



u n c a n n y
e n c o u n t e r s
S t a g i n g t h e E v e r y d a y

H u g o P r i m b s

Exegesis in support of practice-based thesis

Master of Visual Arts

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Abstract

This practice-led research project investigates how painting, functioning as a metaphorical stage, provides a contextual 'platform' for the relationship between an audience and the 'performance event' of paint on canvas. It examines the ways paint can incite the psychological phenomenon of the uncanny through the use of a range of intuitive and consciously applied painting methods. Focusing on the representation of repetitive objects of everyday experience, this thesis explores how creating an unsettling sense of the uncanny within the painted 'doubles' of these encountered 'props' might challenge perceptions of the mundane. This feeling of unease is entirely subjective and evades conclusive definition. Such a feeling is achieved in the artworks discussed in this exegesis through the use of strangely familiar subject matter and experimentation with repressive painting devices such as shallow depth of field, tight cropping, warped perspective, colour interaction and a manipulated use of chance.

To seeing.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Hugo Primbs
21 May 2021

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List of Works

All works appearing in this exegesis are mine unless otherwise stated. Paintings from other artists are recorded in detail below in order of appearance.

16. Christopher Brown, *The Nine Planets*, 2017, Oil on Canvas, 177.8cm x 177.8cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Berggruen Gallery.
18. Wilhelm Sasnal, *Untitled*, 2005, Oil on Canvas, 40cm x 53.9cm.
Courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ. © Wilhelm Sasnal.
19. Peter Doig, *Concrete Cabin II*, 1992, Oil on Canvas, 200cm x 275cm.
Courtesy of the artist.
29. Jude Rae, *SL395*, 2019, Oil on Linen, 46cm x 51cm.
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43. Benjamin Senior, *The Pool*, 2013, Egg Tempera on Cotton on Aluminium, 40cm x 60cm.
Courtesy of the artist.
44. Neo Rauch, *Der Blaue Fisch*, 2014, Oil on Canvas, Diptych, 300cm x 500cm.
https://www.christies.com/features/Neo_Rauch-5175-1.aspx
58. Hurvin Anderson, *Country Club: Chicken Wire*, 2008, Oil on Canvas, 240cm x 347cm. <https://www.ikon-gallery.org/event/hurvin-anderson-reporting-back/>
59. Eberhard Havekost, *Untitled*, 1997, Oil on Canvas, 70cm x 40cm.
Courtesy of Galerie Gebr. Lehmann.

Introduction

This project explores how painting might function as a stage for the mundane encounters of my everyday experiences.¹ I am interested in how painting can bring ‘background’ aspects of my encountered world into the ‘foreground’ of an audience’s perception. By putting banal objects such as wheelie bins and road cones as ‘props’ on the stage of painting, I embark on a formal investigation of re-familiarisation with these components of my quotidian life that have become strangely unfamiliar. Interested in the semiotic nature of theatre, my research explores how thinking of theatre as an analogy for painting might provide context for the transmittal discourse that occurs between an audience or viewer and the ‘performance event’ of paint on canvas. By better understanding this relationship, I hope to gain insight into new ways of thinking about objects of the mundane within the context of how they exist in the world within my everyday experiences. This is an idea that is extensively discussed in Louis Malle’s film *My Dinner with André*. In a conversation between two playwrights, André and Wallace, the former raises the topic of putting on plays for a ‘sleeping audience’, claiming that art which attempts to show the horrors of the world does little to ‘wake up a sleeping audience’ and is merely confirming the viewer’s preconceptions of reality.² Instead, to change the way an

¹ The stage in this research denotes a culturally elevated space or contextual ‘platform’ that creates visual contrast between a ‘performance event’ and its surrounding environment. It is a space that lends an audience to attribute authority to a performing subject to which they surrender their time and attention.

² ‘Unless you’re putting on one of those superficial plays that just help your audience to sleep more comfortably, it’s very hard to know what to do in the theatre. [...] How does it affect an audience to put on one of these plays in which you show that people are totally isolated now; and that people can’t reach each other and their lives are desperate? How does it affect them to see a play that shows that our world is full of nothing but shocking sexual events and terror and violence? Does that help to wake up a sleeping audience? See, I don’t think so. Because I think it’s very likely that the picture of the world that you’re showing them in a play like that, is exactly the picture of a world they have already. They know their own lives and relationships are difficult and painful. If they watch the evening news on television, well, there what they see is a terrifying chaotic universe full of rapes and murders; and hands cut off by subway cars and children pushing their parents out of windows. So, the play tells them that their impression of the world is correct and that there’s absolutely no way out; there’s nothing they can do. And they end up feeling passive and impotent.’

Directed by Louis Malle, *My Dinner with André* (New Yorker Films, 1981), sec. 1:15:11–16:09., <https://mubi.com/films/my-dinner-with-andre>.

audience views the world, they must be shown a familiar version of reality as they know it, albeit in a way that challenges their perceptions of everyday experience.

This idea is highly relevant to my practice as I strive to challenge viewers of my works (who perhaps share a similar urban everyday experience to myself) to truly engage with their own experiential world. Through the use of painting methods such as colour interaction, shallow depth of field, warped orthographic perspectives, cropping, and a conscious use of chance, I hope to achieve this 'challenge' by producing a feeling of the uncanny in my paintings. In one of his possible definitions for this psychological phenomenon, psychologist Sigmund Freud suggests that the uncanny is a sense of unease leading back to something once very familiar.³ It is this disorientating feeling of unease that I attempt to achieve in my paintings. By removing strangely (un)familiar⁴ objects from their original context and re-presenting them on the 'stage' of the canvas, painting becomes a catalyst for genuine observation.

As my painting process is almost entirely non-linear, each section of this exegesis should be treated as a single moment, section or brushstroke of a painting, personal to myself. At times the chronology of creation may be apparent; elsewhere, portions of the process may be seen as interchangeable. I will provide context and highlight key philosophical territories relevant to each section as I discuss and analyse other artists' practices, ideas, and processes in relation to each of my works.

³ Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Alix Strachey, vol. Volume XVII (1917-1919) (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955).

⁴ I use the term '(un)familiar' because these objects oscillate between familiarity and unfamiliarity. They are familiar objects that have become unfamiliar due to their repetitive role in my everyday experiences.



Hugo Primbs, *Ferns*, Oil on Linen,
140cm x 60cm, 2020

The Uncanny and The Everyday

In order to proceed with the following chapter (and the rest of this exegesis, for that matter), it is necessary that I define the critical territories I am engaging with when I refer to ‘the uncanny’ and ‘the everyday’. Both the uncanny and the everyday are incredibly elusive in nature and defy definitive definition. This is primarily to do with the fact that each term is held within the experience of the beholder and is ultimately entirely subjective. What may incite a feeling of uncanniness in one person may not do the same for another person. The same applies to the everyday; the events, objects and encounters that make up one person’s everyday will differ even fractionally from that of someone else.

The uncanny has been the focus of critical literary, philosophical and political reflection from at least the mid-nineteenth century to the present.⁵ First appearing under the critical lens of German and Austrian thinkers,⁶ in the form of the word *unheimlich* (literally meaning ‘unhomely’), the uncanny has come to encompass numerous definitions that exceed a mere feeling of unhomeliness. These range from the strange and unfamiliar, a fear of ghosts and the supernatural, to the dread felt at the thought of losing one’s eyes or genitals.⁷ For my understanding of this psychological phenomenon, I have relied primarily on Sigmund Freud’s famous text, ‘The “Uncanny”’ (originally published in German in 1919 under the name ‘Das Unheimliche’) and literary theorist Nicholas Royle’s comprehensive book *The Uncanny*, published in 2003. Something Royle discovers quite early on in his study is that ‘[the] critical elaboration [of the uncanny] is necessarily

⁵ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester, UK; New York: Manchester University Press, 2003).

⁶ Such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud.

Royle.

⁷ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’.

bound up with analysing, questioning and even transforming what is called “everyday life”.⁸

The everyday defines that which is ordinary, repetitive and mundane; that which constitutes ‘everyday life’. However, as stated above, the everyday is also strangely elusive. Literary theorist Rita Felski summarises this rather poetically in her essay ‘The Invention of Everyday Life’: ‘Like the blurred speck at the edge of one’s vision that disappears when looked at directly, the everyday ceases to be everyday when it is the subject of critical scrutiny’.⁹ In accordance with Felski’s statement, this research project’s understanding of the everyday is also one that abstains from direct critical inspection. My definition is one that agrees with the holistically subjective nature of the everyday but also acknowledges its universality. To some extent, we are all bound by the banal repetition of the quotidian; every human breathes, drinks, eats, sleeps and defecates. Therefore, anywhere in the world where people congregate under similar conditions and circumstances, commonalities in everyday life will form with the culture of a community. In terms of my research, my practice is concerned with the urban Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland everyday.

In the following chapter, I unpack the subject matter of my paintings and how these repetitive objects create a feeling of uncanniness in my paintings. Firstly, I discuss the public, unhomely nature of my everyday in relation to the dual meaning of the German word *unheimlich* (unhomely and uncanny). I then investigate how I repress my subject matter in order for it to emerge into a state of uncanniness. Following this, I break down absurdist philosopher Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the absurdity of repetition, and how my paintings function as an uncanny ‘double’ of the objects I use as subject matter.

⁸ Royle, *The Uncanny*, 23.

⁹ Rita Felski, ‘The Invention of Everyday Life’, in *Everyday Life: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Ben Highmore, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2011), 287.

