

Complicated Feelings

Catalogue essay by Phip Murray

Kate Tucker's paintings for 'Unstable Elements' comprise differently scaled and shaped canvases that contain animated pictorial fields full of colourful forms that bump and jostle against one another. Each composition is complex and intricate, brimful of movement and energy. They are highly aesthetically charged paintings that offer visual excitement for the viewer, but they also resolutely refuse to rest in easy viewing. Chaos and complexity are crucial aspects of these works, with Tucker determinedly refusing to balance each composition. There are turbulent forces at work inside each image; a disruptive energy coils inside each one, creating a compelling restlessness. The eye is kept active, taking in varied compositions that force an encounter between balance and turbulence.

As the title 'Unstable Elements' suggests, Tucker firmly encouraged this pictorial turbulence: "In these works I tried to push everything and I resisted resolution and balance. Yet, despite this, everything seems to find its resolution. They have their own force towards it. I spent a lot of time painting over areas that were perfectly fine because they were not doing what I wanted them to do. Intellectually, I was exploring how I might bring more failure into the images."

The turbulence at work in each painting not only enables visual intrigue but also articulates a critical perspective that is central to Tucker's practice. Like many abstract painters, Tucker creates complex visual codes that outline how she perceives the world. The works in 'Unstable Elements' reflect her quiet but steely determination to rail against the prevailing human need to simplify or reduce ideas in order to render them comprehensible or palatable. Instead, Tucker's images present an argument against this simplification and, instead, put forward complicated feelings and contrasting ideas. The contention expressed in these paintings is that the world is complex and often chaotic and that to pretend otherwise is to deny the world's inherent intricacy. As indices of contemporary life become increasingly unstable – not least of all weather and climate patterns – humans need to become adept at dealing with the complex and chaotic.

Tucker performs these ideas through the interaction of colours and forms. "Colour is obviously a very important part of my process. I don't choose colours because they necessarily look good together. The colours are chosen intuitively, but I also seek discomfort. I don't think, 'That beige will look good with that blue.' I am more likely to stand back from it and blur my eyes and think, 'What would I not expect to see in there?' I find that when you look at things in real life, they always have colours you don't expect in them. Look at skin, for instance; it's not skin colour. Look at a tree; it's not brown or grey – it has many colours in it. My process is a way of trying to see what is actually there, not just what you think you should be seeing. I am interested in the way we look at things, and I want to explore ideas around perspectives. I want to offer a viewing position where, rather than just getting the surface, you are questioning the view. You look for what is actually there and seek out abstract relations between forms and objects."

Tucker is aligned particularly with those abstract painters who blur the boundary between abstraction and figuration: modernist precursors such as Grace Cossington Smith and Margaret Preston and contemporary abstract painters such as Diena Georgetti and Brent Harris. Recognisable elements hover in Tucker's work – one image momentarily resolves as a mountainous landscape, another as a languid cloudy sky – but these dissolve just as quickly into a mass of writhing, wriggling bits. These works offer a kind of paradoxical experience of seeing the whole while also being made highly aware of the component parts. It's almost as if, through some bionic vision, we perceive a mountain or tree while also being privy to the minuscule atomic activity present in every material, even the most solid or seemingly inert.

'Unstable Elements' explores complicated feelings and deliberately courts tension between oppositional forces. As a painter, Tucker attempts to work from the middle – sitting in the tenuous space between balance and imbalance or resolution and chaos. For her, this is where the interest is: "I start with a set of questions or a preoccupation; for instance, I might plan to make a painting in shades of grey or to make another geometric. Those things never ultimately happen, but what's important is that they create a system that I can rebel against – for me that's where the freedom is. Once I become aware of the system I have created, then I can react to it and disrupt it. I can start to add in the opposite of what is already there, and see how those two opposing forces blend and interact. That tension is what painting is for me. Every time you pick up the brush you have to make a choice, and I get excited about making the difficult choice not to resolve what is there but to unbalance it. That way you end up with something that is the documentation of an inquiry that has been really free. Every single bit was an active interesting moment. There are no dead zones."



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