

Neil Frazer

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There are parts of *Deep Freeze* that look as if they have been formed by powerful natural forces. They are thrilling to look at. How does Frazer do that – not just depict an avalanche, but create an avalanche of oil paint? That great slew of paint right in front of you – kilos of the stuff – that looks as if it's just landed on the canvas. Yet the paint looks so heavy and ancient, like rock.

Come to think of it, if you were to cut that part of the painting out and enlarge it, you would have an abstract painting similar to the paintings that Frazer produced in the 1980s and 1990s. From the outset, Frazer revelled in the sensuous appeal of paint. He was influenced by American Abstract Expressionists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, two of the most important painters of the second half of the 20th century. Both could make paint look like natural phenomena: Pollock with his flung and poured skeins of liquid 'energy', de Kooning with great oily swathes of curdled colour.

In the 1980s and early 1990s when Frazer started out, the contemporary art world was generally more interested in Post-modern theory about art and culture than it was in painting. Disseminated through the universities, Post-modernism was in many respects a breath of fresh air, but it tended to be critical of painting – especially anything that smacked of Expressionism. (Expressionism is a term broadly describing the artistic projection of inner states of feeling and emotion. It occurs in most art forms.) While many of Frazer's contemporaries distanced themselves from expressive painting at this time – frequently opting for installation, photography and video – he was creating ever more thickly impastoed surfaces, often in lurid tones. Frazer had found in Abstract Expressionism an idiom which gave him permission to handle paint not as a means to an end – as in representational or conceptual painting – but as an end in itself.

Whether Frazer was ever interested in the emotive aspect of Expressionism is questionable. The fact that his abstractions could so easily morph into landscapes suggests a more formal interest. Some of Frazer's abstract works from the late 1980s suggested visceral, internal 'landscapes', that recall French

painter Chaim Soutine's tortured paintings of the innards of butchered animals. But in Frazer's hands even that imagery didn't convey personal anguish.

Now Frazer has turned the landscape outwards and the images are *100% Pure* picturesque. It's imagery that flirts with tourist cliché. For that reason it might have repelled, but somehow Frazer keeps us on the hook. There's all that grunty paint for starters. There are also art historical precursors whom we can't help recalling. For instance, Cézanne was drawn repeatedly to the formal monumentality of Mt Saint Victoire and the lesser known Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler was obsessed by the symbolic potency of mountains as subject matter. Interestingly, both Cézanne and Hodler painted their subjects outdoors. Hodler was even known to set up his easel in the alps amidst ice and snow. Frazer's interest in mountains is more pragmatic. Just as he found Abstract Expressionism hospitable to paint, so in mountains he has found subject matter that allows him to 'do imagery' while losing none of the excitements of handling paint.

Gerald Barnett

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Web search:

Paul Cézanne

Willem de Kooning

Ferdinand Hodler

Jackson Pollock

Chaim Soutine

