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ABSTRACTION HISTORY

Oscar Perry's latest exhibition is a kaleidoscope of historical reference and cultural allusion rendered in bold gesture across paintings and sculptures that, together with the works' evocative titles, weave connective threads across time and space.

FEATURE *by* STEVE COX

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OSCAR PERRY



Top to bottom
 OSCAR PERRY
Live (Isle of Wight), 2020
 acrylic on linen
 196.5 x 289 x 5 cm

OSCAR PERRY
EXXON TULL (Minerve), 2020
 mild steel
 128 x 11 x 11 cm

Opposite
 Installation view
 OSCAR PERRY
Basilica, 2020
 oil on linen
 221.5 x 202 x 5 cm

Left to right
 OSCAR PERRY
EXXON TULL (K 129), 2020
 mild steel
 128 x 11 x 11 cm

OSCAR PERRY
EXXON TULL (INS Dakar), 2020
 mild steel
 128 x 11 x 11 cm

Photos: The Commercial
 Courtesy the artist and
 The Commercial, Sydney

We enter Oscar Perry's latest exhibition, *High Middle Ages*, under the intriguing umbrella of its title. The titles of each of his individual works are also essential to our appreciation of them, packed as they are with historical allusion. In a sense, the paintings become cyphers which can unlock deep-seated memory traces. We may find ourselves transported, as was Perry himself, into a kind of dream of the past via the free association conjured by the paintings' evocative titles – *Ruin Folly*, *Basilica*, *Crusade (Coxswain's Flat)*, among



others. "After watching Simon Schama's *A History of Britain*, I started thinking about this idea of a procession through history," Perry tells me. "Like some kind of seventh seal, a medieval crusade coming to an end. People returning. In that sense, I wanted the paintings to operate like banners, or flags, or tents."

For some context, the High Middle Ages was a period that saw great social and political changes sweep across Europe. There was a massive influx of rural dwellers moving into large cities. The first universities began to open – including in Oxford, Cambridge, Bologna and Paris. There were great flourishes of philosophy, education, art and music. Later, in the mid-14th century, the Black Death rolled in, spoiling everything, but until then the High Middle Ages had been a period of positive growth.

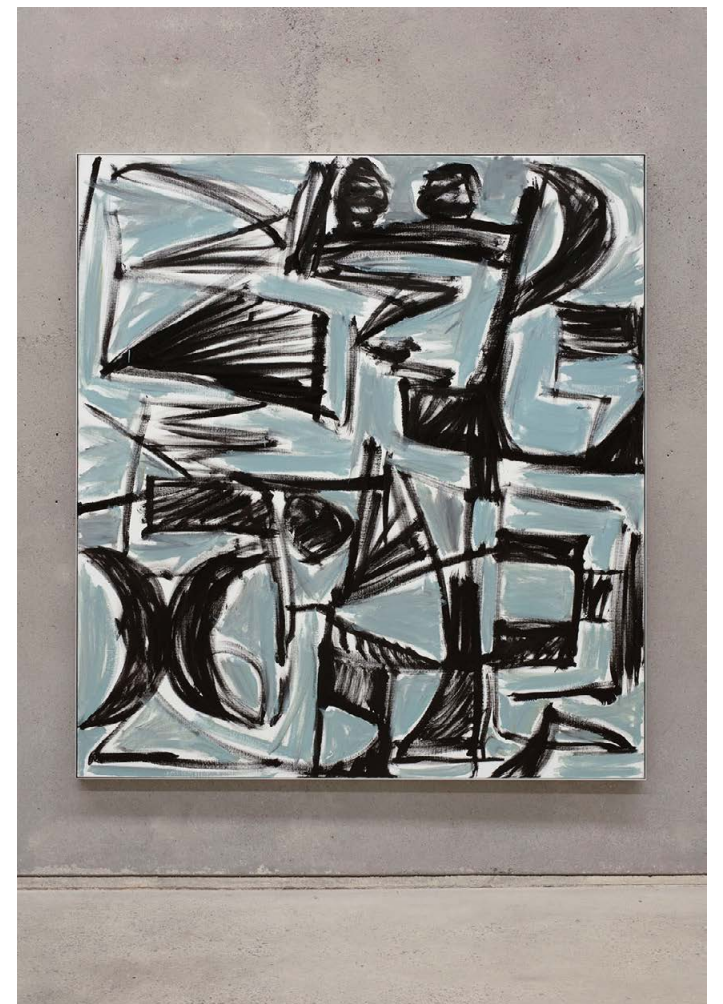
Perry's exhibition is steeped in history, folklore, poetry and politics. The works skip, freewheelingly, across any number of points of reference in the artist's search for creative nourishment. "I guess I'm always trying to find ways to drag abstract painting into different histories – places where it might not seem to be a good fit."

