Construction sight

Emil McAvoy visits the studio of Auckland artist Johl Dwyer and considers the alternative viewpoints his cast-resin paintings and new sculptures provoke.

I'm usually apprehensive about trips to the North Shore. This one was aboard a beige bus during peak pre-Christmas shopping mayhem, alongside a woman blaring the worst ring tones I've ever heard. Stepping from the bus at the Shore, I headed directly to the local liquor store and grabbed a few beers. I wanted to avoid showing up empty-handed at artist Johl Dwyer's Auckland studio – and to take the edge off the hot and grizzly journey.

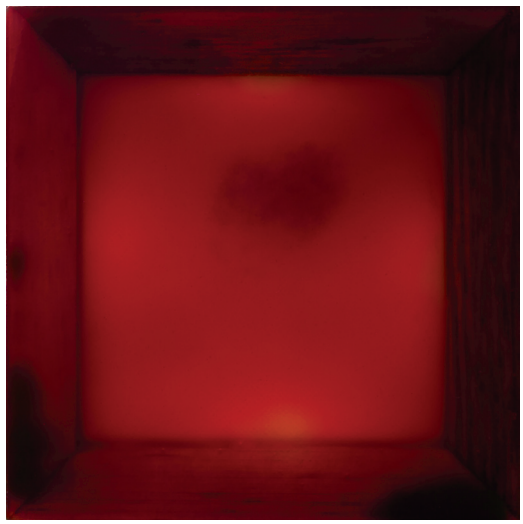
Dwyer pulled up at the local shops in a grunty, gloss-white Toyota Hilux. Driving to his place in Birkenhead, we discussed the visible, evolving changes to his neighbourhood. (I didn't mention my own history with the place: being conceived there following a Bowie concert.) On Rawene Road we passed a construction site where a series of recent landslides next to a suite of new apartments in development (and National MP Jonathan Coleman's office) has generated both media attention and controversy. The first slip occurred at the edge of a neighbouring carpark where Dwyer parks his ute on occasion, though happily not that day. The second slip took with it much of the heavy construction equipment brought in to repair the first slip. Let's just say the site is a work in progress.

Safely at Dwyer's home and studio, and with a beer in hand, our conversation turns to the idea of accidents and how these can inform and fortuitously change one's direction. The recent local landslides offer a metaphor for the tension in Dwyer's own work – between his use of industrial processes and the role of chance and indeterminacy. You can build something on the earth, or in the studio, but sometimes it has other ideas.

Though Dwyer's practice appears disciplined and focused, he describes "casting an open net" which allows for new breakthroughs and trajectories to emerge through chance encounters – the potential for things to go their own way. "This stems from experimentation," he says, "the chance of discovery and shadow left by leaching cedar oil on plaster and cedar-framed works. Getting away from conventional art materials."

These works are created by applying cedar oil to a painting stretcher and then pouring wet plaster into its central cavity while it rests on glass. The resulting 'cast paintings' draw on the cedar oil as a pigment released through this sculptural technique.

Dwyer has produced a substantial body of work since graduating with an MFA from the Elam School of Fine Arts in 2014. He was picked up by a gallerist early in his career, and has since shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including at Sydney Contemporary, Auckland Art Fair, Malcolm Smith Gallery, Enjoy Public Art Gallery and Window Gallery. First known for intimately scaled works, he has recently been exploring new terrain.

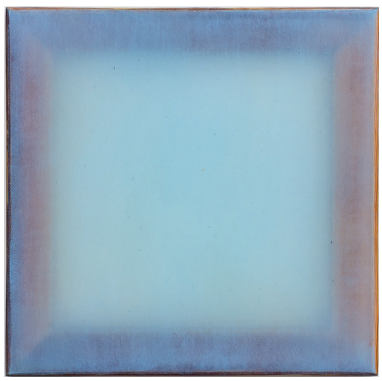


All artworks by Johl Dwyer, courtesy of the artist and Tim Melville. All photos by Kallan MacLeod

Opposite: Installation view of *The Caerulean Blue Room*, Tim Melville Gallery, February 2018, showing *Chains and Mirrors*, 2018, polished stainless steel; *Stages of the Horizon*, 2018, powder-coated aluminium; and *Hornet Valley*, 2018, COR-TEN steel. All 2100 x 300 x 300mm

Above: *Vita (Cloud)*, 2017, cedar, resin, enamel, 230 x 230 x 20mm

Below: Johl Dwyer in his studio, 2017, working on *Stages of the Horizon*



Dwyer's move into large-scale sculpture is one such example. We sit outside for a while and discuss a new weathered-steel work, *Hornet Valley*, which will feature in his February 2018 exhibition *The Caerulean Blue Room* (a title that draws on an alternative spelling of the word 'cerulean', but more on that later). The sculpture's modular form, comprised of truncated triangles, resembles the first version of Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1918), yet with a rusted metal finish and the interior visible through spaces in the welded plates.

To accelerate the rust Dwyer has been treating the material with salt water and hydrogen peroxide for months, resulting in a nuanced skin of deep brown and fluorescent orange hues. Highlights develop where the solution pools in the flat sections, and faint organic lines emerge where the drips have trickled down the steel. It's already so oxidised one might assume it had been sitting there for years, reflecting the rhythm and changes in the local weather.

