
Angela Brennan

Text Paintings

Introduced by Amanda Rowell

Angela Brennan studied Fine Art at RMIT and has a BA from the University of Melbourne. She has exhibited extensively in Australia and overseas, developing a reputation for work which negotiates abstraction, portraiture, landscape and philosophy. Her paintings are in the collections of major state and regional galleries in Australia and private and corporate collections internationally.

Amanda Rowell is gallery manager at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and a freelance writer.

Angela Brennan has been flirting with language – taking letters, words, phrases etc. and transcribing them across canvases. She has been doing this the way a pubescent girl might try on different shades of lipstick or watch herself smoke a cigarette, self-consciously, seductively shaping letters with paint. Her text paintings are studies in sensuousness, a bit messy and exaggeratedly emphatic. They combine her familiar looseness of gesture and attitude to colour with a new tightness of legibility. For an abstract painter as intuitive and spontaneous as Brennan, the addition of text imports relative order into a world of decided disorder, some sort of prescription of meaning into good chaotic use of paint. The linearity of written English structures these paintings that previously had no beginning or end, so that for the first time we feel guided in our reading of Brennan's works, compelled to approach them from left to right – or perhaps initially we do – because text demands it. Unlike her abstractions, which signify in a much more ambiguous way, text provides a strong signifying force. Brennan uses language's precise descriptive and evocative power as if it were an extra-dimension of paint, to articulate particular emotional landscapes that can only be communicated by speaking of them, whose most efficient mode of delivery is spelling them out.

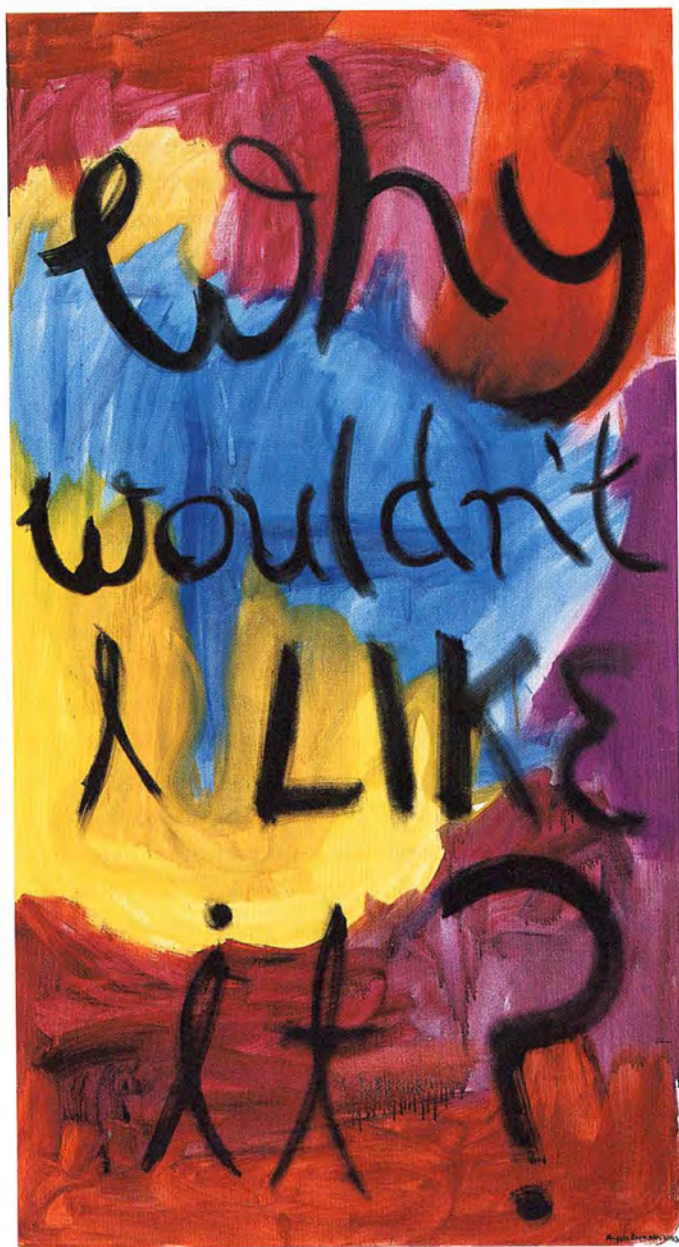
Brennan typically combines many different styles of abstraction and sizes of canvas in the one exhibition. Her vocabulary includes soupy primordial forms with raining veils of glazed colour, robustly architectonic structures, busy pastel grids, and soft fields of floating ellipses, in the accumulation of an infinite lexicon of form. And her text paintings exhibit a similarly wide variety of genre: extracts from poems, fragments of songs, recipes, meditations on the alphabet, slogans, mantras, protestations and dialectal turns of phrase. Writing is a conduit for expression but is minimally expressive in its own form. Brennan, however, manages to coax the aesthetic and expressive potential from each physical manifestation of language – the graphic shape of each written letter as much as the phonological shape of each spoken sound.

