

Don Peebles

b.1922

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“People can see what they like in them... I want the works to have PRESENCE... The good painting pumps out from the wall. How can a painting be called surface bound?”¹

Is this work a painting or a sculpture? It is made out of canvas and paint and hangs on a wall like a painting, but it also projects out into three-dimensional space like a sculptural construction.

Untitled (Blue) brings together two strands in the art of Don Peebles. In 1959 he had been influenced by a touring exhibition of British painters, including Patrick Heron and Peter Lanyon. Their semi-abstract paintings influenced Peebles' *Wellington Harbour* series (1959–60). In 1960 Peebles also travelled to Britain and met Victor Pasmore, who was bringing about a local revival of Constructivism based on the radical Russian art movement of the same name. Around 1915 Constructivism had emerged from sculptor Vladimir Tatlin's search for 'truth to materials' in art. But what had started as a personal artistic vision was to come under the control of the Russian Revolution after 1917. The revolutionaries insisted Constructivism should combine a collective creative process with industrial materials to produce art that would engage the viewer as an active participant.

Peebles's constructions of the 1960s are closer in spirit to the British version of Constructivism. His works were elegant and immaculately finished. Usually made from painted plywood, they often included industrial materials like metal and plastic. In an echo of those earlier works, the canvas in *Untitled (Blue)* is attached to a plywood support. But Peebles's use of canvas began in the mid-1970s as a reaction against the rigid materials and straight lines of his 1960s work. For several years he experimented with canvas, thinking of it as an essential formal element of the artwork rather than simply as a support for easel painting. By the 1980s he was employing a tentmaker to sew flaps of canvas onto a canvas backing. The work was painted on the floor and then hung wet to let the soft and flexible, fin-like leaves drape down under their own weight.

Untitled (Blue) emphasises its physical presence, “pumps out from the wall”, by asserting two opposing qualities: the deliberate scruffiness of its monotone finish feels austere, yet its ‘imagery’ of luxuriant growth is opulent. The construction has been meticulously planned to be harmonious and economical, free of anything the artist does not consider absolutely essential. The use of a single colour for instance, effectively prevents the viewer being distracted from the form. At the same time the viewer is made aware of the tension in this object between painting and sculpture.

Andrew Paul Wood

¹ Don Peebles: *The Harmony Of Opposites*, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, 1996.

Galleries and museums:

www.artisgallery.co.nz

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govtbrewster.com

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

Simpson, P. (1997). 'Don Peebles At 75: Alive & Working Among Us'. *Art New Zealand*, 83, Winter, pp. 67–71.

Books:

Paton, J. (1996). *Don Peebles: The Harmony Of Opposites*. Christchurch: Robert McDougall Art Gallery and Hazard Press.

Web search:

Patrick Heron

Peter Lanyon

Victor Passmore

Russian Constructivism

Vladimir Tatlin