Everyday Objects of the *Unheimlich*

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the psychological phenomenon of the uncanny was first addressed by native German-speaking psychologists Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud under the term *unheimlich*, which, literally translated, means ‘unhomely’. The feeling of unhomeliness or unfamiliarity is where both Jentsch and Freud start their investigations of the uncanny.¹⁰ While the latter swiftly concludes that the uncanny transcends a mere feeling of alienation (something the former fails to do entirely – much to Freud’s distaste),¹¹ this idea of the unhomely still influences my choice of ‘props’ that I represent in my paintings.

When contemplating subject matter for a painting, I seek objects from a more ‘universal’ experience.¹² I favour objects that reside within a public sphere, separate from the connotations of class and culture that are inescapably embedded in the commodities of a domestic setting. In other words, I am interested in those objects that are, by default, *unheimlich* (in either sense of the word). My practice is concerned with the strangely (un)familiar objects of my non-domestic everyday experiences. The ritualistic encounters that occur either publicly or within an institutional context – as is the case for the swivel chair in my work titled *Wading*. Through painting, I explore these familiar aspects of my everyday that have become unfamiliar due to their over-familiarity and tendency to be taken for granted.

¹⁰ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’.

¹¹ Freud.

¹² ‘Universal’ in the sense that multiple people within a specific context (i.e. the ‘Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland everyday’ or the ‘rural Aotearoa/New Zealand everyday’) collectively share a similar understanding of ‘everyday life’ and the encounters that represent that everyday.

Freud addresses this perhaps ironic inclination for the familiar to become unfamiliar (or the homely to become unhomely) when dissecting dictionary definitions of *unheimlich* in his essay. He examines the word *heimlich* in order to understand what the prefix ‘un’ (meaning ‘not’) in ‘*unheimlich*’ is in contradiction of.¹³ In doing this, he discovers that definitions of the word *heimlich* diverge into an arena of uncertainty, whereby it exhibits attributes that correlate with its opposite, *unheimlich*:

[T]he word ‘*heimlich*’ is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means [that which] is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, [that which] is concealed and kept out of sight. [...] What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*.¹⁴

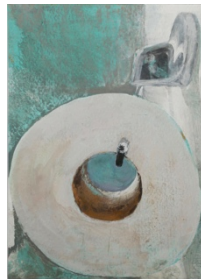
This statement endures in my practice: any *heimlich* subject matter originating from my domestic everyday comes from a more ‘universal’, middle-class experience and has, therefore, lost the sacred intimacy of home and become *unheimlich*. For example, my work titled *Wipe* depicts a roll of toilet paper, a familiar object, but somewhat ironically, not one that is exclusive to my personal experience. On the contrary, it is a widely recognised, ubiquitous component of the Aotearoa/New Zealand everyday. This sense of exposed vulnerability that these objects in my works exude when isolated under the ‘spotlight’ of painting – this insecurity of the unhomely – fascinates me. Viewers assume this vulnerability as their own as the depicted subject matter strangely oscillates between familiarity and unfamiliarity, giving rise to the uncanny.

¹³ Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’.

¹⁴ Freud, 224–25.



Hugo Primbs, *Wading*, Oil on Canvas, 130cm x 85cm, 2020



Hugo Primbs, *Wipe*,
Acrylic on Paper,
17.8cm x 12.5cm,
2020

Repression and ‘Reverse Marking’ Reconfiguring the Everyday

In the final part of ‘The “Uncanny”’ (‘Das Unheimliche’), Freud exhaustedly suggests, ‘It may be true that the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich*], which has undergone repression and then [emerged] from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition’.¹⁵ This attempt at a conclusive definition is especially pertinent when addressing the strange (un)familiar nature of the subject matter used in my paintings.

In his essay, ‘A Mundane Manifesto’, sociologist Wayne Brekhus introduces the concept of ‘markedness’ as a mode of distinguishing between the elements of everyday existence that attract attention and those that are repressed for the sake of cultural continuity. Our perception of the world consists of actively *marked* components that we are receptive to due to a default absence of any markers (the *unmarked*).¹⁶ The marked represents the extraordinary, exotic and unusual aspects of existence, while the unmarked defines that which is repressed from one’s consciousness due to its banal repetition. Just as the *heimlich* circles back on itself to become *unheimlich*, the unmarked represents those ordinary, passive objects that ironically feel unfamiliar and eerily strange due to their mundane familiarity. Like Brekhus, I believe that the marked receives a disproportionate amount of attention and analytical privilege compared to the unmarked. By depicting inherently unmarked subject matter in my paintings, I attempt to invert default modes of perception in what Brekhus would call an act of ‘reverse marking’:

‘Reverse marking’ is an explicit strategy whereby one consciously ignores what is typically marked as though it were mundane and focuses on the unmarked as though it were ‘exotic’ and ‘unusual’. Rather than gravitating to what already stands out as exceptional, reverse marking tries to find the exceptional in what is ordinarily

¹⁵ Freud, 245.

¹⁶ Wayne Brekhus, ‘A Mundane Manifesto’, *Journal of Mundane Behaviour* 1, no. 1 (February 2000): 91.

taken-for-granted as unexceptional. [...] It] involves distancing [oneself] from the taken-for-granted world and looking at it through the eyes of a stranger.¹⁷

Therefore, by reverse marking repressed objects, such as a rubbish bin and an 'open' shop sign, and foregrounding them in my painting titled *Gum*, for example, they emerge from their state of 'invisibility' and enter a realm of the uncanny. This method of 'reverse marking' is an ironic form of inversion that spotlights the systematic misconceptions and comic absurdities of our passively accepted social world.¹⁸ In *Gum*, mundane objects from my everyday experience are 'staged' like props within a theatrical encounter. Illogical and absurd, skewed perspectives and an unworldly collapsing of space are juxtaposed by a naturalistic one-to-one scale that forces the painted scenery into a distressing foreground setting. Painter Christopher Brown employs a similar approach in his painting titled *The Nine Planets*. Although the scale is absurdly exaggerated in his work, he reconfigures his subject matter using a shallow depth of field (similar to that used in *Gum*) to confrontationally bring the viewer, in the words of Brown, 'up close to something [they don't] necessarily want to be close to'.¹⁹ When painting, I aim to compress my unmarked subject matter, further repressing it, sometimes nearly to the point of abstraction. This method of repression through reconfiguration creates a tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, inviting the uncanny to emerge and challenge viewers, as Brown puts it, '[to see] the same old boring, banal and stupid things [...] the] things we see over and over [...] in a way that is new and unique'.²⁰



Christopher Brown, *The Nine Planets*, Oil on Canvas, 177.8cm x 177.8cm, 2017

¹⁷ Brekhus, 97.

¹⁸ Brekhus, 97.

¹⁹ Thomas Bolt and Christopher Brown, 'Christopher Brown', *BOMB*. 31 (Spring 1990): 30.

²⁰ Christopher Brown and Megan Atherton, 'Making Our Mark: Christopher Brown and Megan Atherton', interview by Jan Wurm, Video, 15 October 2016, 18:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PKISxpljyc>.



Hugo Primbs, *Gum*, Oil on Canvas, 118cm x 212cm, 2020

The Unexpected Emergence of the (Un)familiar

Contrary to common belief, the psychological phenomenon of the uncanny is not simply an experience of alienation, estrangement or the unfamiliar.²¹ Nicholas Royle explains this rather eloquently in his book of the same title as the English translation of Freud's essay. He states, '[Paradoxically,] it is not darkness itself (whatever that might be), but the process of ceasing to be dark, the process of revelation or bringing to light, that is uncanny'.²² In other words, Royle takes arguably the same stance as Freud. Both conclude that the uncanny is that which emerges from a convergence between the familiar and unfamiliar. It is a feeling of indeterminacy that takes form 'when something familiar unexpectedly arises in a strange and unfamiliar context' or when 'something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arises in a familiar context'.²³ Given the familiar yet evasive and intangible nature of the everyday, I believe both of these examples speak true to the 'staged' objects in my paintings.

Such an uncanny feeling of indeterminacy is what I strive for in my practice. I achieve this in smaller works by using a smooth non-resistant painting surface (plywood, board or paper) usually no larger than 75cm x 75cm. Such specifications allow me to apply paint and cover the whole working surface very quickly. For example, my work, titled *Tape*, painted on plywood, offers an exacting performance that assimilates the gesture, every bit as much as the subject matter, into the theatrical painting 'event'.²⁴ Similar to the approach taken by painter Wilhelm Sasnal in his work *Untitled*, *Tape* was executed hastily and with a degree of emotional detachment (Sasnal himself professes



Wilhelm Sasnal, *Untitled*,
Oil on Canvas, 40cm x 53.9cm, 2005

²¹ The 'common belief' is likely due to Jentsch's initial proclamation of the uncanny being that which is 'novel and unfamiliar'* and standard dictionary definitions denoting the uncanny as that which is not normal or expected; or that which is eerie, mysterious or supernatural.†

* Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 221.

† Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. 'uncanny', accessed 30 April 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/uncanny>.

²² Royle, *The Uncanny*, 108.

²³ Royle, 1.

²⁴ Vittorio Colaizzi, 'Wilhelm Sasnal: Rochester, MN', *Art Papers*, June 2010, 59.

to never spend more than a single session on a painting).²⁵ In both my work and Sasnal's, the amount of 'information' applied to canvas is just enough for the viewer to extract the familiar subject matter from the abstract terrain of the paint. Attributes that each representation is dependent on (the frame of my laptop screen or the bent pages of Sasnal's book) are equally reliant on what is often one or two brushstrokes applied to the painting plane. Therefore, what imagery prevails presents an unstable sense of suspenseful dormancy. The viewer feels as if aspects of representation might disintegrate and disappear into pigmented matter, or more disturbingly, something currently unknown may yet emerge from the painted surface.

