

Natalie Lavelle: *In the Making*

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See more, hear more, feel more

Elena Dias-Jayasinha

In 1966, American critic Susan Sontag argued the importance of treating works of art as sensory experiences, as opposed to content for interpretation. In other words, she claimed that the best way to understand a work is to engage with it through your senses, instead of distilling its visual elements and attempting to make meaning out of them. Sontag's words resonate strongly with Natalie Lavelle's works, which oscillate between painting and sculpture, encouraging us to rethink how we perceive what too many reduce to 'pictures on the wall'.

Traditionally, in Western art history, paintings have been valued as 'faithful' representations of nature. The problem with this convention is that a painting is not only what it depicts; it is also an object in and of itself. A painting is constructed of various elements—paint, canvas, wood, staples—all of which make it more than a two-dimensional surface. Put simply, painting and sculpture are not mutually exclusive. Rather than trying to reconcile the content of a painting with its form, Lavelle's works lean into this tension. Her work *Untitled (Hang)*, for example, is composed of a body-sized sheet of canvas, with one side painted white and the other black. The bottom left corner of the canvas has been lifted and nailed to the wall, creating a fold that protrudes into the gallery. Lavelle cites American sculptor Eva Hesse as her inspiration, whose 1966 work *Hang Up* draws attention to one of painting's most disregarded features—the frame—by extending it with a generous loop of cord. By intervening with the painted surface of her work, in a similar vein to Hesse, Lavelle encourages us to think more deeply about the materiality and 'objecthood' of painting.

The concepts Lavelle explores in *Untitled (Hang)*, like the other works in this chapter of the exhibition, are indebted to Postminimalism. Popular in the 1960s and 1970s, Postminimalism emerged in reaction to its predecessor, Minimalism. Although both movements sought to highlight the materiality of art, their approaches differed greatly. The strategies adopted by the Minimalists resulted in impersonal, harsh and implicitly 'masculine' works. The Postminimalists, on the other hand, developed approaches that centred expression, warmth and sensuality.

In line with Postminimalist thought, the body is referenced throughout Lavelle's works, including *Untitled (Purple, Crimson and Violet)*. Hanging from steel brackets, this work sits 36 centimetres off the wall. This is the distance between Lavelle's right thumb to right elbow, and is also 1.5 times the length of her foot. From top to bottom, the work transforms from deep purple to light brown, reminiscent of a healing bruise. To achieve this gradation, Lavelle seeped, soaked and stained paint onto the surface of the work, the marks of which sustain a connection to the artist's body.

Fleshfield and *Breather* make obvious reference to the body through their titles. The two works are displayed with *Untitled (White square)* and *Untitled (White)* on a steel scaffold. Moving around the scaffold exposes all angles of the works, making us realise that they too have fronts, sides and backs.

By drawing attention to the materiality and objecthood of painting, Lavelle encourages us to recognise our shared physicalities with such work. Without being prescriptive, she invites us, in the words of Sontag, "to see more, to hear more, to feel more". As you explore the third chapter of this exhibition, allow yourself to open up your senses and surrender to the reality in front of you.

In the Making captures the evolving artistic practice of Brisbane-based artist Natalie Lavelle. The exhibition brings together early experiments in abstraction and colour field painting with large scale monochromes and new works that expand into spatial installation.

Raised in Hervey Bay, this is Natalie Lavelle's first major exhibition on the Fraser Coast and the first survey of her practice to date.

Enclosed is a collection of three texts by women curators and writers commissioned to accompany *In the Making* at Hervey Bay Regional Gallery.

List of works, clockwise

1. *Untitled I (Deliberate Pictures Series)*, 2020
acrylic and thread on canvas, 137 x 101.5 cm
2. *Untitled II (Deliberate Pictures Series)*, 2020
acrylic and thread on canvas, 122 x 183.5 cm
3. *Untitled (Hang)*, 2018-2020
acrylic on canvas, 183 x 160 cm
Private collection
4. *Untitled III (Deliberate Pictures Series)*, 2020
oil and thread on canvas, 137 x 101.5 cm

5. *The Nearness of You*, 2022,
oil on Italian linen, 114 x 145 cm
6. *Untitled (Burnt Umber and Raw Umber)*, 2022
oil on Italian linen, 135 x 203 cm
Private Collection

7. *Untitled (Crimson and Dioxazine Purple)*, 2023
acrylic on Italian linen (framed), 88 x 202 cm
Private collection
8. *Untitled (Purple, Crimson and Violet)*, 2021
acrylic on Italian linen + custom steel wall brackets,
292 x 92 x 36 cm

9. *Untitled (Burnt Umber and Ultramarine Blue)*, 2020
oil on Italian linen, 213 x 168 cm
Private collection
10. *Untitled (Quinacridone/Dioxazine/Cerulean)*, 2024
acrylic on Italian linen, 167 x 200 cm
11. *Untitled (Violet/Cerulean Blue Chromium)*, 2024
acrylic on Italian linen, 112 x 167.5 cm

Centre structure - interior works, front to back

12. *Breather*, 2023
acrylic on Italian linen, 167.5 x 167.5 cm
13. *Fleshfield*, 2023
acrylic on Italian linen, 167.5 x 167.5 cm

Centre structure - exterior works, front to back

14. *Untitled (White square)*, 2025
acrylic on French linen, 198 x 198 cm
15. *Untitled (White fields)*, 2025
acrylic on French linen, 198 x 198 cm

Deconstructing Colour - Black & White Works

Tess Bakharia

When considering Natalie Lavelle's work, what immediately comes to mind is her use of colour. Rich canvases awash with layered, painterly hues conjure a multiplicity of associations, from art historical references, to the colour field painting of the 1950s and 60s, to everyday associations borne from colour. Her work references both the body: blushing, bruised and unblemished; and landscapes: wind-swept, sparse and endless.

