conceptually), I think the text serves to reveal the conversations we have with others, or perhaps, just with ourselves.

The other thing to mention is the significance of how the text is rendered within the works. Whilst usually painted, occasionally they appear as fluorescent neons or as billboards and banners. At other times the text is part of a painterly pattern within an abstracted work and occasionally the letters are overtly figurative themselves. Text is image.



*Tom Polo, Other People's Problems, 2017, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 60 x 50cm.
Photograph: Andrew Haining. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne*

What is the significance of using captivating colours such as bold reds and blues?

In terms of colour, I use whatever is feeling right. I rarely try to restrict my choices before starting a work, but I do think the decisions are made with an understanding of what's working for the paintings on a case-by-case basis – it's an impulse! My studio practice is one built and informed by process, and colour-use works to respect balance and disrupt it.

Expansive fields of flat colour in my wall pieces or installations set an agenda to create a work in response to; a backdrop of sorts. From there it's all intuitive, unless on occasion a work requires a specific colour for its conceptual weight. Sometimes the seduction of colour overrides anything else for the audience and I think I've accepted that. It's an emotional response in the viewer after all.



Tom Polo, Blend In or Disappear, 2017, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 180 x 140cm. Photograph: Andrew Haining. Courtesy the artist and STATION, Melbourne

Tell us about your new exhibition, 'Emotional Patrol', at STATION, Melbourne.

The exhibition comes after a period of research across Europe last year whilst I was undertaking the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship, awarded in 2015. Broadly, the exhibition builds upon my interests in conversation, doubt and gesture as embodied acts of portraiture and during my time away I began connecting these concepts to familial histories and places of cultural significance in Italy.

The show will feature a collection of paintings and sculptural elements that focus in on subjects of emotional theatre and performativity, self care and personal surveillance as well as the act of collage and costuming to reference masking and facade.

Alongside this show is my participation in 'Primavera 2017: Young Australian Artists' at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and there'll exist an echo between both exhibitions – almost like a call and response of painted and sculptural works between Sydney and Melbourne.

STATION

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