A similar feeling is achieved at the other end of the spectrum for larger paintings such as my work, titled *Stain*, which uses a much more laboured and meditative process. Constructed through multiple washes and layers of pigment applied over numerous weeks, this work depicts a dark rubbish bin claustrophobically compressed to the canvas' surface by a protruding white picket fence. Weighted by the complexity of the paint on canvas, the representation feels more stable than that of *Tape*. However, akin to the approach taken by painter Peter Doig in his work titled *Concrete Cabin II*, *Stain* disregards standard conventions of visual hierarchy. The slats of the bin in coalition with the pickets of the fence and the contrasting background leave the eye with no place to properly rest. Like Doig's painting, viewers become trapped in a grid-like maze of disorientating detail.²⁶ Whether one focuses on the bin, the fence, or the mysterious world beyond the two, a tension arises between the familiar objects and the strange hostility they emit. The scene is familiar, but the viewer cannot 'enter' and 'activate' the painting due to its congested surface. Again, this feeling of indeterminacy causes an unsettling dormancy to emerge. Unable to

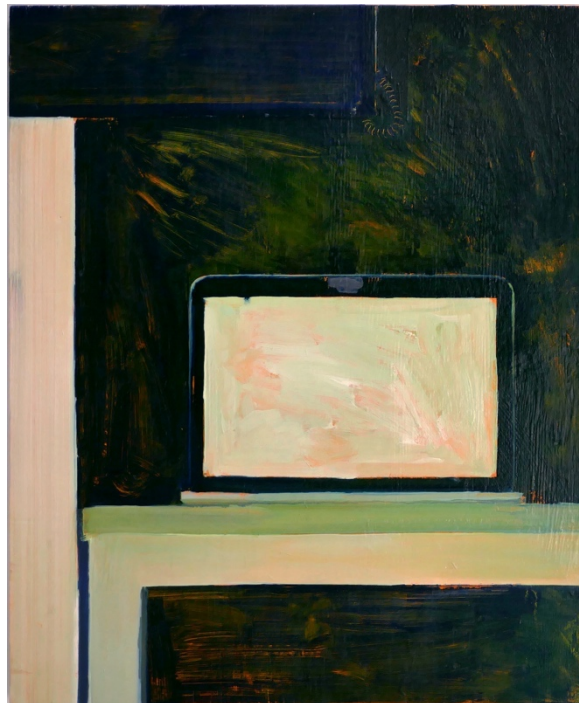


Peter Doig, *Concrete Cabin II*,
Oil on Canvas, 200cm x 275cm, 1992

²⁵ Jordan Kantor, 'The Tuymans Effect: Wilhelm Sasnal, Eberhard Havekost, Magnus Von Plessen', *Artforum*, November 2004, <https://www.artforum.com/print/200409/the-tuymans-effect-wilhelm-sasnal-eberhard-havekost-magnus-von-plessen-7810>.

²⁶ Richard Shiff, 'Incidents', in *Peter Doig*, ed. Judith Nesbitt (London: Tate Pub., 2008), 25; Adrian Searle, 'The Twilight Zone', *The Independent*, 21 October 1994.

'take part' and 'inhabit' the scene, the viewer becomes a witness. The objects stand guiltily static – as if caught in the act of some forbidding activity or ushered 'on stage' for a mugshot in a police line-up.



Hugo Primbs, *Tape*, Oil on Plywood, 67cm x 55cm, 2021



Hugo Primbs, *Stain*, Oil on linen, 102cm x 106cm, 2020

Imagining Sisyphus Happy

The Absurdity of Repetition

After conquering Death, deceiving the gods, and escaping the underworld once before, when finally recaptured, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to a punishment that would enslave him for all eternity. He was destined to ceaselessly push a rock up a mountain, where upon reaching the summit, it would roll back down to the base of the slope, leaving him to start over. In the eyes of the gods, there was no greater punishment than that of endlessly repetitive, fruitless labour.²⁷

Absurdist philosopher Albert Camus unpacks the myth of Sisyphus in the last chapter of his book of the same title. Using this classical legend as a metaphor for the absurd repetition of modern life, Camus claims, 'The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious [to him]'.²⁸ For Sisyphus, Camus says this only occurs in the moment when the rock rolls back down the mountain. Only during his descent does Sisyphus become conscious of the tragic hopelessness of his situation.²⁹ This moment of consciousness, this moment of reconciliation between the repetition of each mechanical task of everyday life, is what I aim to incite in viewers of my paintings. As Rita Felski states, 'Everyday life is above all a temporal term. As such, it conveys the fact of repetition; it refers not to the singular or unique but to that which happens "day after day"'.³⁰ By painting a 'still image' of objects from my everyday life, I hope to create a 'window' for such moments of consciousness. I hope to create a mental and visual opening through which viewers may look introspectively and reconcile their situation in the world, away from the distraction of mundane repetition.

²⁷ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien, Great Ideas (London: Penguin, 2003).

²⁸ Camus, 117.

²⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

³⁰ Felski, 'The Invention of Everyday Life', 290.

To Camus, Sisyphus is the hero of absurdity. He speaks of his heroic slave as being 'superior to his fate' and 'stronger than his rock' during those moments where he 'sinks towards the lairs of the gods'.³¹ For Camus, the consciousness that accompanies Sisyphus during each descent, '[t]he lucidity that was to constitute his torture, at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn'.³² If we imagine that Sisyphus decides to 'own' such a pointless task and make it his; if we imagine him taking pride in his performance, feeling content at the end of each day as he watches the stone roll back down the mountain, then the task is no longer a punishment. As Camus summarises his chapter,

[Sisyphus] concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.³³

The Myth of Sisyphus reveals that repetition can represent resistance as well as enslavement. This absurd act of embracing banal repetition and creating oneself anew in each moment as a form of resistance is what I attempt to achieve in each painting throughout my practice. I feel amused and humorously content when *re-presenting* already familiar, banal objects of my everyday within the unpredictable and unfamiliar terrain of painting.

³¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 117.

³² Camus, 117.

³³ Camus, 119.

Re-presenting the Double

Humour, Absurdity and the Uncanny

In his book, Royle states, '[T]he uncanny is never far from something comic: humour, irony and laughter all have a genuinely 'funny' role in thinking on this topic'.³⁴ I believe all of my works contain a component of comedy within their marked surfaces. This is undoubtedly due to my rather 'accurate' re-presentation of repetitive objects from my everyday experience. All of the paintings made during this project represent their 'props' at an approximately true to life, one-to-one scale; larger subject matter is painted on larger surfaces, smaller subject matter, on smaller surfaces. This naturalistic scale allows each work to function as a humorous two-dimensional 'double' if you will. When continuing his discussion on humour and the uncanny, Royle raises the topic of the double, saying:

The figure of the double is also a figure of humour. [... It] is *funny*, in the most strongly antithetical or duplicitous sense of 'funny'. [...] What makes [it so] is partly its sense of absurdity, playfulness, hyperbole, perversity and hocus-pocus, but partly also its implacable earnestness, its peculiar, deadly seriousness.³⁵

To say that my paintings function as a double (in an identical sense) is undoubtedly a stretch due to their inherent inability to inhabit three dimensions. However, the 'funny' effects that Royle lists above certainly still apply to my works.

For example, my paintings titled *Lava Lamp* and *Banana* present an uncanny ambivalence between the comical, absurd choice of subject matter and their deadpan solemnity. Isolated under the 'spotlight' of painting, when encountering these works, the viewer becomes trapped in a standoff of sorts with the double. A strange irony is present; the viewer understands the illusionary nature of the represented objects but nonetheless finds themselves seduced by the life-like scale that brings the encounter eerily close to reality. The distant way viewers typically

³⁴ Royle, *The Uncanny*, 2.

³⁵ Royle, 190.

interact with such banal objects in the real world is not too dissimilar from the way they interact with my painted replicas. Therefore, on a more sensual and affective level, the viewer becomes unsure about the reality of the paintings. Both Freud and Jentsch agree that a feeling of uncanniness can emerge under such circumstances. For Freud, 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, [...] when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolises'.³⁶ As for Jentsch, '[the uncanny is present when one] doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate'.³⁷ Such interactions with the painted 'double' interest me. By exciting a feeling of uncanniness in the viewer through their interaction with my representations of repetitive subject matter, I hope to shift the way they interact with those same objects within their everyday world.

³⁶ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 244.

³⁷ Freud, 226.



Hugo Primbs, *Lava Lamp*, Oil on Canvas, 228cm x 138cm, 2020



Hugo Primbs, *Banana*, Acrylic on Paper,
21 cm x 29.5cm, 2020

Painting and the Stage

Early on in this project, I became interested in thinking about my painting practice as a metaphorical form of theatre. More specifically, I became interested in how painting might function as a stage to contextualise the transmittal discourse between an audience or viewer and the 'performance' of paint on canvas.

This chapter commences by investigating how this theatre analogy materialises in my practice in the form of the stage as well as a range of other visual and compositional motifs. I continue my dissection of this analogy as I explore the performative nature of painting, stage presence, and how paint in *action* fulfils the same purpose on canvas as that of an *actor* on stage. My focus then narrows in on the subject matter of my compositions and how representations of mundane objects come to function as props within the 'stage' of painting. To conclude, I discuss the relationship between a viewer or audience and the performance event of painting in relation to performance theorist and philosopher David Z. Saltz's essay on theatrical performance perception titled, 'Infiction and Outfiction'.