Short texts on large canvases, such as the vertical *Why wouldn't I like it?*, are painted with the movement of the whole arm in a complaining graffiti scrawl, emphasising the physicality of each

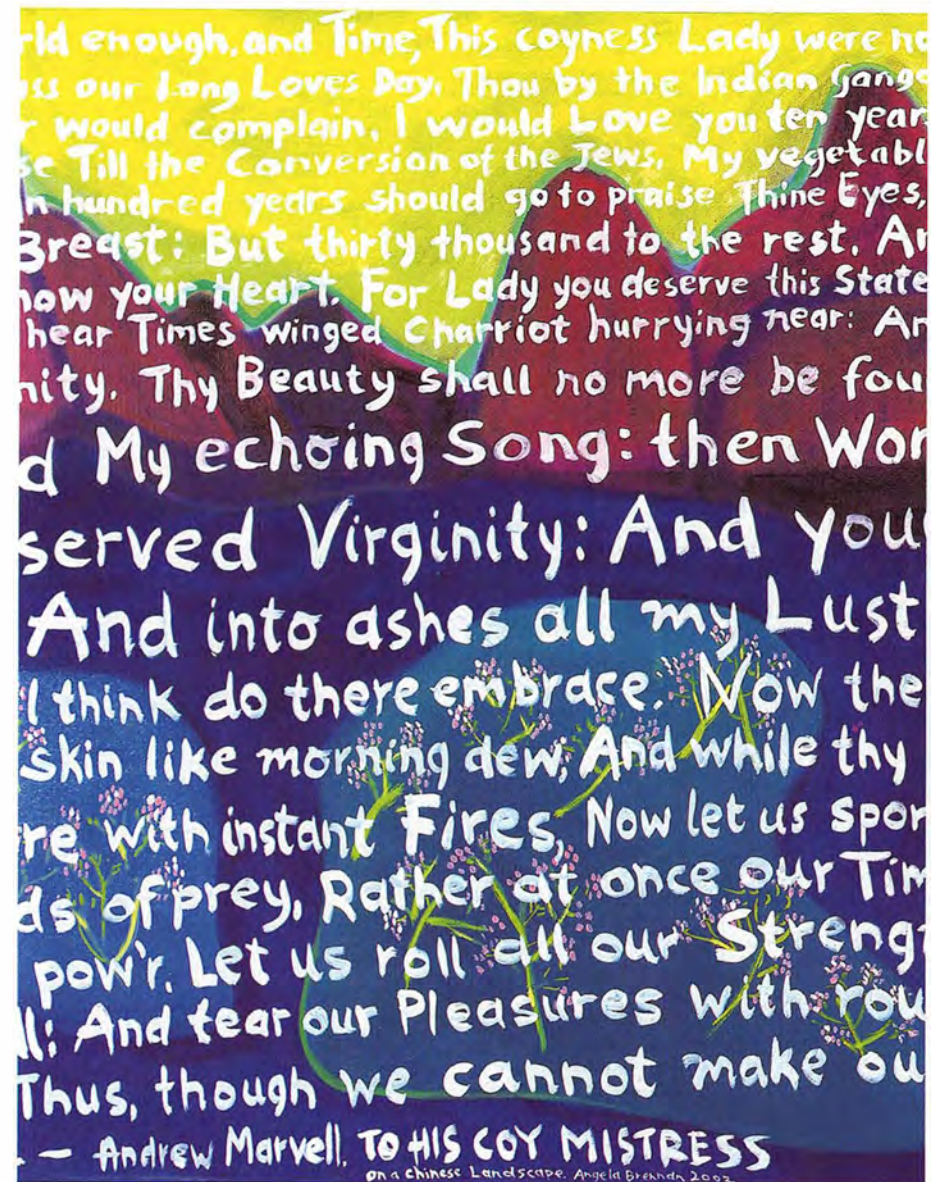
letter and the insolent gesture of the question asked. Text is a fine net in the horizontal *To his coy mistress on a Chinese landscape* and *Song of songs*. In these two works Brennan has obsessively transcribed poems at length. They require real commitment from the viewer to read them, as each row of small text is about two and a half metres long. The task of reading is frustrated as the abstract interest of the shape and colour of the composition as a whole takes over. Reading disengages into a more disinterested kind of looking in which the eye free-ranges across the canvas interrupted occasionally by words, insistent upon recognition, that push out into awareness. The erotic charge of the Marvell and the biblical texts is conveyed by these assertive fragments and in the fluctuations between shapes of colour, shapes of meaning, shapes of letters and shapes of sounds. The phenomenological force of Brennan's abstract work, the way she lets colour address the viewer physically, is given an oral emphasis in the text paintings which employ the voice in articulating sounds put into the viewer's mouth by the painted letters. The phonetic shapes of the words, 'the song of songs which is Solomon's', buoy the voluptuousness of the full text in imaginative space, their assonance echoed and amplified by a pleasure-giving field of pink, red and orange painted circles.

