A Material Direction

by Jodie Dalgleish

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André Hemer, *A Hot Mess #3* (detail), 2015. Photo: Jodie Dagleish.

André Hemer, *New Representation #3*, 2015, acrylic, oil and pigment on canvas, 151.5 x 121cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

André Hemer, *Flatbed Plein Air*, Villa Lena Foundation studio, 2015. Photo courtesy of the artist.

André Hemer, *Towards Deep Surfacing #4*, 2016. Acrylic and pigment on canvas, 36 x 27 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

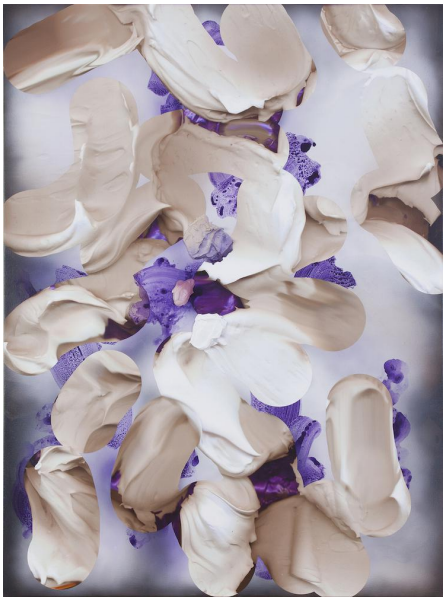
As I spoke from Luxembourg to André Hemer in Vienna, his latest series of work, *Deep Surfacing*, was held up in German Customs, while the University of Sydney's 2016 Fauvette Loureiro artist's award exhibition, for which it was destined, opened. Following on from the artist's four year PhD in painting, his works were to be seen alongside the other four finalists and recent graduates of the Sydney College of Arts, also to be recognised for their practice.

Hemer was the cover artist of Thames and Hudson's 100 Painters of Tomorrow in 2014, has had two intensive years of exhibitions on

both sides of the world, and was also recently the winner of the Wallace Arts Trust Paramount Award in New Zealand. I have been, however, largely unaware of his reported success. Rather, as a New Zealander now also based in Europe, I have been intrigued by the achievement of three series of new paintings produced in Paris, Tuscany and Vienna. The first, *A Hot Mess*, was painted while Hemer was a recipient of a Studio in Paris Scholarship at Cité Internationale des Arts, awarded by the Art Gallery of NSW. I came across documentation of the Paris works too late, after one of my visits to the city, but returned recently to view the few remaining works and then spoke with the artist of my experience, and his practice.

First-off, we discussed the problematic term 'ex-pat,' and its sense of being away from 'home.' For Hemer, who has German and New Zealand citizenship and has always moved between different countries, there is not one place that falls with the word like an anchor of nostalgia. A transitory state is more natural to him, as is his Kiwi-born sense of dislocation, experienced particularly as an art student dealing with the world of art history in abstract. His state is, then, more one of his practice: an enquiry into other spaces occupied more generally in the moment, in terms of his experience of contemporary visual culture in both its materialised and dematerialised forms. Yet, we note, his paintings can't help but be responsive, in some way, to their condition, particularly as the light of different places infiltrates the artist's various scanning processes.

André Hemer, *A Hot Mess #3* (detail), 2015. Photo: Jodie Dagleish.



André Hemer, *A Hot Mess #3*, 2015. Acrylic, oil and pigment on canvas, 137.5 x 102.5 cm.

André Hemer, *A Hot Mess #3*, 2015. Acrylic and pigment on canvas, 40 x 30cm.

In *A Hot Mess #3* the cut of digitally-printed gestural and petal-like forms radiate—under and over layers of background print and hand-painted gestures, from a centre of corresponding gestural and hand-built, three dimensional forms. Somewhat quixotically, I describe it as punctuated by a floral 'boom,' because that was the word I actually said quietly to myself in the gallery as I also made a corresponding gesture with my hand—opening it suddenly from closed.