The Theatre Analogy

Painting as a Stage

An involvement with drama has always paralleled my entanglement with the visual arts. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that theatre has slowly wriggled its way into my painting in recent years. As I have become conscious of this influence, I have identified several recurring theatrical and compositional staging motifs present throughout my practice. These include dramatic lighting, contrasting backdrops, distorted perspective, shallow depth of field, and grounding proscenium-like bands at the bottom of my images. These painting devices appear in my works titled *Speaking Surfaces* and *Can*.

Works such as *Speaking Surfaces* and *Can* were formally conceived. The encounters from which these paintings were derived could not hold my attention in themselves. Like the painter Jude Rae, 'I have to impose order to find a composition that will sustain the focus I require'.³⁸ I set about reconfiguring and structurally staging my subject matter by shifting the perspective and scale of pictorial elements to achieve a desired *mise en scène*. The theatre analogy allows me to expand and contract space, turning volumes into planes in ways that defy laws of physics and perspective but that are nonetheless accepted as reality within the pictorial realm.³⁹ The dark background and harsh contrast between the illuminated subjects and their stark shadows in the aforementioned works illustrate flooded stage lighting. In *Speaking Surfaces*, what action there is takes place in an ambiguous setting, much like the paintings from artist David Hockney's 'theatre period' from the 1960s to the early 80s,⁴⁰ such as his work titled *Shirley Goldfarb and*



Jude Rae, *SL395*, Oil on Linen, 46cm x 51cm, 2019

³⁸ Jude Rae, 'An Interview: Jude Rae and Terence Maloon', interview by Terence Maloon, exhibition catalogue, *Jude Rae: A Space of Measured Light*, Drill Hall Gallery (The Australian National University, 2017), <https://dhg.anu.edu.au/events/jude-rae-a-space-of-measured-light/>.

³⁹ Martin Friedman, *Hockney Paints the Stage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 29.

⁴⁰ In his book *Hockney Paints the Stage*, Martin Friedman discusses a range of Hockney's painted works from 1961-81. These works were painted during a period where Hockney was evidently influenced by his childhood involvement with theatre and his newfound interest in set design for theatre, opera and ballet (1966-83).

Martin Friedman, *Hockney Paints the Stage* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983).

Gregory Masurovsky. Similar to Hockney's painting, my work uses frontal, one-point perspective to define the 'wall' that pushes the 'performance event' to the edge of the canvas, 'spotlighting' the 'props' at the edge of the 'stage'.⁴¹ This foregrounding effect is reinforced by, perhaps the longest prevailing compositional motif in my painting, the proscenium.⁴²

This image has been removed for copyright reasons

David Hockney, Shirley Goldfarb and Gregory Masurovsky, Acrylic on Canvas, 115cm x 213cm, 1974

Popping up in my painting over two years ago, the proscenium is the stage-like strip of 'earth' that 'grounds' my subject matter in a habitable setting. Painted from an orthographic view like Rae's work titled *SL395*, all of my environment compositions⁴³ possess these raised platforms at the bottom of their frames, staging my mundane objects in a setting. Due to its flatness, this strip of colour functions as a horizontal ground and as the vertical face of a proscenium, like that which a 'groundling' audience member would experience at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. This representational motif acts as a threshold to the world of the fictional 'performance'. Through their relationship to this stage 'ledge', the objects in my paintings suggest characters assembled on a stage.⁴⁴ As writer Martin Friedman says of Hockney's 'theatre paintings', 'Using the stage analogy causes fact and fantasy to dissolve into one another, allowing seemingly mundane events to take on mythic connotations'.⁴⁵ Because the objects are encountered on the stage of painting, they become signifiers of greater thematic narratives. They command attention as the viewer apprehensively waits, perhaps anticipating a performer to enter the frame and activate the dormant scenery.

⁴¹ Friedman.

⁴² The section of a stage that is visible to an audience when the curtains are closed.

⁴³ What I call my works that are composed of multiple objects, creating an 'environment' large enough for a viewer to 'enter into'.

⁴⁴ Rae, An Interview: 'Jude Rae and Terence Maloon'.

⁴⁵ Friedman, *Hockney Paints the Stage*, 23.



Hugo Primbs, *Speaking Surfaces*, Oil on Board, 70cm x 70cm, 2020



Hugo Primbs, *Can*, Oil on Plywood, 32.2cm x 42.4cm, 2021

Paint as an Actor

Performance and Stage Presence

In the previous section, I established how the *medium* of painting can function as a metaphorical stage to contextualise the dichotomy between a viewer and the performance of the paint on canvas. However, I believe that a painting, as a commodifiable *object*, functions in the very same way.⁴⁶ Where canvas serves as a metaphorical stage, paint is the physically present actor that performs, giving presence to a character within the fictional world of my paintings. Performance philosopher Suzanne M. Jaeger defines such stage presence as:

an active configuring and reconfiguring of one's intentional grasp in response to an environment. It is to be aware of the uniqueness of a particular audience and of certain features of a theatrical event rather than performing a perfect repetition of a familiar and well-rehearsed pattern of behaviour.⁴⁷

In other words, presence, she proposes, is the ability to improvise. It is the ability to adapt to unanticipated events in the present moment.⁴⁸

Improvisation is a technique or artistic license afforded to actors that provides spontaneity and presence within a performance. To theatre and film directors alike, this technique functions as a method of 'manipulated chance'.⁴⁹ Actors are forced to think, act, and react in the

⁴⁶ Most commonly, canvas is stretched over a frame to produce a literal platform – or 'stage' – that protrudes from a wall.

⁴⁷ Suzanne M. Jaeger, 'Embodiment and Presence: The Ontology of Presence Reconsidered', in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy*, ed. David Z. Saltz and David Krasner (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 122.

⁴⁸ David Krasner and David Z. Saltz, 'Introduction', in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 10.

⁴⁹ In his book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, philosopher Gilles Deleuze discusses how painters Paul Cézanne and Frances Bacon struggled to suppress the cliché and inspire a sense of presence in their paintings. For Bacon, this was achieved through the use of 'free marks'. He used marks made 'by chance' to 'wrench the visual image away from the nascent cliché.' However, '[c]hance, according to Bacon [was] inseparable from a possibility of utilisation'. These 'free marks' were, in fact, marks of 'manipulated chance'. A series of 'probabilistic givens' were always present. Bacon knew more or less how these marks would behave; he just did not know how they would position themselves on the canvas, altering the representational image.

present. Theoretically, a narrative can be taken in any direction through improvisation. However, like my painting, there are a set of 'probabilistic givens' that are at play. An actor must stay in character and conduct themselves in accordance with that character's persona and limitations. The same applies to the other characters with whom an actor interacts alongside the laws of the fictional stage setting. For example, if another stage performer hands an actor a mimed 'box', every ounce of that actor's being must believe that the space between their hands constitutes a box. The box's features, such as its material or weight, are open to chance because they are defined by the actor the very second their fingers 'touch' its surface.

When considering paint as an actor, I direct it to stay more or less faithful to an overall representational narrative. However, I permit it the freedom to deviate and define portions of its character through moments of improvisation. In my work titled, *Stop B*, I manipulate chance through an application of intentionally fluid paint. Again, a set of 'probabilistic givens' are present in this painting. Each brushstroke is inescapably attached to representation; the liquid paint is bound to be influenced by gravity, and depending on its viscosity, will only travel so far down before it dries. Chance is at play because I know what I want to do with a painting; I just do not know how the paint will do it.⁵⁰ The form the coloured pigment takes on the canvas diverges from its initial application as areas pool together and the force of gravity acts upon it. I allow the paint to 'perform' with limited constraint, utilising chance to bring a more charismatic presence to my represented 'props'.

Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 76–78.

⁵⁰ Deleuze, 78.



Hugo Primbs, *Stop B*, Oil and Charcoal on Canvas, 145cm x 194cm, 2020

The Mundane Object as a Prop Representation and the Uncanny

Picking up where the first part of this chapter left off, this section examines how my painted representations of mundane objects function as props on the 'stage' of painting. Using theatre philosopher Alice Rayner's essay, 'Presenting Objects, Presenting Things', as a point of inception, I discuss the shifting perception of my subject matter when viewed within a theatrical context. In her essay, Rayner includes human bodies in her definition of 'objects of perception'. To her, props and actors fulfil the same function on stage – as things that 'perform' before a viewer or audience.⁵¹ In other words, if the paint is the actor on stage, then the mundane objects such as those in my work titled *720.9 (Architecture)* are the characters or fictional objects that paint represents and performs 'through'.

Once staged, the objects or 'props' in the work mentioned above adopt a unique positioning as they participate in multiple dimensions.⁵² They can elaborate into semiotic signifiers with historical connotations and contexts or recoil into material sensations of, surface, texture, colour, and form.⁵³ However, in her essay, Rayner also notes a third function that negotiates the space between these viewpoints, in the sense that, as staged objects in theatre, props present themselves *as* representations.⁵⁴ Their representative textures and forms are the very same as those of their real tangible bodies. However, I swiftly concluded that this third function does not easily translate, even metaphorically, to painting.

⁵¹ 'From purely a linguistic standpoint, the word *object* stands for any "thing" that is thrown (*-jected*) in front (*ob-*), suggesting not simply the thingliness of objects but their position in relation to a subject, like an obstacle or an object of study.'