The vocal aspect of Brennan's paintings is apparent in the regular appearance of song. In *The sun pours down like honey*, a line from Leonard Cohen is painted in large red letters over bands of egg yolk yellow and purple. The smoothness of the letters combines with the waxiness of the colours in a vertical arrangement of words that in itself speaks of the vivid picture drawn by the song writer. With her text paintings, Brennan harnesses the pleasures of synaesthetic spillage. She lures us away from a dialogue between shape and colour to one that includes the equally abstract and nuanced elements of language, in order to incorporate the shape and colour of meaning and voice. In that the texts she chooses are particularly meaningful to her, the paintings are like the contents of her mind. They identify her in the way a self-portrait would, or the signing of her name on a finished work.

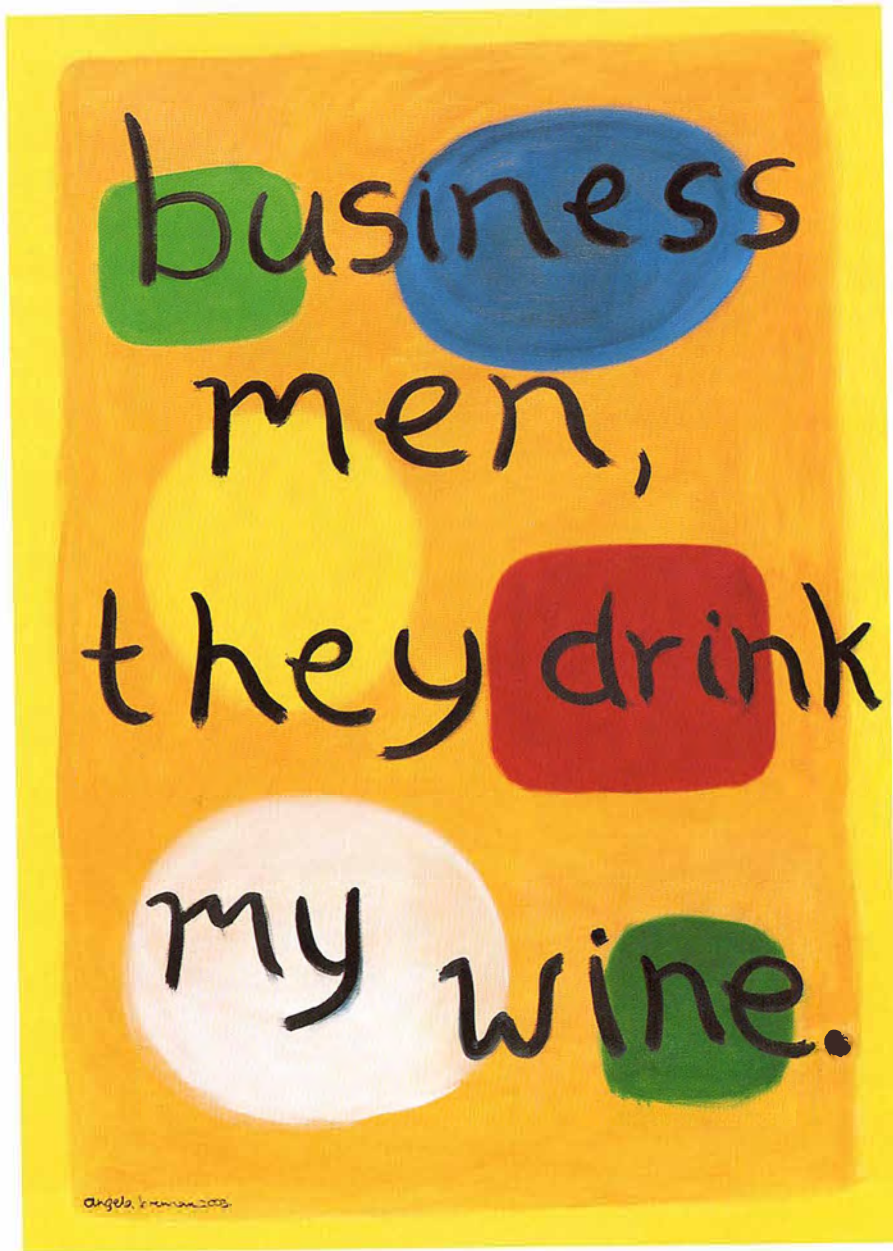
Amanda Rowell



Why wouldn't I like it? (2003)
oil on linen, 240 x 130cm



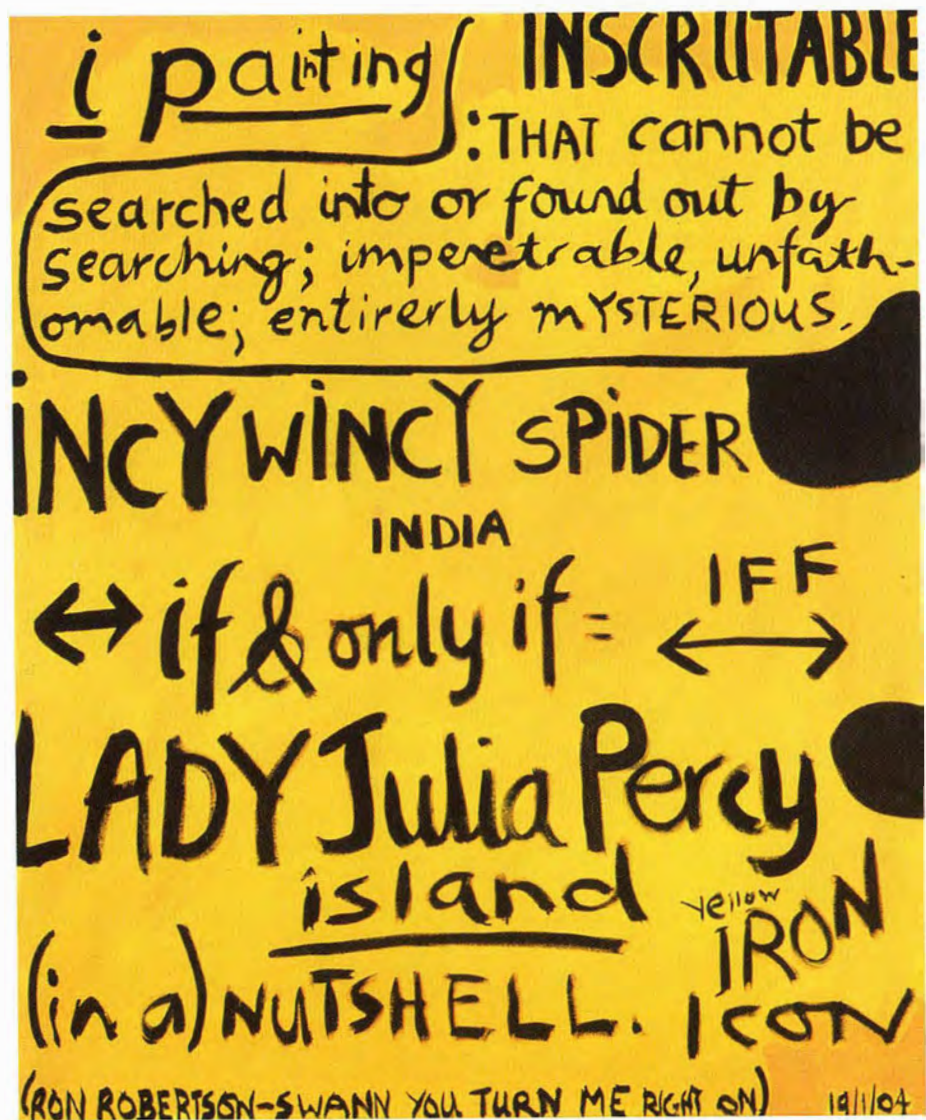
detail from *To his coy mistress on a Chinese landscape* (2003)
oil on linen, 137.5 x 244cm