Europe is not a new experience for Hemer. And yet, I say, there is some sort of arrival in, and continuation from his Parisian series, *A Hot Mess*. That's less to do with a revelatory experience of previously abstracted art works, or being in Paris (which has become such a cosmopolitan city, anyway), and more to do with timing, Hemer explains. For him, the time offered by his PhD was one of experimentation and reflection, while that of his Paris residency, one of resolution. This is a recurrent part of his practice, after all, says the artist: trying things out, to see what comes together. Also, being in an older, perhaps less self-conscious, culture helps: not over-thinking where you might 'fit,' or the aesthetic choices you make.

A Moment with a Painting

As Hemer and I start to talk more critically of his work, I share my in-person experience of his big painting *A Hot Mess #3*, the first I saw of his Paris series. On stepping back to take it in, it revealed itself in a memorable moment, as a complete concept and physical experience, albeit one I have puzzled over since.

Hemer's working process combines forms, media and materials across digitally-enabled and hand-based processes so as to play, not only with gestures, created from both digital tools and the painter's mark, but also their presentation, in the layers that comprise the painted object. Sometimes labelled post-internet, or post-digital, Hemer's work is often described in terms of the digital versus the analogue, pixels in tension with pigments, digital manipulation and the digital print in contrast to painting.

And yet, while Hemer utilises media that are opposites in their native form, and manifests them alongside each other, what he creates, for me, is less concerned with opposites and more concerned with the complexity and multidimensionality of a single space. 'Amalgamation,' the artist tells me, is the word he uses to describe his intent for such a space, which is concerned with the materiality of both materialised and dematerialised forms.

Granted, Hemer uses a scanner's digital output as much as he uses the physical media of plaster and paint. But, as seen in the series *A Hot Mess*, the artist's scanning of his three dimensional objects creates the complex form and content of the gestures that characterise the work. Placed on a flatbed scanner, these built objects reflect light off their surface to become the flared painterly marks—complete with their quality of digital production—that, when materialised, exist as both digital and physical form. Beneath and beside them also, are the artist's other gestures, in concurrence, even while we understand the generative interplay of their different media to be part of the concept of the work. What emerges, is an object that is finally characterised, not so much by dichotomy, but by synchrony.

The ‘One-space’ and the Archive

To my mind, the dematerialisation of digital forms and the ubiquity of the image, across media in general, is a fact of commonplace experience and the natural space that Hemer explores. Indeed, the artist’s interest, as he has also discussed with Sydney-based lecturer and curator Oliver Watts (2015), is in a ‘full circulation of images,’[01] and the possible ambit of data with which we interface, collect and make part of our experience, everyday. Correspondingly, for him, using digital media and the digital print along with non-digital media, is both a natural use of material and way to work.

As part of his PhD and practice, the artist has proposed the term ‘new representation’ within which image/material/experience are all things affecting one another, and approximated in the act and object of painting. With his work, such as *A Hot Mess #3*, I can relate what he also describes as his concern, not so much with ‘a complete hybridisation of material,’ but with a convergence of forms and the complexity of connections made across a multiplicity of both materialised and dematerialised data, media, and modes.

What I see in Hemer’s work, then, is what I will call a ‘one-space’ in which one might amalgamate the multivalent ‘material’ of our

daily existence, whether it be strictly physical, or not. To me, this one-space is the hyper-space of the painting in which conversational gestures are formed differently but from across the same terrain, and are similarly given the intrigue and longevity of the painting's physical form, across the play of its surface. Further, it is a one-space that has become, through the advent of painting, another space of possibility that we recognise and understand in some way, without the need for a step-by-step account of the ways in which the object has been created.

As I seek to describe my sense of the one-space of *A Hot Mess #3*, Hemer relates his concept of the 'Archive': also a word and concept central to his PhD, and which he uses as a placeholder for the space that amalgamates material and dematerialised forms 'as versions, variations, and connections upon one another.' He agrees that it is a space in which dematerialised forms are as real as anything else and in which a complexity of multifarious forms inescapably reference one another (but not simply in a linear way: from original to copy). His interest, he says, is always in this place of amalgamation and connection in which materialisation and dematerialisation inform each other and are, therefore, valued equally. Ultimately, it is this place he relates—through the physical act and object of painting, and the intimacy of the creative act—to his own personal experience of the Archive's concomitant objects and histories.