Alice Rayner, 'Presenting Objects, Presenting Things', in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy*, ed. David Krasner and David Z. Saltz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 180.

⁵² Rayner, 180.

⁵³ Rayner, 181.

⁵⁴ Rayner, 180–81.



Hugo Primbs, 720.9 (*Architecture*), Oil on Canvas, 150cm x 140cm, 2021

Interested in exploring this idea, despite its probable futility, I decided to paint a painting as a 'prop' inside my work titled *Arm & Leg*. That is, I painted a representation of a painting (depicting a 'mundane' image of typically 'low' visual status)⁵⁵ inside the fictional world of a greater pictorial composition. This embedded artwork represents itself as a prop even though it is painted as if it were a standalone image. Both representing the real and undermining it, this 'painting within a painting' creates a tension between its materiality and the reality of representation.⁵⁶ Rayner even suggests, 'The tension of perception oscillating between the inert matter and its signifying possibilities can, in some circumstances, create a sense of the uncanny'.⁵⁷ I believe this presence of the uncanny to be most plausible in *Arm & Leg* because one wonders about the reality of the pictorial painting 'prop' even as it gives sensory testimony.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ On account of its overlooked and disregarded nature due to its association with lavishly romantic, sentimental and inherently kitsch landscapes. (Art that tends to populate motels and souvenir shops that I have come to enjoy primarily in an ironic sense).

⁵⁶ Rayner, 'Presenting Objects, Presenting Things'.

⁵⁷ Rayner, 182.

⁵⁸ Rayner.



Hugo Primbs, *Arm & Leg*, Oil and Mineral Silicate on Canvas, 180cm x 141cm, 2020

Infiction and Outfiction Performance and Perception

Continuing my investigation of performance perception, I decided to research the relationship between the viewer and the 'performance event' of painting. In his essay 'Infiction and Outfiction', David Z. Saltz rejects orthodox views of theatrical performance perception in favour of breaking it into two sections he calls 'Infiction' and 'Outfiction'. Adopting these terms, I examine the dual perception of painting, between the 'acting' or 'performative' materiality of paint and the representational 'characters' or 'props' that the medium brings to life in my works.

The standard view, by Saltz's definition, is that an audience 'looks at the stage in order to look beyond the stage'; viewers look past, or through, the real events to a fictional world.⁵⁹ According to this thinking, he claims,

[A]s a spectator I must choose whether to focus my attention on the real world, [containing an actor] or the represented world, [containing a character]. These two levels of reality are distinct and cognitively incompatible.⁶⁰

As soon as one begins to perceive a painting as a representation, one can no longer perceive it as a canvas covered with paint, that is, as a real physical presence in the world.⁶¹

However, Saltz proposes that 'the relationship between narrative and performance runs two ways: from narrative to performance (fiction in) and from performance to narrative (fiction out)'.⁶² In terms of my painting practice, the infiction is the subject matter (be that a bin or some other everyday object) that dictates the physical actions I

⁵⁹ David Z. Saltz, 'Infiction and Outfiction', in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance, and Philosophy*, ed. David Krasner (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006) 203.

⁶⁰ Saltz, 204–5.

⁶¹ Saltz, 210.

⁶² Saltz 215.

make when painting. It is the fictional ‘character’ that informs every mark and brushstroke consciously applied to canvas. The viewer’s ‘metaphorical redescription’ of these painting actions is what Saltz calls the *outfiction*.⁶³ As long as the viewer regards the narrative of my paintings as an infiction, their primary focus is the ‘performance’ on the canvas ‘stage’. Representation is not a third component separate from the painting; it is intrinsically ingrained in this ‘performance’ itself. Only when an audience *extracts* the narrative content *from* the painting, treating the subject matter as an *outfiction*, does a three-way relationship materialise between the viewer, the performance, and the realm of representation.⁶⁴

Like Saltz, I believe that an audience need not, and generally does not, repress the experiential reality of the ‘performance’ of painting in order to comprehend the fictional representation in my works.⁶⁵ The viewer’s perception of the ‘performance’ on the ‘stage’ of painting is fundamentally informed by representation. When observing my work – for example, my painting titled *Arm & Leg*, which I discussed in the previous section (see page 38) – the viewer engages with the painted surface as well as the representational sofa and the framed painting above it. These are not independent experiences but separable elements of a holistically single ‘event’.⁶⁶ The paint ‘acts’ according to the laws of the representational world, and the represented objects exist only through the ‘performance’ of the paint on ‘stage’. A technically accurate ‘performance’ reduces the viewer’s awareness of the materiality of the paint. However, where physically expressive and theatrically exaggerated ‘acting’ can disrupt this illusion, it offers a more visceral and perhaps more holistically accurate representation in its place.

⁶³ Saltz, 214.

⁶⁴ Saltz, 215.

⁶⁵ Saltz, 206.

⁶⁶ Saltz, 210; Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make Believe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 301.

Colour

As the tortoise draws its limbs into its shell at need, so the artist reserves [their] scientific principles when working intuitively. But would it be better for the tortoise to have no legs?⁶⁷

This chapter examines my relationship with colour and its role in my painting practice. I begin by sharing insight into the role colour plays in my everyday experiences and my choice of subject matter. I proceed by discussing positive and negative colour in figure/ground relationships and the relative nature of colour in my paintings. It then takes a more introspective turn as I share insight into my peculiar connection with yellow.

My relationship with colour is an intuitive one. I rarely engage with and employ colour theories in my practice consciously. Yet my knowledge of them always seems to filter through and permeate every finished work. Therefore, this chapter is best understood as a reflective attempt to rationalise my use of colour theory in my painting processes. I hope to highlight the fragile terrain of colour perception, its untamable nature, and wholly subjective demeanour.

⁶⁷ Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color*, trans. Ernst van Haagen (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1993), 13.

Colour and The Everyday

Abstraction and Representation

In many ways, my painting begins with a moment of encounter, a confrontation with my quotidian world, which hoists me into the present. Typically, colour is the catalyst for such an encounter. Often presenting contrasting tones or complementary hues, colour carries these 'props' out from the wings into the centre stage of my perception. I am constantly accumulating photographic and mental snapshots from my interactions with everyday objects, which perform before me. I feel that most of my days consist of moments of internal composition, contemplation, and reconfiguration – painting. The daily walk to and from my bus stop continually presents me with material to consider, as does the commute itself. I am attracted to subject matter that has character; something with a surprising, flamboyant edge and, perhaps, a sense of humour.

As an example, wheelie bins have become something of a recurring motif in recent years. Their awkward block-like masses, (often dual) colour scheme, and scale, are always pleasantly varied.⁶⁸ Furthermore, their linear constitution presents a wonderful potential for flat areas of expansive colour on canvas. They allow me to create exciting colour relationships while staying more or less true to their form. This duality between the materiality of paint (or rather, colour) and representational imagery is key to my practice. When painting, my perspective and attention continuously shifts in and out of abstraction and figuration. I believe this constant fluctuation backwards and forwards, this place of indeterminacy between the familiar and the unfamiliar, is what inspires a feeling of uncanniness in my works.

⁶⁸ For the past two years, I have taken it upon myself to photographically document as many chromatically and formally different wheelie bins as I encounter. To date, I have discovered 23 different colour variations and 9 formal variations.

Figure/Ground Relationships Positive and Negative Colour

This state of indeterminacy is also evident in the figure/ground relationships that occur in my works *Sift*, *Mars*, and *Alarm*. In these paintings, I examine how spatial tension is created when representation teases the realm of colour interaction. Here, traditional figure/ground colour relationships are reversed. Instead of serving as a backdrop for a positive image, the coloured grounds tussle to become the dominant element and, in a sense, the real subject of their stage-worlds.⁶⁹ This 'push and pull' is due to contradictory relationships between representation and – what artist and colour theorist Josef Albers called – positive and negative colour.⁷⁰

Albers believed that in juxtaposing colours, one hue will always be perceived as being in front of the other, appearing as a positive 'figure' against a negative or recessive 'ground'.⁷¹ For example, when looking at my painting titled *Sift* through an abstract lens, the white tones of the background are positive and appear to protrude forward. The black of the foremost wheel of the wheelie bin and its blue lid are negative colours in comparison. However, by the logic and laws of representation, the opposite speaks true. This is an approach commonly employed by painters such as Benjamin Senior and Neo Rauch.



Benjamin Senior, *The Pool*,
Egg Tempera on Cotton on Aluminium,
40cm x 60cm, 2013

⁶⁹ Charles Le Clair, *Color in Contemporary Painting: Integrating Practice and Theory* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1991), 111.

⁷⁰ The term 'push and pull' was what Josef Albers' compatriot and fellow colour theorist, Hans Hofmann, called this system of contrasting colour dynamics. Hofmann saw colour relationship as a system of attractions and repulsions; hence the name 'push and pull'.

Le Clair, *Color in Contemporary Painting*.

⁷¹ Le Clair, 107.

To borrow the words used by Senior to describe this very same figure/ground interplay in his practice:

The field becomes more solid, almost than the figures. [...] Only in painting does space behave in this strange way [...] enshroud[ing] the figure from all sides – as opposed to sitting behind it. [...] I find it natural to manipulate space in this way, to make space solid, to distort it.⁷²

Like Rauch, works such as *Alarm* and *Mars* use a limited colour palette that constantly drags and thrusts the eye forwards and backwards. The harmonious tricoloured schemes and stark contrasts shift the viewer's gaze between horizon planes, foreground 'figures', and fields of austere ambiguity. Similar to both Senior and Rauch, my conglomerations of subject matter serve the painting before serving a narrative. Figures and their settings are theatrically altered in perspective, scale, and hue to create tension, harmony, and discord of colour and form.⁷³



Neo Rauch, *Der Blaue Fisch*,
Oil on canvas, Diptych,
300cm × 500cm, 2014

⁷² Benjamin Senior, *Benjamin Senior: Artist's Talk* (Shoreditch Studios, Royal Drawing School, London, 2015), 41:56, <https://www.royaldrawingschool.org/lectures-events/benjamin-senior-artists-talk/>.