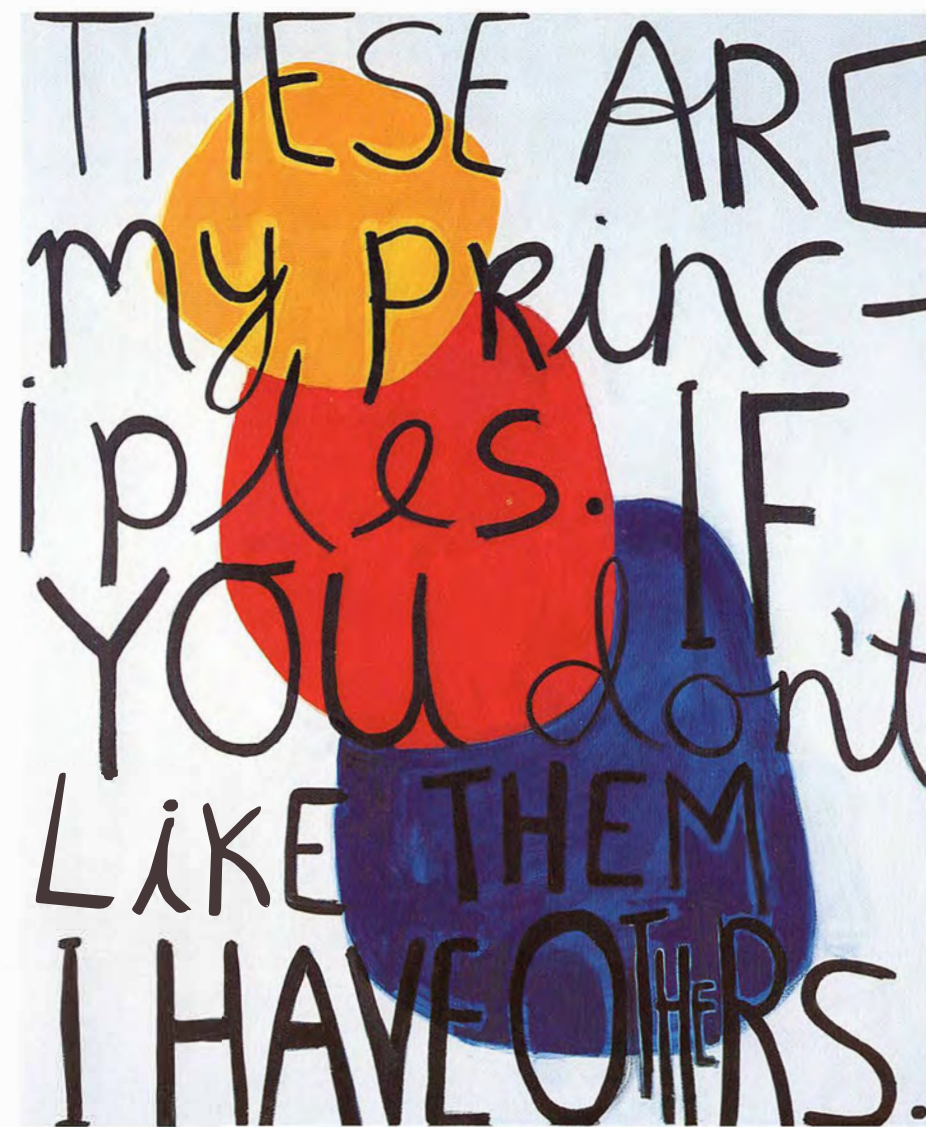
Business men they drink my wine (2003)
oil on linen, 192 x 136cm