In contrast, the artist has also produced a highly polished stainless-steel version, *Chains and Mirrors* (2018), the silver exterior of which reflects and refracts its immediate environment with machined precision. Its minimal, repeating form finds a further echo in his earlier sculpture *Mirrored* (2016). "Part of the production is out of my control," Dwyer notes, referring to the industrial processes. "You never really know how it will turn out. The object enters a booth to be anodised, powder-coated or welded. I'm not looking for 100 percent perfection. What keeps recurring in my mind is 91 percent – this is the desired art area."

While Dwyer outsources a few of the more high-end industrial processes, he does a lot of the work himself. His garage-studio is a dream workshop for tool junkies: a compressor and airbrush, orbital sander, nail gun, saws, paint cans, pigment bottles and hand tools galore. He is practised and confident with his materials and processes, and clearly enjoys honing the fine details: an ultra-fine layer of paint, a bevelled edge.

In the studio, artworks under construction compete for space with power tools, garden equipment and Dwyer's father's powder-coated silver, teal and gold Ducati motorbike. I can't help but see connections between *Chains and Mirrors*' seductive finish and the silver-bodied vehicle nearby. I ask about the influence of Donald Judd, and Dwyer waxes lyrical, imagining him in a white Chevrolet Silverado, Texas edition, driving the wide streets of Marfa. Dwyer even describes colours in terms of custom automotive paints: a Ford Mustang metallic candy-blue, a Nissan Skyline GT-R charcoal-grey after dark.

From a foundation in what many perceive as painting, Dwyer has been quietly producing an increasing body of sculptural work in recent years. Yet boxing his works into discrete disciplines neglects the interplay between structure and surface central to his practice. In many respects his paintings act as sculptures, and vice versa.

What underpins all this is an open investigation of abstraction – particularly of colour, material and geometric form – in relation to the physical space it inhabits. *Journey to the Garden* (2017), recently exhibited at The Suter Art Gallery in Nelson, is a series of three glossy square monochrome paintings in which the black mirrored surfaces of enamel reflect and distort their surroundings – in the case of The Suter, a garden visible through a nearby window. Like the presentation of Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) in the *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings* – hung in the corner across two gallery walls, close to the ceiling, to evoke a religious icon – Dwyer's black squares are all about their placement. He may be mining well-known art history but is also carving a unique space for himself in his search for "an idiosyncratic language for making art".

Dwyer's work stresses the perception of colour as a visual experience mediated through light. Although this fact is self-evident in a scientific sense, foregrounding it reminds us to consider how we see and what makes sight possible. Dwyer is fascinated by colour theory. Of particular interest is the Munsell colour system, developed by the American painter Albert Munsell in the early 20th century. Grounded in human perception, the model specifies colour in three dimensions – hue, lightness, and chroma or colour purity – the scientific basis of which aided its widespread adoption and ongoing use.

While a focus on the optical basis of experiencing colour underpins Dwyer's work, he also extends the grammar of minimalism to emphasise the nuances of the physical exhibition environment. He likens his choice of spelling for the word 'caerulean', in the exhibition title *The Caerulean Blue Room*, to the perception of his work: there is no correct way to see anything; rather, each choice or viewing

Opposite: *Never*, 2015, cedar, resin, oil, 350 x 350 x 20mm; *Night*, 2015, cedar, resin, oil, 350 x 350 x 20mm; and *Hollow*, 2016, cedar, resin, enamel, 350 x 350 x 20mm

Right, from top: *Journey to the Garden*, 2017, pine, resin, enamel, 450 x 450 x 20mm; and *Demon*, 2017, pine, resin, enamel, 450 x 450 x 20mm

is a singular experience modulated by the ever-changing qualities of ambient light.

When I make my visit, Dwyer is working on some of his trademark paintings, filling the negative spaces in custom-made stretchers with resin. The pigments added to the liquid resin give it a smoky, luminescent, often spooky quality. When dry the surface of the resin is further sanded and painted in successive translucent layers. Viewers will then be able to see through the work to the wall behind. They will also see the cedar or pine stretcher bars – the work's architecture laid bare. And with no canvas cover to conceal them, the exposed sides of the stretchers become part of the overall effect.

In the exhibition catalogue for *Grid, Colour, Plane*, a 2017 show at Malcolm Smith Gallery, the curator Julian McKinnon remarked that the appearance of pigment within Dwyer's cast resin paintings can be likened to the operation of an LCD screen. The pigment is made visible by the resin's translucent quality – from ambient light illuminating the surface, the interior and the white wall behind – just as with a digital screen, coloured light is emitted from behind the surface. Dwyer believes the paintings should 'pulse' and 'hum' in a way akin to electronic media, an effect furthered by the subtle casts made by his works on the gallery wall.

Dwyer's hybrid forms draw from both the precision of industrial processes and the indeterminacy of hand-made painting and sculpture techniques. Balancing any machine aesthetic, the paintings reveal accidents and aberrations, traces of human mark-making and those produced by the behaviour of their materials. As Ann Poulson says in 'The Memory of Becoming', a piece written for Dwyer's 2014 show *Icicles*: "By relinquishing control and by introducing chance into a process of scientific consistency, the artist addresses both the limits and the potential of Minimalism, uncovering a potential for lyricism within the presence of austerity."

Gazing at the cranes, towers and scaffolding punctuating the skyline through the bus window as I head back to the city, I reflect on Dwyer's aesthetics in the fading light. They're an unlikely but apt analogy for the changing face of Auckland, a place which appears eternally under construction.

Johl Dwyer's The Caerulean Blue Room *is at Tim Melville Gallery, Auckland, until 3 March.*