

Layered Landscapes

AA LJ

Lucy Jackson – 26 July, 2019

'The Great Race' perhaps provides more questions than answers. The works are small, framed like little jewels and icons. Inside the frames are layered landscapes, shapes painted over, and locked in. The works clearly hark back to influence of Cubism with their diamonds, triangles and lines. They remind me of theatre design, with multiple layers of scenery and architecture, disconnected and creating an odd spatial depth.

SPA_CE

Napier

John Brown

The Great Race

May 24 - June 22, 2019

I'm not surprised that John Brown won the Molly Morpeth Canaday Trust Major Award in 2019. His work is deliberately contentious, highly organised within and outside of the frame, and intelligent in both content and delivery. The artist examines his personal history, which in turn becomes our history, through a mixture of objects and landforms that are clues to gaining a deeper understanding, or questioning, of where we come from.

It's easy to miss SPA_CE, especially when your rain-jacket hood is up and your Google Maps is lagging. But the gallery is worth the find. Made up of two rooms, it hits quaint without cuteness; and the exhibition is sparsely hung to match the small spaces. John Brown's The Great Race inspired in me a curiosity to get close and to spend time with the work.

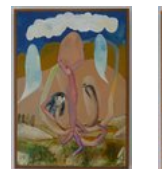
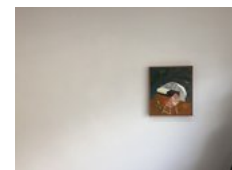
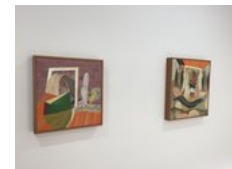
The painting that won Brown the Molly Morpeth Canaday Trust Major Award was The Battle for Tuber. The work was an inkling of things to come, with split and layered landscapes, eeley figurines and a vintage colour palette. In The Great Race, Brown continues on this trajectory, producing ten small, intricate but captivating works. He's been working on them in his home studio for a year; they are previously unseen.

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The paintings have a 'vintage' presence, with their colour palette screaming 1960s, with its salmon pinks and secondary blues. Each work is compositionally balanced, sitting tight within its matching brown frame, halfway between sculptural object and painting.

In Tales of the Golden Land, each brushstroke is visible, including the under painting. Looking closely you can see marked in, or even wiped away, koru in the bottom section. And the large diamond in the centre obviously consists of small square sections in itself.

The accompanying text states that the series 'amalgamates various painterly conventions'. The works do this effectively and unobtrusively, being reminiscent of Cubist collage works and going further than simply breaking up spaces. Instead there is a true layering, asking us to figure out possible dialogues between these levels.



The exhibition is an attempt by the artist to piece together his Pākehā and Greek heritage. I think Brown looks to—rather than ‘believes in’—the controversial theories that claim Greek Egyptian voyagers as the first people to visit this country, referencing discussions found in books such as Maxwell C. Hill’s To the Ends of the Earth.

Brown riffs from this iconography, presenting pyramids (Believe it or Not), eels and snakes (The Snake and the Three Unknowns; Knight Under Fire Mountain; The Hawk, the Snake and Homer’s Superstitions), gateways (Fire on Easter Island; Knight Under Fire Mountain) and a ship for exploration (Aotea). The paintings’ names read like story titles or chapters, producing their own narrative. His imagery mingles icons and cultures as if they are characters on a stage, exploring the potential of his own personal heritage and wandering through it, grasping at the unknown for answers.

Lucy Jackson

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