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Hands Stuffing a Mattress at Josh Lilley Gallery

The Painter Sarah Dwyer kicks off Josh Lilley's Autumn season



Emma Bennett

I could spend all day here, basking in the bafflement, the seduction and the slow, sly game of these works. In a sense, Sarah Dwyer's new solo show is the closest thing you can get to cloud gazing in an overlit, windowless basement. And yet, quite frankly, clouds are pretty boring compared to these strange, imploding, gawkily magnificent paintings.

Some seem to depict a single, amorphous form. Buckshee's compound-globule of vivid hues seems to erupt out of a conch-like cone, a riotously colourful sea creature as ever there was. And yet a figural 'explanation' cannot begin to contain the complex dynamics of any of the works here. Each wavers between surface and depth, flatness and three-dimensionality, rough brushwork and blended fluidity.

The eye (and the mind) is constantly challenged, surprised. Try getting lost in the infinitely mysterious, purply depths of Smoothing Sunday Evening, and that dirty yellow blob will pull you back. Try sensing Roundelay's massed areas and two dimensional, as if looking down on a strange continent, and you'll be helpless against the sense that it's lifting, raising itself up on knobbed limbs, wearing what looks strangely like a cavalier's hat.

Such instances of partial recognition are elicited time and again by Dwyer's strange, encompassing works. Her painterly marks often waver on the edge of form – partially evoking something, but not quite. And her colour palette is distinctive: occasionally unnerving, always utterly surprising. If it weren't enough that Roundelay's acqua expanse gives way to pale pink, emerald green, maroon and white, there's a slick of egg yolk yellow to keep you on your toes.

But what really marks Dwyer's work as extraordinary is its complex play of surface and depth, and attendant exploration of painterly process. This is wonderfully demonstrated by the two small-scale untitled works which flank Tread Softly (for me the show's magical centrepiece). Here, darkly lit depths of rich ochre are overlaid with impulsive-looking daubs of mauve, turquoise and white. The immediacy of these marks – their brushstrokes are visible, light-handed, almost scrawl-like – introduces an element of timing. It's as if they were impulsive afterthoughts – a flippant, pastel-hued coda to the intractable vastness behind.

There's a humour to these works, a certain oddness, and something mischeavous for sure. But to overplay this would be to deny the strange, beguiling presence of them; their slow, weighty beauty. For all their play on timing, like the best paintings, Dwyer's works seem to exist outside time. They are at once immediate and eternal, breathtaking and slowly-dawning.

Sarah Dwyer's show, [Hands Stuffing a Mattress](#), is showing at [Josh Lilley Gallery](#) between 11th September and 8th October.