

Simon Ogden

b.1956

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At first sight, Simon Ogden's *Pearl* is a visual riddle, a puzzle of put-together parts. Why is this mixed media work called *Pearl*? A pearl, as the dictionary will tell you, is a smooth, round precious gem, usually of a pale, greyish-white colour. Maybe the artist is being whimsical and a bit flippant, and there's no connection between title and artwork. However, if we study the artwork we do begin to see associations and possibilities. Actually, *Pearl* is all about associations.

Too often, in this age of visual overload, our eyes skate and slide and skim over easy-to-understand signs and symbols, and pre-packaged imagery. Ogden wants you to slow down and look at what's right in front of your nose, or underfoot – your actual environment – and to develop a sense of appreciation for what gets discarded.

Pearl is one of a recent series of works by the artist that incorporate collage and construction with painting. Here, he has combined acrylics painted onto stretched canvas with cut-up pieces of other canvas he's glued on, and then partly over-painted. Ogden began as a painter and sculptor interested in abstract art, and in particular the experiments of the Russian Constructivist artists of the early 20th century, who were revolutionaries: they wanted to transform the way we think about art and its symbols by using industrial materials and motifs. We can see evidence of Ogden's interest in the industrial and the manufactured with his incorporation of old fabric stamped with lettering. He believes in recycling. As he commented in a newspaper interview: "I like the idea of making art from found objects, many of which are so beautiful in themselves that it often seems a shame to use them".

Pearl gets us to examine worn, scratched and faded colours, shapes and textures, and see them anew. It's a kind of close-up look at some of the artist's favourite shapes. There are circles, triangles and rectangles, arranged in a certain way and in a certain colour combination so as to establish a meaningful relationship between them. They evoke landscape and movement, and also mood.

The round and pointed shapes, interacting, are embedded in and bonded by a flow of white paint. But this ground of white has some dark underpainting that creates a greyish-white sheen: a 'pearl' effect. The plastered-on white also makes outlines that suggest islands, fiords, harbours — and one or two slivers resemble the sails of yachts. The three circles – one pale blue, one pale violet and, floating in a top corner, one sizzling-hot red spot – are enacting a sequence. They seem to shift, or at least suggest movement. Has the small red circle, like a floating balloon, been punctured by one of the sharp-pointed triangles and so drifted upwards? Alignment and balance are put under scrutiny by the artist and then by you as you gaze. This is a jazzy collage, one that sharpens your attention as you catch at its sophisticated rhythms, its improvisational engagement with possibilities of design, possibilities of meaning.

David Eggleton

Galleries and museums:

www.artbash.co.nz

www.bowengalleries.co.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.fina.canterbury.ac.nz

www.milfordgalleries.co.nz

Articles:

Mane-Wheoki, J. (1991–1992). 'Simon Ogden: The Choreography Of Abstraction'. *Art New Zealand*, 61, Summer, Number 61.

Web search:

Russian Constructivism