⁷³ Neo Rauch, Sabine Russ, and David Zwirner, 'Neo Rauch', *BOMB*, 2015.



Hugo Primbs, *Sift*, Oil on Canvas, 140cm x 145cm, 2020.



Hugo Primbs, *Mars*, Acrylic on Paper,
12.5 cm x 18cm, 2020.



Hugo Primbs, *Alarm*,
Acrylic on Paper,
18cm x 12.5cm, 2020

The Relativity of Colour

Factual and Actual Perception

Eager to understand the ever-changing personas colour seems to adopt in my paintings, I decided to look into Albers' theories of colour relativity. The subjective and shifting nature of colour is best addressed with an understanding of factual perception and actual perception.⁷⁴ In the context of colour relativity, factual colour is how we name, measure or locate colour – what we know colour to be in isolation.⁷⁵ Actual colour refers to how colour appears when viewed in relation to other colours – as it is experienced naturally in the world. Albers demonstrates how the perception of colour shifts in two primary examples: colour addition (making one colour appear as two) and colour subtraction (making two colours appear as one). The first example, colour addition, is seen in my work titled *Cage*.

In this painting, the lilac-grey of the wire fence appears to vibrate and change in hue depending on whether it sits against the rich yellows of the wheelie bins, the deep purple, or some other background colour. These vibrational effects become even more evident when the surface colour is isolated from its surrounding grounds (*Colour Addition Example*). The band of colour swatches to the right is comprised of numerous swatches, factually matched from wire-covered areas in *Cage*. On top of the colour swatches, I have placed a series of factually identical rectangles, the same lilac-grey as that in my painting. This example, based on a model used by Albers, shows how the

⁷⁴ Joseph Albers explains factual and actual perception and the relativity of colour using the analogy of three basins of water in his book, *Interaction of Color*. Imagine one had three basins of water in front of them. The basin to the left contains hot water. The basin to the right contains cold water, and the central basin contains lukewarm water. If one holds their left hand in the basin of hot water and the other in cold water, they will experience warmth in the left hand and coolness in the right. However, if they then transfer both hands to the single basin of lukewarm water, each hand would experience the opposite effect: The left hand would perceive coolness, and the right hand would perceive warmth. *Factually*, both hands experience the same temperature water; *actually*, the felt temperature is different.

Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color: 50th Anniversary Edition*, 4th ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁷⁵ Anoka Faruqee, 'Color in Context: Revisiting Albers, with Anoka Faruqee' (Lecture, Yale Presidential Inauguration Symposia, Yale University, 13 October 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YpZX0Xj9-Y&feature=emb_title.



Colour Addition Example

temperamental nature of colour brings forth a startling and captivating sense of movement. Depending on which grounds aggravate and soothe its presence, the hue of the wire shifts and appears different in tone, brilliance, and even scale.

More complex is the example of colour subtraction. My work, titled *Full*, shows how two *factually* different colours emerge as the same *actually* when viewed against contrasting grounds. In this painting, the warm grey of the background, situated with teal blue, harmonises and resonates with the peachy highlights of the foremost rubbish bag. Resting against the silhouetted cadmium orange bag behind it, portions of the peachy bag appear to dissolve and dissipate with the grey background over time. However, when each colour is compared in isolation, they are factually very different. This ‘subtracting’ effect is best understood when viewed in the style of an Albers colour plate with flat, textureless hues (See the swatches at the bottom of *Colour Subtraction Example* below).⁷⁶ Like my work, *Cage*, this painting truly highlights colour’s relative disposition and fragility in terms of perception. I enjoy how the unpredictable nature of colour interaction activates the space in my paintings, creating a sense of movement in an otherwise dormant scene.



Colour Subtraction Example

⁷⁶ To present these effects appropriately, first cover the two colours in the peripheries of the studies. Focus firmly on the point in the middle between the two centred rectangles within the boundary of the two grounds. The two rectangles eventually appear more or less the same, *actually*. However, when the small colour blocks in the peripheries are uncovered, and each colour is compared in adjacency, they are factually very different.

Albers, *Interaction of Color*, 94–95.



Hugo Primbs, *Full*, Oil on Canvas, 98cm x 123cm, 2020-21



Colour swatches derived from *Full* (2020-21)



Hugo Primbs, *Cage*, Oil on Canvas, 145cm x 165cm, 2020



Detail of *Cage* (2020)

Yellow

I have always found yellow challenging to work with: inclined to be excessively vivid and assertive, easily offended, often offensive, and liable to antagonism when situated with other colours.⁷⁷ Any inclusion of yellow in my paintings immediately becomes an exercise of taming it, of getting it to behave. As painter Ian Jervis puts it when addressing the role yellow plays in his practice, 'In character yellow seem[s] self-absorbed rather than empathetic; indifferent or insensitive to other colours, but in ways more autistic than arrogant'.⁷⁸ Because of its difficult nature, I have tended to shy away from yellow in the past. Where it occasionally persisted, I felt the impulse to punish and restrain it for doing so. Reluctantly accepting its inclusion, I would relegate it to a 'supporting role' or use a pale, diluted version of itself for highlights or to provide luminosity to my paintings.⁷⁹

Eventually, in the year leading up to this project, I gradually plucked up the courage to confront this uncooperative hue and gradually incorporate it into my painting practice. I still find its relentless intensity and sensitive nature troubling to accommodate. However, I now relish the challenge of incorporating it into my paintings, something evident throughout my research practice, in my works titled *Speaking Surfaces* (see page 31) and *Cage*, for example. Being the most light-giving of all hues, the existence of yellow in these paintings brings forth an eerie sensation of life.⁸⁰ My use of warm yellows, such as cadmium or Naples yellow, creates a familiar sense of comfort and homeliness. However, the slightest addition of a cool colour or the presence of a cool ground underneath can cause these yellows to become repulsive and hostile. Their warmth diminishes into an electrifying and acidic green-yellow that radiates a cold and alienating feeling of the unnatural. In *Cage* and

⁷⁷ Ian Jervis, 'Yellow: An Artist's Meditation on Yellow', September 2020, 2.

⁷⁸ Jervis, 3.

⁷⁹ Jervis.

⁸⁰ Itten, *The Art of Color*.

Speaking Surfaces, I seek to tease this temperamental colour, gently coercing it into a world of uncanniness. I hope to utilise yellow's fragile persona to create an uncanny tension between warm familiarity and cool estrangement.

Like an actor, colour brings life to my imagery, possessing the empty bodies of surrogate forms, giving a sense of presence and personality to the characters within my stage-worlds. Yet, just the same as there is a real actor – a real person – behind every character on stage, I understand that colour is its own entity. My role is to direct it, ensure it stays in character while allowing it the creative freedom to deviate from the script wherever it deems fit.

The Pandemic

To summarise this exegesis, I discuss the Covid-19 pandemic and the influence the resulting isolations had on my practice during and after lockdown. I begin by recounting my experience of the first 'big' isolation back at the rural family home of my upbringing and how the changed everyday affected my painting practice. I then unpack the constant state of uncanniness that accompanied me even after the initial isolation period ended and how I expressed my pent-up frustrations through painting. In continuation of this idea, I examine how the sudden appearance of the barrier motif and a noticeable emphasis on restrictive painting methods were subconsciously expressive of my feeling of containment during the lockdown. These painting devices are evaluated and discussed using works by Hurvin Anderson and Eberhard Havekost as context. Finally, this contemplative train of thought is carried through to my conclusion of this writing. Reflecting on the challenging year, I analyse how this period of discomfort is representative of the feeling of uncanniness I have been attempting to create in my paintings throughout this research project.

Revisiting the (Un)homely

The Everyday, the Uncanny, and the Pandemic

At 1:30 pm on the 23rd of March 2020, it was announced that New Zealand would be moving to Alert Level 4 in 48 hours. The entire population was to self-isolate in what turned out to be the first of four nationwide lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time, I was naively making my way to campus with a 10-metre roll of canvas over my shoulder, eager to open the 5-Litre bucket of Gesso waiting for me in my studio. Fast-forward those 48 hours, and I am cosily cooped up back at my family property in the countryside. Unsure how long the lockdown would last, I had decided to pack up what I could in the day I had spare and left my flat in the city to go 'home'.

However, in the sense that I did not feel at home or at ease in the one place that I would normally call home, my entire condition during the following months was one of relentless uncanniness. My experience of isolation was one of uncertainty and discomfort. The urban everyday that I had become accustomed to over the previous four years changed back to that of my childhood upbringing; wheelie bins, road cones, and bus stops became wheelbarrows, sheep, and possum traps. In an act of stubborn defiance, as I longed for the world to return to 'normality', the subject matter of my paintings initially refused to make room for any component exclusively from my now rural everyday. However, due to no longer having access to my studio and oil painting in my bedroom becoming a health hazard, my work did become different formally. I was forced to work smaller, often on paper, and had to relearn how to use acrylic paints, which in itself was an uncomfortable transition. In order to stay true to the scale of my represented objects, I had to look for smaller subject matter. This often meant looking inward to the domestic components of my everyday, such as my mobile phone, a vegetable peeler, and a roll of toilet paper in my works, titled, *Cell*, *Peel*, and *Wipe* (see page 14), which were all created during one of the four lockdowns.



