

Kim Pieters
The Mallarmé Suite
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The Physics Room

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Melanie Oliver

NOTHING of the memorable crisis or it was the event

In 1897 French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé wrote *A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*. It continues:

NEVER
EVEN IF THROWN IN ETERNAL
CIRCUMSTANCES
FROM THE DEPTH OF A SHIPWRECK...

Immediately we are challenged with the impossibility of cheating chance—of the dice somehow accumulating memory and the result falling into a logical order—though even in eternal circumstances, the luck of the dice will not change. The words are precisely scattered across the page, like the choppy surface of the sea this shipwreck sank far beneath. Mallarmé is known for utilising typography to explore the interrelationship of content and form, the shape and placement of words is critical as is their counterform. Veritably, *A throw of the dice* is a visually spectacular literary document.

With *the mallarmé suite* paintings, Kim Pieters quotes Mallarmé in the title of each work, delicately handwriting along the lower edge to be just barely perceptible. When discovered by the viewer, there is a dynamic interplay of painting and title, though no direct relationship exists, creating an intersection of ideas and opening a space for the possibility of new readings, a new event. When searching for meaning, it is tempting to take the title as a kind of description, but these are not explanations: ‘were it to be numbered’, ‘a rock, a false manor’, ‘were it to exist, were it to begin’. The disjunction of language and image produces an enduring tension, offering multiple points of encounter. It is in this clearing that the viewer is invited to occupy some presence of their own-being-human and respond with their own contemplation. This framing of event is a continuing project for Pieters and revolves around a question she constantly summons into her practice: ‘what is a life?’

It is futile to attempt to describe her work in words: the translucent washes layered to create an expansive spatial depth; the subtlety of colours, glazes and textures; the fine and exactly considered mark making. They are beautiful paintings and arouse complex emotions that at once defy and demand a narrative. Painted on found plasterboard,

each ground itself has a pre-history that is worked around and into: small indents, marks and holes are incorporated into the whole, and become the subjects occupying the seemingly vast space. There is no central focal point, so the act of viewing is based on movement across the surface, around the rough edges and into the illusive depth, an exploration of and from all aspects. There is no adequate substitute for encountering these paintings in the flesh.

Perhaps this intensity of experience is underpinned by the urgency of democracy, prompted by Pieters' interest in the writings of Giorgio Agamben. Pieters' work is devoutly serious, intent on provoking and asking much bigger questions regarding what it means to have political power, rather than be reduced to 'bare life'. In terms of engaging art in his discussion of biopolitics, Agamben writes:

To look at a work of art, therefore, means to be hurled out into a more original time: it means ecstasy in the epochal opening of rhythm, which gives and holds back. Only by starting from this situation of man's relationship with the work of art is it possible to comprehend how this relationship—if it is authentic—is also for man the highest engagement, that is, the engagement that keeps him in the truth and grants to his dwelling on earth its original status. In the experience of the work of art, man stands in the truth, that is, in the origin that has revealed itself to him in the poietic act. In this engagement, in this being-hurled-out into the epoch of rhythm, artists and spectators recover their essential solidarity and their common ground.¹

Agamben could be writing here directly of an experience with Pieters' work, and this is certainly the philosophical ground that Pieters' invites us to reflect on: the human condition, what it means to be and exist in the present moment. Her paintings give and at the same time, hold back. *The mallarmé suite* is a particularly challenging series and while the works generously offer an opportunity for deep personal engagement, they also expect this of the spectator, producing a somewhat confrontational experience: these works are not for the fainthearted. In forging a space for the viewer, he or she is then forced to acknowledge his or herself in relation to the work.

Although not originally intended for The Physics Room gallery space, when viewing these paintings in the context of post-quake Christchurch they take on a further layer of meaning. The suite, seven works in total, are hung adjacent to windows that overlook vacant lots of rubble, the remains of the central city after the demolition of most buildings and urban life. Against this setting it is difficult to ignore the materiality of Pieters' work: the rough, salvaged hardboard that forms the base of each painting. As a surface, it is neither embellished nor hidden, but simply taken as the existing structure to be dealt with, talked to, worked from.

¹ Giorgio Agamben, 'The Original Structure of the Work of Art', from *The Man Without Content*, trans. Giorgio Albert, (California: Stanford University Press, 1999) 63.

Might this also provide an opportunity to consider the state of political power for people within the local context? Here is a city being rebuilt according to a government-issued blueprint, but with what ideals and whose interests at heart? Like those of any community, the political consequences of the current environment, in this instance a natural disaster, are questionable in terms of the operation or obstruction of democratic rights.

Mallarmé's poem concludes with a reminder of the inevitability of chance, that every thought is governed by possibility:

A CONSTELLATION
cold of forgetting and of disuse
not so much
that it enumerates
on some vacant and superior surface
the successive clash
sidereally
of a total count in formation
watching over
doubting
rolling
glittering and meditating
before it stops itself
in some last point which consecrates it
Every Thought emits a Roll of the Dice

Pieters' work brings us to a point of intersection and encounter, an opening, a clearing, an event that forces us to ask ourselves: what might we make of this moment of chance?

Melanie Oliver is a curator, writer and current Director of The Physics Room.