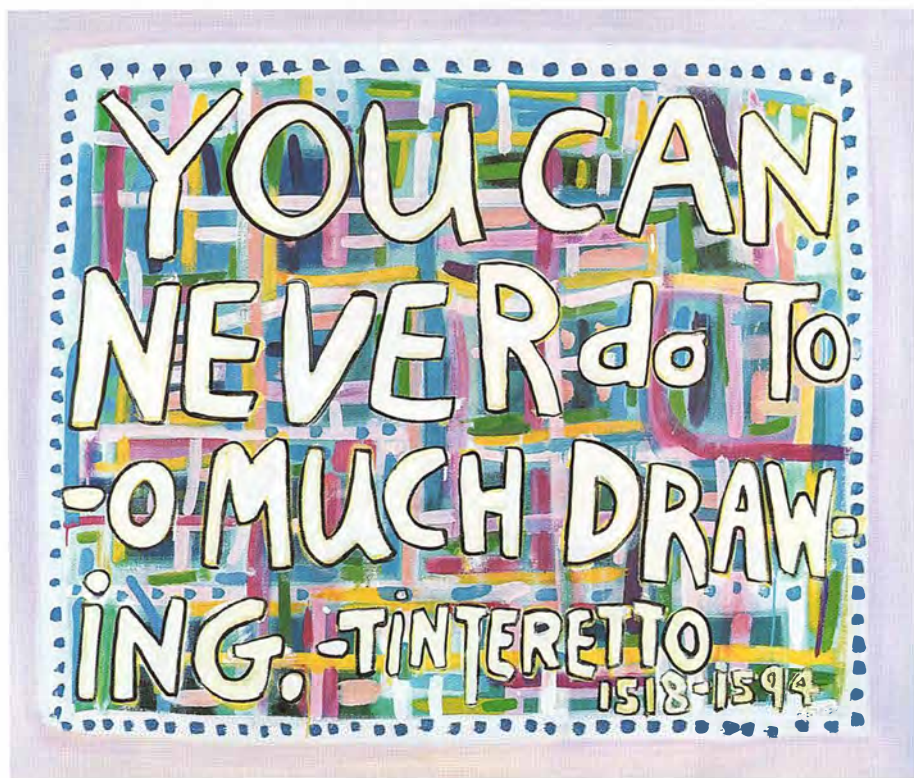
Licence my roving hands (2003)
oil on linen, 220 x 180cm