Hugo Primbs, *Cell*, Acrylic on Paper, 19cm x 18cm, 2020.



Hugo Primbs, *Peel*, Gouache on Card, 20.8cm x 14.7cm, 2021.

It wasn't until the first lockdown ended in June, and I moved back to the city, that I was able to momentarily breathe a sigh of relief, gain some mental and physical distance from my uncanny situation, and reflect on the previous two months. It was during this period of reconciliation that my rural lockdown experience made a sole appearance in my practice. My diptych of works titled *Pear* and *Apple* depict two classically bright yellow Timms possum traps from two different view points. Painted simultaneously, the two works of this diptych adequately represent how I felt during that first Covid-19 lockdown. The first painting, *Pear*, shows the trap front on, with no proscenium band raising it from the base edge of the canvas. The trap shares the 'stage' with the viewer, who is forced to embrace the perspective of a possum fatefully seduced by the apple beyond the pear-shaped hole. The second painting, *Apple*, functioning as a darkly comical *memento mori* of sorts, depicts the trap side-on with the slightly levitated torso of a deceased possum hanging out the side. On a first inspection, the scene gives no indication that a violent and deadly event has taken place. It is only when the viewer notices the possum's visual decapitation and makes connotations with the painting's contextual counterpart that it becomes evident that the violence has occurred *inside* the yellow box, next to the invisible *apple* contained within. Being the first works I painted since the initial lockdown, these works allowed me to express the suppressed frustration I felt towards the containment of isolation. With no single, tangible entity to blame for the situation and direct my anger towards, I channelled this emotion into my painting. The fur of the possum in *Apple* was created in a particularly brutal fashion as I viciously stabbed paint onto the canvas surface using a stiff-bristled brush. In doing this, the possum's corpse assumes the ironically lively gestures of the paint's application. This state of indeterminacy between the animated mark-making and the inherently inanimate possum causes a sense of the uncanny to emerge, reflecting the discomfort and uncertainty I felt for the prior nine weeks of isolation.



Hugo Primbs, *Pear*, Oil on Canvas, 45cm x 46cm, 2020.



Hugo Primbs, *Apple*, Oil on Canvas, 47cm x 61cm, 2020.

Containment and Isolation

Cropping and the Barrier as a Motif

Post lockdown, my paintings changed. Although I have regularly enjoyed limiting the viewer to a mere portion of a scene within the pictorial frame, I always managed to maintain a feeling of self-containment within each work; the represented worlds feel complete enough to 'enter into'. However, with the Covid-19 isolations, my paintings unconsciously became more restrictive. The cropping became tighter, the perspectival depth of field more condensed, and barriers – a previously unemployed compositional motif – became a symbol reflective of the containment felt during the lockdowns, a symbol which continues to recur throughout my practice. What were previously accessible realms of the strangely (un)familiar became confined realities of eerie hostility. As Nicholas Royle notes, 'The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality'.⁸¹

In my work *Beam*, for instance, an electric scooter precariously sits behind a blue fence on a narrow, sloped footpath. Barriers, fences and 'security grills', to use the artist's words, commonly appear throughout the practice of contemporary painter Hurvin Anderson.⁸² In his work *Chicken Wire*, the viewer looks through a wire mesh, similar to that in *Beam* and *Cage* (see page 50). This barrier acts as a threshold of sorts, separating viewers from the uncanny world beyond in a way that is both comforting and unsettling. By utilising this motif in my practice, paintings such as *Beam* assume a state of uncanniness by default due to the viewer's liminal position. A tension forms between the unstable ground, the prison bar-like fence, and the viewer's knowledge of the



Hurvin Anderson,
Country Club: Chicken Wire, Oil on canvas,
240cm x 347cm, 2008

⁸¹ Royle, *The Uncanny*, 2.

⁸² Hurvin Anderson, Hurvin Anderson: Reporting Back, interview by Ikon Gallery, Video, 18 October 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oZ2ObXvLtg>.

object's potential mobility. Because of this, the fence appears to be containing the estranged subject matter. Like a zoo enclosure, it acts as a protective railing between the homely, familiar world of the viewer and that of the unpredictable and perhaps dangerous world of the scooter.

However, doubts soon arise regarding which party is the one being contained due to the severe cropping and framing that restricts the viewer's perspective. Such painting devices are typical of the late Eberhard Havekost. Similar to the painter's work *Untitled, Beam* consists of planes of opaque paint which are read as being congruent with the surface of the canvas, creating a shallow pictorial space.⁸³ Vibrant ochreous yellows pull the imagery to the very surface of the working plane, forcing the scene into a potentially confronting foreground setting. Vibrating against the blue gridded fence and the complementary purple scooter, the warm ochres threaten to push the illusionary imagery into a realm of two-dimensional abstraction. The flatness of the paint together with the fence positions the viewer at the very edge of the image. Stranded in a division between realities, viewers are paradoxically prohibited from crossing the threshold into the very world in which they have become trapped. In occupying this liminal position between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the viewer enters an arena with the uncanny. They become disquieted as they are teased by the representation beyond the harshly cropped barrier. While this affect was not consciously created, I believe this abrupt introduction of the barrier motif in my practice is subconsciously resultant of my experience during and after the Covid-19 lockdowns.



Eberhard Havekost, *Untitled*, Oil on canvas, 70cm x 40cm, 1997

⁸³ Kantor, 'The Tuumans Effect'.



Hugo Primbs, *Beam*, Oil on Canvas, 145cm x 120cm, 2020.

A New Normal

Conclusion

In more than one way, the lockdown was an exaggerated version of the feeling of uncanniness that I attempt to create in my paintings. It was a state of unease that persisted even in my most homely of environments. It made me ponder my reality and how I interact with my immediate everyday surroundings on a much deeper, more personal level. Such thinking into my everyday condition and the objects that make up my reality opened up grander conversations around home, homelessness, the consumer, consumption, and commodities of mass production. These areas of thinking also led me to question the commercial 'art world' and its position within overarching issues of unsustainable economic growth, unequal distribution of wealth, the housing crisis, climate change, and the inevitable economic and ecological collapse that will ensue. The lockdown was a catalyst for me to think about uncanniness in regard to my everyday life and how 'normal' life is always weighted by such thematic issues. Without the containment of isolation, such moments of consciousness are quickly suppressed; typically 'marked' components of experience serve as ample distraction. However, by contemplating the everyday, such confronting ideas emerge from their repression in the form of the uncanny. As psychoanalyst Barbara Creed explains in her essay 'The End of the Everyday: Transformation, Sexuality and the Uncanny', 'The uncanny has the power to undermine the social and cultural prohibitions that help to create the order and stability of the everyday. In its transgressive role the uncanny brings to light things that should have remained hidden.'⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Barbara Creed, 'The End of the Everyday: Transformation, Sexuality and the Uncanny', in *Everyday Life: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. Ben Highmore, vol. 2 (New York: Routledge, 2011), 491.

This time of restriction forced me to slow down and spend time with my immediate environment. While this exercise was challenging at first, it taught me to do exactly what I want my paintings to do to viewers, through their own containing effects. By utilising painting devices such as tight cropping, shallow pictorial surfaces, figure/ground interplay, skewed orthographic perspective, and the barrier motif, I work to create a similarly restrictive effect on viewers. The act of *isolating* objects of my everyday experience on the 'stage' of painting can invite viewers to slow down and look at their encountered world more consciously and perhaps with more intention. The objects I use as subject matter will inevitably outlive me in some form, someplace on earth. By absurdly 'preserving' or 'archiving' such permanent matter in my practice, I emphasise their absurd tendency to repeat themselves. Like Sisyphus, my staged 'props' are forced into a position between the living and the lifeless, condemned to ceaselessly 'perform' themselves into meaningful existence. The viewer catches each object during their moment of consciousness, at the top of their mountain. The 'moment' preserved in the paint is their moment of realisation. Their situation on canvas represents both that of tragedy and resistance, as does my act of painting them. My repression of such products of mass production through the aforementioned painting methods is my way of punishing them for their association with the capitalist structures responsible for their creation. By bringing these overlooked components of my everyday to the foreground of the viewer's perception through painting, I create a space for the uncanny to emerge. In doing this, I aim to create a feeling of discomfort similar to that felt during the pandemic isolations. I hope this feeling of unease encourages viewers to create a 'new normal' in the way they perceive and interact with their immediate environment, even if it just means truly *seeing* a road cone or two.



Hugo Primbs, *Mask*, Acrylic on Paper, 12.5cm x 17.8cm, 2020.

