

Allen Maddox

1948–2000

Ilam School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury

Paintbrush held in a hand, passing at speed. The wrist dips – paint hits canvas, viscous pigment sliding off brush – the wrist swerves, brush follows ‘tailing’ paint at the end of its stroke. Allen Maddox’s paintings celebrate the brushstroke as traces of the painter’s bodily movement. As art critic, Tony Green noted: “...every stroke stood up, for itself and nothing else, no symbol, no metaphor, a physical piece of action, not mistakable for anything else”.

This is close to the ‘action painting’ of classical American Abstract Expressionism. Maddox aspired to Jackson Pollock’s and Willem de Kooning’s largeness of ambition for painting. In his best work, like *A Letter To Phil About Dolphins* (1979), Maddox achieved a fluency of gestural mark-making that has obvious affinities with Abstract Expressionism. He also engaged with a more recent development, in the grid.

Along with X-crossed brushstrokes, the grid became a signature element in Maddox’s art. Used by a number of New Zealand artists in the 1970s, the grid was a late Modernist system for dispersing pictorial incident evenly over the painting’s surface. By grafting gestural brushstrokes onto its geometry (which in Maddox’s case was always drawn free-hand and had a kind of undulating pulse), Maddox was creating an unlikely hybrid. Unlikely because, as Hamish Keith noted, grids are “the epitome of order and intellectual arrangement, and Expressionism is, well, something else entirely”.

For more than 20 years, Maddox worked with these elements, playing with variations of configuration and execution. For instance, his brushwork could be light and breathtakingly agile. In *A Letter To Phil About Dolphins*, the brushstrokes have the playful movement of dolphins cavorting in the surf. Or it could be turgid yet tactile, as if the grid had become a load-bearing structure.

Untitled (Linear Grid) is dominated by a dark inner structure: a full grid complete with crosses, painted matter-of-factly in black. It has been partially clad in bright, somewhat sloppy brushstrokes. A few dark sections of framework remain exposed against a white background, emphasised by runs and drips of black paint from horizontal ‘girders’. Layers create an illusion of shallow space. A few boxes in the grid are veiled by a semi-transparent grey wash. In some cases, there are brushstrokes both beneath and on top of the wash.

Serious painting-games like Maddox’s, based on self-imposed rules of engagement with materials and format, were a late Modernist strategy. Maddox knew there were traps for players,

especially for the skilled ones: paradox being part of the game. To a 1976 painting, that showed his own considerable skill, Maddox gave the title: *Finer And Finer And More Gutless*.

Maddox’s work was never gutless, but there were other traps. In later years, he seemed to be consumed by a search for a kind of expressionist intensity that flirts with formlessness. The late work has the drama of imminent implosion. Gone though are those thrilling, tensile brushstrokes locked in a dance between lightness and weight.

Gerald Barnett

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www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
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Articles:

Tony Green on Maddox’s 1970s work:
www.art-newzealand.com/Issues11to20/maddox.htm
 Richard McWhannell remembers Maddox:
www.art-newzealand.com/Issue97/maddox.htm

Web search:

Willem de Kooning
 Jackson Pollock