Regard the stark *Shipping Forecast* (2020). Its rusty-hued surface suggests ageing sea-hulks. It is dappled by softer flecks, reminiscent of light on choppy water or clouds scudding over the ocean, viewed from on high. Most British people of a certain age are familiar with the Shipping Forecast on BBC radio. Over 150 years old,

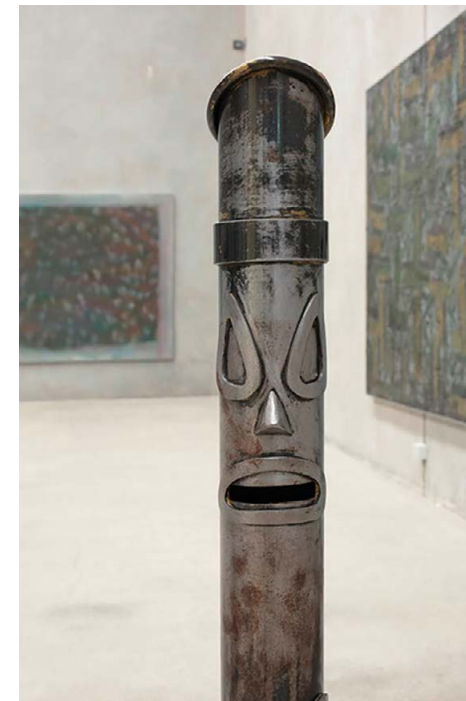
the program focuses on 31 designated areas of ocean around the British Isles, stretching from Portugal all the way up to Iceland. The names of the various regions have a mysterious poetry: Fastnet, Cromarty, Forties, Dogger. Anybody who has tuned into BBC radio late at night – as I suspect Perry did during his early days – will attest to the magical properties of the show, as the presenter runs through the mysterious forecasts of the tides, winds and weather of the surrounding seas, intoned in a hypnotic tenor. Perry's painting similarly evokes the unforgiving regions of the North Sea. Rather than sweeten the visual effects, Perry has allowed a natural rawness to infuse the picture, which powerfully evokes the idea of an implacable, uncaring nature.

Asked about his process, Perry explains: "I painted some of the pictures outside, on the ground, and I left them in the rain for months. I liked the idea of weather being a part of them." This process is evident in *Live (Isle of Wight)* (2020). "I kept going back to some Live at the Isle of White concert footage, with Ian Anderson from the band Jethro Tull playing his flute and carrying on like the Pied Piper. All these hippies were stumbling out of their tents towards the stage. I became very interested in these different ideas of 'procession'." Since its inception in 1968, the festival has offered a smorgasbord of musical talent, including The Who, David Bowie, Stereophonics, Manic Street Preachers, The Rolling Stones, Queen, Roxy Music and The Prodigy, among others. Perry's painting is segmented into various pieces dictated by the structure of the stretcher beneath the surface, the outlines of which insinuated themselves, ghostlike, across the image during the painting process, reiterating the idea of separate painterly presentations appearing one by one over the surface. Each frame is isolated in its own joyous section – a swipe of black, a fudgy area of ochre, a white smear, a ruby-red splotch – each representing a separate section of information. The painting holds a sense of history, and of time passing. Areas of paint are gently dissolving, becoming insubstantial – like trying to hold onto a nostalgic memory.

The musical motif is carried over into four almost identical sculptures placed across the gallery floor. They are all named primarily *Exxon Tull*, with a separate subtitle for each: *INS Dakar*, *Thresher*, *K 129*, *Minerve*. Fashioned to resemble a sooty, black, metal flute, each sculpture sports a stylised, mocking face, like an archaic metal homunculus. "Each is named after one of the four nuclear submarines that sank in mysterious circumstances in 1968," says Perry. "They were conceived as doomed nuclear periscopes, or negative viewfinders." Once again, the titles unlock a raft of associations. Already mentioned is Jethro Tull. The oil company ExxonMobil has a serious legacy of environmental catastrophes



"I GUESS I'M ALWAYS TRYING TO FIND WAYS TO DRAG ABSTRACT PAINTING INTO DIFFERENT HISTORIES – PLACES WHERE IT MIGHT NOT SEEM TO BE A GOOD FIT."





OSCAR PERRY
Ruin Folly, 2020
 oil, sand and acrylic on jute
 199 x 231 x 5 cm
 Photo: The Commercial
 Courtesy the artist and
 The Commercial, Sydney

and numerous purported human rights violations – serendipitously, the project manager of the company is named Flo Tull. A further coincidence is the subtitle *Thresher*, which references not only the doomed Russian submarine of the same name, but also a 1985 court case where ExxonMobil disputed the negative effects of ocean drilling on the habitat of the thresher shark. “I wanted the flutes to operate like sirens that could drag collectors into some type of abyss.”

The intriguing *Palisades* (2020) presents a slab of grey/green that occludes previous layers of paintwork, remnants of which are still visible along the top edge. It is a fitting abstract ‘description’ of the real-life intention of palisades – posts or pickets used primarily during battle to hold back the enemy. Perry seems here to be acknowledging the battle of the studio as he marshals a work to completion.

“Some of the paintings seem like flashes of landscape – things you might pass when you’re moving – hedges, dry stones walls,

ruins, bridges, forests, bogs.” *Argyll 68* (2020), for instance, features a very large leaf form, perhaps a tree-shape in close up, which fills more than half the canvas, pushing out to three of its edges, the veins (or branches) scored brutally across it while the paint was wet. It is light grey, as if frosted with ice. Behind the form, Perry has constructed a battlefield of black slashed-in brushstrokes, suggestive of a wooded space. Embedded in this maelstrom are small autumnal vestiges of red, yellow, brown – remnants of the season past. Once again, it is the poetic title of the work that leads us to a conceivable interpretation – after all, the Diocese of Argyll was an ecclesiastical territory of Scotland in the Middle Ages. Which brings us neatly back to where we started. **V**

High Middle Ages showed at The Commercial, Sydney from February 13 to March 13, 2021.

Oscar Perry is represented by The Commercial, Sydney.
thecommercialgallery.com