André Hemer, *New Representation #3*, 2015. Acrylic, oil and pigment on canvas, 151.5 x 121 cm.

André Hemer, *New Representation #3* (detail), 2015. Photo courtesy of the artist.

André Hemer, *New Smart Object Plus #16*, 2015. Acrylic, oil and pigment on canvas, 88 x 66 cm.

André Hemer, *New Representation #12,* 2016, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 180 x 135 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Associations and Persistence

As part of describing my experience of *A Hot Mess #3*, I mention my interest in Hemer's own understanding of how people encounter his work. Hemer responds by saying that he does not try to put himself in the place of the viewer but is, rather, trying to figure the work out for himself, processually and intuitively. The viewer's experience, in the openness of painting, is not one he would seek to predict or prescribe. For, what I found in my moment of recognition

of *A Hot Mess #3* was perhaps the resolution of a concept of the Archive in the work of the painting, but not some sort of resolution of the nature of the Archive within the painting—and that is, I think, what keeps me coming back to it, keeps it in my mind, and gives it both currency and persistence.

Hemer says that ten years ago, while in art school in New Zealand, he thought about art history a lot, but that he now thinks about it less and less. It is part of the Archive and infiltrates some works more directly than others, but he does not attempt to build an overt historical bridge. In this way, I think the data and objects of art history, can concurrently, and inconclusively, be part of the narratives and histories of the work, for both the artist and viewer.

Associations can be freely made by the viewer through the interface of the painting. When I was viewing works from the more painterly series *A Hot Mess*, for example, I had within my everyday Archive, a tantalising melange of possible historical relations that came and went, as if shifting in my peripheral vision, yet within arm's reach: a sense of Baroque painting's type of drama, rich colour and intense chiaroscuro and the floral blooms of the 17th Century Dutch Masters; an abstract artist's sense of simplification by marks made; the candy colours of pop; the decorative impulse of a belle époque in all its forms; and the balance of classical composition.

In my experience, associations can exist and change over time too, as happened with *New Representation #3*. This is a painting Hemer says Paris 'allows,' within its context of the ornate, the decorative, and beauty-in-excess. Like *A Hot Mess #3*, it is a painting, the artist agrees, that is unavoidably sensual in its forms, colour palette, and tactile sense of surface. It is more dramatic too, I note, with its luscious corpuscular/petal-like forms and type of tenebrism (the baroque style of using deep shadows against distinct areas of light). In it, floral swathes of light-ridged colour settle against a velvety background and, for me, somewhere, the flesh of the hand and arm of a woman in a romantic portrait carries the falling folds of her white sleeve, or maybe her soft collar lies at her throat. This occurs, for example, in the portrait *Reverie* (1840) by French painter Hippolyte Flandrin, which I saw at le Musée de la Vie Romantique the very next day, and which now exists in my

own digital files and its many online versions I have seen since. So that, now, when I think of *A Hot Mess #3*, or *Reverie*, I somehow see all their images and objects together, not as placeholders for historical categorisation, but moving coincidentally together, someplace else.

It's something he loves about the medium of painting generally, the artist says: that there are connections people make just because of the medium and its flattening, across history and across cultures, but not because of some deliberate attempt of his to 'put' such content 'in there.' And with painting also, those connections, rather than being fixed, are also affected by the contemporary culture within which the object exists. So, could it be that, in the future, the material relationships of the works are inflected in a way we don't expect today?

André Hemer, *Flatbed Plein Air*, Villa Lena Foundation studio, 2015. Photo courtesy of the artist.

