

The Saturday Paper

NEWS COMMENT CULTURE LIFE FOOD PUZZLES SPORT NEWSLETTERS PODCASTS EDITIONS

APRIL 6 – 12, 2024 | N° 494

VISUAL ART

Angela Brennan's abstract paintings are vibrant explorations of form that hover between emergence and imminent collapse. By *Lisa Radford*.

Quantum colour Angela Brennan's Art Gallery of Ballarat exhibition



An installation view of Angela Brennan's Art Gallery of Ballarat exhibition, *Tête-à-tête* & *Vis-à-vis*.
CREDIT: BEN COX

Lisa Radford is an artist who writes and teaches.
April 6, 2024

Angela Brennan's teacher, the artist Geoff Lowe, said in 2002 that if modernism was marred by masculinity, "Brennan forgives and loves what has gone wrong".

Her influential rethinking of abstraction and modernism is broad and deep. She activates art history through the present – or our present through art history. Her work has appeared in 55 solo exhibitions in commercial galleries, national and state museum exhibitions and in backyards. She is known for her generous gatherings with peers of varying generations and for the conversations she engages in with younger artists such as Madeline Simm and Mel Deerson.

When I was at art school, lecturer Norbert Loeffler discussed Brennan's abstraction through a feminist lens, drawing on traditions of craft and quilting. Her peers are often cited as being Elizabeth Newman and Melinda Harper, but for me the delight of her paintings, suspended as they are between emergence and imminent collapse, also brings to mind painters such as Linda Marrinon and Diena Georgetti.

Tête-à-tête & Vis-à-vis – currently on show at the Art Gallery of Ballarat, the town where she was born – prompts me to consider the collapse of the private and the proxy public when brought face to face. These large paintings, more than two-metres high and 180-centimetres wide, hold song. It is hard not to think of the spiritual works of Hilma af Klint, portals to a place where the subject is not centre. Amelia Winata reminds us that, in the studio, these works "almost kiss the ceiling". Here in the gallery, these celestial forms hover. Light emanates from within these thresholds of oil paint and linen, rather than from behind the colonial walls upon which they are hung.

Brennan's tête-à-tête is a continuous conversation with an audience, the practice of painting and the making of things that feel like paintings – porcelain and pottery, couture and costume – which she has pursued since the mid-1980s. This teetering vis-à-vis painting embraces feathered edges and phosphorescent fields of colour that weightlessly support rings and rectangles, loops and linear auras.

There is something exhilarating about viewing Brennan's works, like drawing for the first time. Compositions that render forms, not objects, as a relation.

As I walk through the door of the gallery, I glimpse almost immediately a painting titled *String Theory* (2020): washed pastels on white-primed linen experienced as "quantum colour". An opalescent atmos – interrupted by three central patchworked washy-green stripes that deny the void – is supported by a lilac square to the right and a hot orange square on the left. A cool, green oval flutters above a horizontal pale orange dash; a muddy gold nirvana dot occupies the top centre. Two loops and one nipple of varying scales triangulate the dashes – purple, red and pink. A wannabe Möbius strip frames these ethereal objects, a black loop not unlike those that occupied the edges of binder books in 1985 – technical affect cum *decoration*.

I read the work of Italian theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli, the founder of loop quantum

gravity, as I do a love story – but here the lovers comprise an intricate relationship between mathematics, space, time, art history and the universe. One of quantum theory's simplest truths is that observation affects reality – as does the engagement with these paintings.

As I walk through Georgia MacGuire's exhibition *Onemda* – which I learn is Woiwurrung for "love" – en route to Brennan, I remember the colony is a time-severing reality resulting in the rupturing of ritual, reconnected here in objects and myths separated over millennia, such as in MacGuire's *Bunjil's crown* (2023) constructed from eagle feathers and a plastic headband. The objects and language shape my encounter with the present, and Brennan.

There is something exhilarating about viewing Brennan's works, like drawing for the first time. Compositions that render forms, not objects, as a relation. A psychological game – three orbs, two rings, slabs of colour, contrails of light. Encountering intellect and love humming with the vibration of colours juxtaposed or, at other times, muddled and mauled, these floating forms envelop, making me suspicious of my own implicit negativity. A theory of relativity, a quilt of colour indeed, just as the title reads *Why wait any longer for the world to begin* (2023). Brennan's *Cosmic Love* (2023), a blue band vibrating between dancing streamers, could be a conversation with Emily Kame Kngwarreye.

The painting *Atoms and passions* (2023) is a liquid lime yellow from which nine fluoro pink atoms merge and move diagonally past a central pastel green elemental form. These dance between rectangular and loop voids, shimmering maps of electric thinking. *Intelligent life, miss the bliss* (2023) prompts a memory of Rovelli writing about poetry as a mnemonic for remembering equations. I can hear the bleed of Dionne Warwick's "Don't Make Me Over" playing as a soundtrack to Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* in the next room. I can't help but think that Goldin's bodies are absolutely connected to these paintings. Ironically abstract, the tennis-court green of *A Finely Tuned Universe* (2023) contains tracings of spirit – its foil yellow square a distant lover to Malevich's black one. Bronze paint over purple, between yellow and red, maps the edges of the canvas, like the inner glow of Frank Stella's black paintings.

In the second room we find Brennan's *tête-à-tête*, a triple sofa seat in three circles. A relic from the future, even the mild, wax-coated steel has a temperament. The mid-grey walls imply architectural neutrality. Hanging opposite each other, with the seat between them, are two black-and-white paintings – *Vis-à-vis*. A dialogue across the room. The painting to my left asks *Why is that?* (2023) and across the room in a loop, Brennan responds *Tell me more* (2023). Dubuffet-esque, these black-and-white diagrammatic paintings seem to articulate the negative space from the paintings seen earlier. They are a conversation in form that embodies both contradiction and folly – an impossible attempt towards resolution, a realisation of how easily we can slip from disagreement into conflict. These are the borders of thoughts, meaning found in the unrepresentable space of exchange – perhaps much like (cosmic) love.

Brennan's work might seem rough at first glance but it reveals itself as composure, as one colour slips into another while maintaining its own presence. Hers is another kind of logic bubbling around like matter in a floating cosmos – knotted, blobbed and dabbed, transparent and opaque, baroque yet minimal, mathematical and emotional.

There is an intrinsic relationship between art and science that need not be instrumentalised or illustrated. As Rovelli muses in *Reality Is Not What It Seems*, and as Brennan's paintings evoke, quantum mechanics reveals "a world which does not exist in space and does not develop in time. A world made up solely of interacting quantum fields, the swarming of which generates – through a dense network of reciprocal interactions – space, time, particles, waves and light."

Angela Brennan *Tête-à-tête & Vis-à-vis* is at the Art Gallery of Ballarat until April 21.

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on April 6, 2024 as "Quantum colour".

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/culture/visual-art/2024/04/04/angela-brennans-tete-tete-vis-vis>