Uncanny Encounters: Staging the Everyday

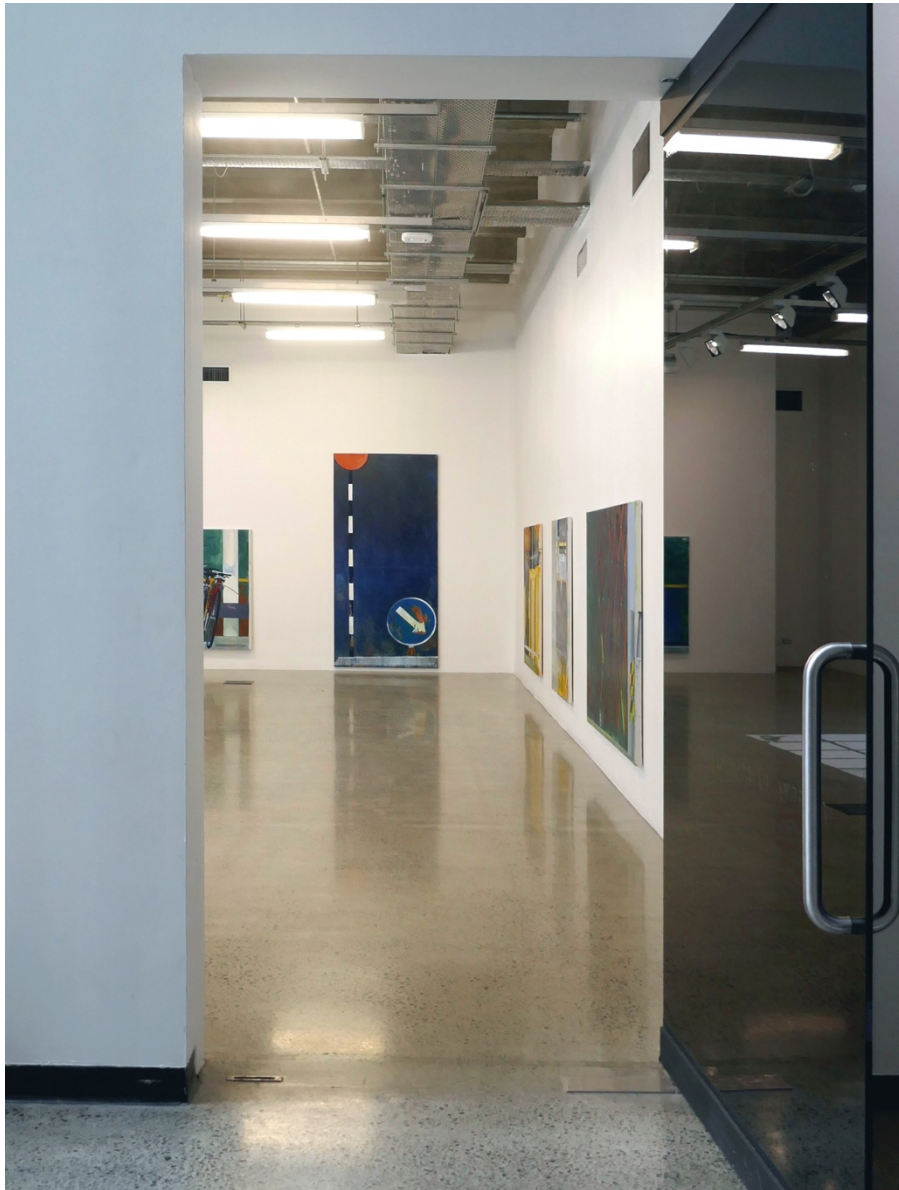
Final Exhibition

ST Paul Street Gallery Two, Auckland University of Technology

23 – 26 June, 2021



Installation shot from ST Paul Street.



Installation shot from WM Building Foyer.





Installation shot of works on southern wall. (From left to right) *Cage* (2020), *22N* (2021), *Accordion* (2021), *Tape* (2021).



Hugo Primbs, 22N, Oil on Linen, 145cm x 115cm, 2021.



Hugo Primbs, *Accordion*, Oil on Linen, 145cm x 200cm, 2021.





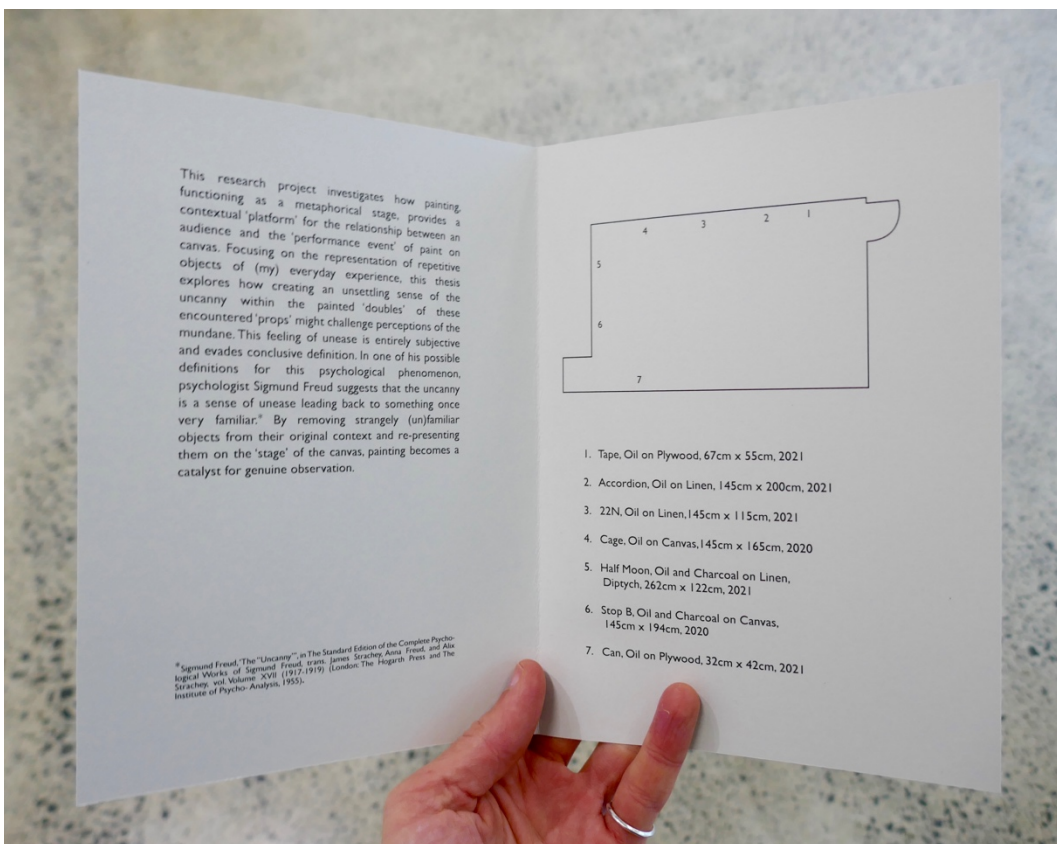
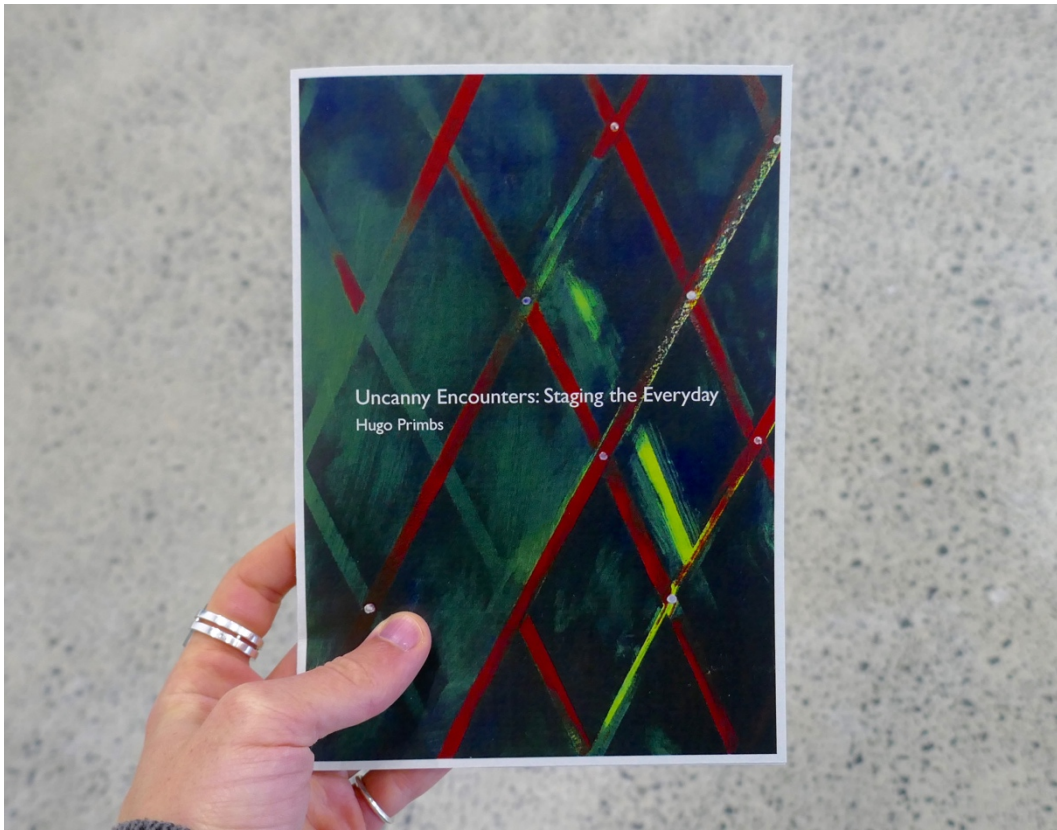
Hugo Primbs, *Half Moon*, Oil and Charcoal on Linen, 262cm x 122cm (Diptych), 2021.



Installation shot of *Stop B* and *Half Moon* catching the afternoon sun on the eastern wall of Gallery Two.



Installation shot of *Can* on the northern wall



Gallery Sheet / Floor Plan



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Hugo Primbs, *Pan*,
Oil and Gouache on Linen,
32cm x 22cm, 2020.