André Hemer, *A Hot Mess #10*, 2015. Acrylic and pigment on canvas, 120 x 90 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

André Hemer, *Towards Deep Surfacing #4*, 2016. Acrylic and pigment on canvas, 36 x 27 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Porosity and Complexity

I view the *Flatbed Plein Air* series Hemer produced in Italy, and the *Towards Deep Surfacing* he produced in Vienna, via his website. *Flat bed Plein Air* is the series he created while artist-in-residence at Villa Lena, Tuscany in 2015. Titling it as he has, Hemer sought a more direct relationship with a historical mode of painting

outdoors, scanning in the open air to let the light of the landscape infiltrate the work more directly. The paintings become more back-lit, while digitally-flared forms, expanded by hand-drawn marks, release as if to settle into their own, more open, sense of space. I have *A Hot Mess #10* open on my screen as I write and the skylight to my studio is open, spilling its block of light and connecting me to the outside of the sky, just as the paintings' forms glow in the window of their own kind of landscape that pulls the light in.

In *Towards Deep Surfacing*, the space of light follows *Flatbed Plein Air* but the layers create more depth. The material sources and effects of light somehow move forwards and backwards within the paintings so that I find a play between what is inside and what is outside—where I am looking out and where I am looking in, as if the 'one-space' of the work is surfacing while also settling. 'I'm still trying to work them out,' I say to the artist, who says 'I don't know them as well either,' which is, we agree, part of their point.

With *Flatbed Plein Air*, and, *Towards Deep Surfacing*, especially, I enjoy the way Hemer's works materialise their porosity even more than before, while they coincidentally become more complex. They have a way of making themselves more permeable, so that I have a sense of passage through their many layers without being able to exactly figure the nature of that movement. I can pore over them for ages, responding both to their intricate details and their interstices: their porosity becoming one of openness to reflection, rumination, and even argument, but not conclusion.

Hemer tells me of the 'non-place' that is Vienna, where he is now based and has taken a lease on his studio. It is like a slowed-down version of Paris and a less-cool version of Berlin, he says, and affords him that necessary sense of removal, or space of dislocation, in which to work. Being there also allows him to find and take decisions more slowly, both within the process of making and in its relation to shows.

Following *Towards Deep Surfacing*, the series *Deep Surfacing* is presented at the Luis de Jesus Gallery in Los Angeles, November through December 2016. With it, some of the findings of the previous works move into the physical relations of the next, as Hemer's practice of play remains open to the material possibilities

of painting, and the Archive. ‘Play is the thing you do when you don’t know what to do,’ says Hemer. It is the thing that allows the painting, and the artist, to take a material direction.

What I think Hemer knows, is to seek a pathway of making through the possibilities of the Archive touched within, and across, series of works that might collect associations as they move. The navigation of the Archive, as it is navigated within a body of work.

Footnotes

01. www.academia.edu/10476815/Andre_Hemer_New_Representation

Biographies

André Hemer (b. 1981) is a New Zealand/German artist who is currently based in Vienna, Austria. He holds a Master of Fine Arts (Distinction) from the University of Canterbury (2006) and a PhD (Painting) from the University of Sydney (2015). Hemer is the recipient of several awards including The National Contemporary Art Award, Waikato Museum (2011) and the Bold Horizons Contemporary Art Award (2011). In 2016 he was the Paramount Award Winner at The Wallace Art Awards, and recipient of the Arts Foundation New Generation award. His work has appeared at international art fairs such as the Melbourne Art Fair; Sydney Contemporary; Code Art Fair, Copenhagen; and Art Basel in Hong Kong, and features in public and private collections including the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Seoul Art Space Geumcheon, Wallace Arts Trust Collection, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū and Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection, Florida.

Jodie Dalgleish is a writer, artist and curator currently based in Luxembourg, and returning to her own practice after a decade within the Art Museum sector in New Zealand. Particularly interested in the experiential, or 'lived,' experience of art and the creative process, she has been published in art historical and literary journals, as well as online. In 2015, she drew on her experiences of Venice whilst hosting the New Zealand Biennale exhibition *Secret Power* on her Blog, *Immagine*.

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