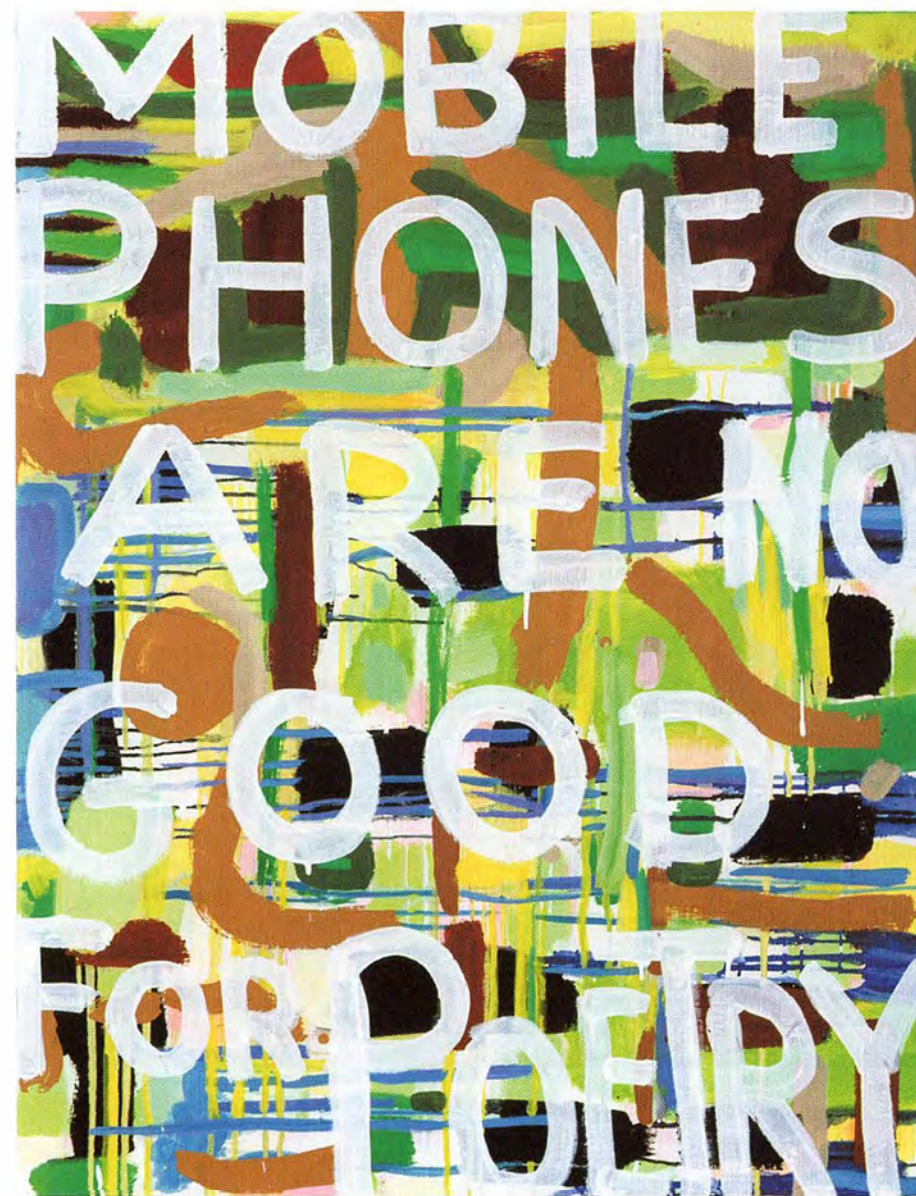
I painting (2004)
oil on linen, 110.5 x 90.5cm