In the Making, Lavelle's first survey exhibition, revisits her earliest works including *Untitled I*, *Untitled II*, *Untitled (Hang)*, and *Untitled III (Deliberate Pictures Series)*, first shown in her 2020 exhibition, *Flatform*. Now displayed alongside some of her most notable recent paintings, these works possess a fundamental difference to most in the exhibition: an absence of colour.

In this limited palette a viewer can find their own associations driven by form. Imperfect black and grey squares set on crisp white borders imitate ubiquitous silhouettes:

The view from an aeroplane window

A Polaroid warm from the camera, yet to resolve its image in the light

The ever-present Instagram grid

Open curtains on a dreary morning

Elevator doors preparing to close

Like a sketch, these works outline lines of inquiry that have continued in each subsequent body of work in Lavelle's practice—deconstruction and reconstruction of the canvas, breaking or expanding the painting's typical frame, and engaging the audience with a bodily sense of spatiality. Even the colours explored in later works, Dioxazine Purple and Australian Sap Green, Burnt Umber and Ultramarine Blue, emerged from these initial explorations, with specific combinations of hues, pointing once again to the colour black.

The black and white works distil, with immense clarity, the essence of Lavelle's work. To simplify, reduce and deconstruct are all integral processes, at odds with the inherently additive medium of painting. At each step of Lavelle's process, there exists a tension between creation and destruction:

1. Methodically constructing the canvas by hand vs. unravelling its linen by intentionally draping a single thread over each finished work.
2. Establishing a layered acrylic surface vs. diminishing the presence of colour.
3. Emphasising the agency of her materials vs. relinquishing the subject to instead focus on form.
4. Appropriating formalist techniques vs. redefining the traditionally masculine-led minimalist movement.

With each painting, Lavelle subverts our expectations of the medium, instead refocusing our attention on what exactly a painting is and how it is composed.

It is through these methods that Lavelle's paintings deftly modulate becoming and unbecoming, existing at once at the precipice of something and nothing, absence and presence. They are laden with associations and yet devoid of meaning, positing the painterly medium as both as richly complex and effortlessly simple as the living moment—resulting in a series of works which speak not of a single representation or connotation, but are imbued with the multiplicity and nuance of a shade of grey.

The lightness of colour, the weight of clouds

Zali Matthews

It has long been understood that a form's physical and visual weight does not always necessarily correlate. A simple Google search will retrieve countless rankings of colours in all hues, shades and tones by order of visual mass; American artist Richard Serra, known for his imposing lead sculptures, once observed that rectangles appear lighter than squares of the same size¹; and the average cumulus cloud, brilliantly white and seemingly weightless, carries up to 500 tonnes of water. Rather than corresponding directly to a calculable mass, visual weight is perceived and interpreted through the tenuous interconnecting relationships woven between colour, form and space.

Meanjin-based artist Natalie Lavelle is well aware of these intricacies and the need to balance them, much as she balances warring urges of restraint and release, muteness and vibrancy, and heaviness and lightness in her art practice. Inspired by mid-century abstract expressionism and colour-field abstraction, Lavelle creates simple compositions of vibrant colour by slowly and methodically pulling thin washes of paint across flat canvases. Overlaid like sheets of coloured gauze, each hue interlaces with the next to create deep, luminous variations in colour.

Clear in these works is Lavelle's simple delight in the depth, variance and vibrancy of colour. She revels in its formal qualities, juggling each hue's perceptual weight within the bounds of repeated geometric shapes to create balanced compositions. This sense of careful restraint, evocative of the self-effacing nature of mid-century minimalism, is immediately countered by thick and violent "bleeds" which suffuse the edges of her washes in spontaneous expressions of the vitality, agency and bodiliness of paint.

In recent years, Lavelle's use of colour has shifted away from the heavy, dense and constrained tones of her earlier works towards softer, pastel hues. From behind these translucent and almost veil-like washes of paint, more expressive and suggestive forms emerge dancing across her compositions: dry brushstrokes, inky stains and atmospheric smudges. Like clouds, they suggest little sense of shape or solidity, instead forging a vastness of space one feels almost at danger of falling into—met with no resistance, if not coming out the other side a little wet.

Most recently, Lavelle has begun doing away with layered geometric compositions entirely, releasing these undefined forms into an openness of space. Positioned along a horizontal axis, these works seem to suggest landscapes or atmospheres, porous and open to the elements which surround them: one sees perhaps the height of midday in *Untitled (Violet/Cerulean Blue Chromium)*, 2024; the brilliant yet short-lived warmth of sundown in *Untitled (Crimson and Dioxazine Purple)*, 2023; and the soft, lilac tones of dusk in *Untitled (Quinacridone/Dioxazine/Cerulean)*, 2024.

This lightness of colour speaks to expansive pictorial spaces, ones which could envelope the viewer entirely if not for the thin, exposed linen edges which bind these works to their frames. At times heavy and light, structured and loose, self-restrained and expressive, Lavelle's works trace the fine line between extremes, both at odds with themselves and in balance—like the cloud which defies gravity, impossibly heavy yet effortlessly light.

¹Richard Shiff, *Experience Beyond Language*, lecture presented at Nasher Sculpture Center, January 28, 2017.