

Paul Hartigan

b.1953

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On an apricot pink ground, in a slightly darker shade of pink, Paul Hartigan has written three separate pieces of information: his surname, the title of the painting and the date. Each piece of information is placed amongst the array of colourful objects depicted, almost as if it were an element in the painting. The title defines these objects as 'stones', but they can also be taken for pieces of fruit, cookies, leaves or pills. A piece of blue steak, anyone?

Why is it that these objects can so easily be perceived by the viewer as something that they really are not? When you look hard, you can see that what at first looked like cookies, sweets and other edibles are really nothing more than candy-coloured, cartoony shapes that slip between sense and nonsense. It's interesting, though, that our eye and brain should want to recognise them as familiar objects.

We are often called upon to 'join the dots' when looking at an artwork, or a comic book for that matter. It is a common artistic strategy to merely suggest with shapes and marks and let the viewer's perception do the rest. But Hartigan is playing a little game with this process. When he pushes our eye-brain willingness too far ("hey, that can't be right!"), we feel the need to verify our initial perception. Then we realise that what has been created is a sign: a recognisable and easily reproducible cipher that stands in for the real thing. It's just that Hartigan's signs are deliberately wonky: *Goon Stones*.

In fact, signs are at the centre of Hartigan's art and he has been collecting them for the past 30 years. With a Polaroid camera he has recorded advertisements, billboards and shop signs, which he then turns into screenprints or paintings. It is the everyday visual language of commerce and advertising that interests him. And, with not much of a stretch, the objects in *Goon Stones* would look right at home in an advertisement for lollies. They look edible.

Goon Stones also has a painterly, decorative quality where the sketchily painted objects almost appear animated – shimmering and pulsating, a little like lights. Interestingly, Hartigan has also created art with neon light, another reference to signs, and in *Goon Stones* he gets something of the neon effect using paint. It is as if there is a pale blue 'neon haze'

around each object causing it to vibrate against the pink ground. Again, this strategy can be related back to the world of consumer culture, where every product is competing for the consumer's attention and every little trick is deployed to make it more desirable than the rest. Hartigan's interest in consumer culture and its signs places him in the Pop tradition of the 1960s as well as suggesting affinity with the playful approach of New Image artists of the 1980s.

Robyn Pickens

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.govettbrewster.com
www.nzartmonthly.co.nz/kruscic_007.html
www.pageblackiegallery.co.nz

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