These are my principles (2004)
oil on linen, 220 x 180cm



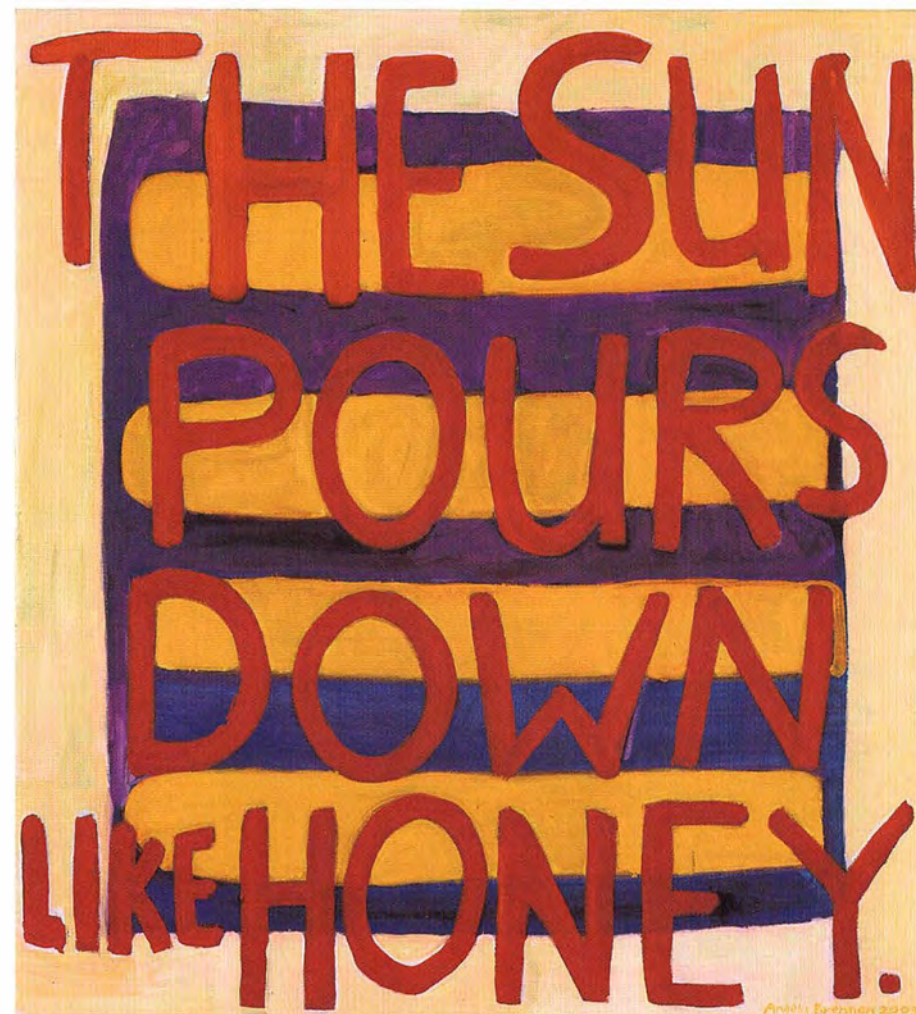
You can never do too much drawing (2003)
oil on linen, 95 x 105cm



Mobile phones (2004)
oil on linen, 92.5 x 70.35cm

When the Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre in 1911, thousands of people flocked to see the empty space where it had been on display. What could have drawn these crowds to stare at a **BLANK WALL**?

Blank wall (2003)
oil on linen, 150 x 129cm



The sun pours down like honey (2003)
oil on linen, 101 x 90cm

The Song of Songs; which is Solomon's.

O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant, your name is oil poured out; therefore the maidens love you. Draw me after you, let us make haste. We will exalt and rejoice in you. We will extol your love more than wine. I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved amongst the young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, for his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. He will lead me with raisins, refresh me with apples. The voice of my beloved. He comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills like a gazelle or a young stag. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing is come, and the voice of the turtle dove is heard in our land. The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; Arise my love, my fair one and come away with me. My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock amongst the lilies. Behold, you are beautiful, my love. Your eyes are doves behind your veil. Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes. Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely. Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil. Your neck is like the Tower of David. Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle. You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you. My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished amongst ten thousand. His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven. His eyes are like doves beside springs of water, bathed in milk. His cheeks are beds of spices, yielding fragrance. His lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh. His arms are rounded gold set with jewels. His body is ivory work, encrusted with sapphires. His legs are alabaster columns set upon bases of gold. My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, among my beloveds and my beloved is mine. How graceful are your feet in sandals. Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand. Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies. Your eyes are pools in Heshbon. How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden! You are stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its branches. I am my beloved's and his desire is for me. I come to my garden, I gather my myrrh, I eat my honeycomb with my honey, I drink my wine with my milk. I slept but my heart was awake. My beloved is knocking 'Open to me, my love, my dove, my perfect one. Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is as strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave. You have ravished my heart with a glance from your eyes. How sweet is your love, how much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! Your lips distill honey. Fair as the moon, bright as the sun.

Preceding page:

The Song of songs, which is Solomon's (2003)

oil on linen, 200 x 270cm

With thanks to:

Niagara Galleries

245 Punt Road

Richmond Victoria 3121

tel: 03 9429 3666

www.niagara-galleries.com.au

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery

8 Soudan Lane (off Hampden Street)

Paddington NSW 2021

tel: 02 9331 1919

www.roslynoxley9.com.au



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