

ARTIST PROFILE

2019 Venice Biennale artist

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ANDRÉ HEMER

STORY ROSE VICKERS

01 *Big Node #14*, 2015, acrylic and pigment
on canvas, 137.5 x 102.5 cm

02 André Hemer in his studio, 2018



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Coming to prominence on the cover of the landmark 2014 book, *100 Painters of Tomorrow*, New-Zealander André Hemer's pigment-loaded canvases are instantly recognisable. He spoke to *Artist Profile* about maintaining a studio practice, the death of Instagram, and his experience as an antipodean artist living mostly in Europe.

WHERE ARE YOU IN THE WORLD RIGHT NOW, AND what are you reading?

I'm in Christchurch, where my mother is from, and I'm about to go back to Vienna. I can categorically say I am not reading anything. I'm writing more, and I think those two things are mutually exclusive. It's anecdotal art writing for a publication coming out next year, I hope.

Is writing part of your practice?

It is. I set up a publisher, called Painting Diary, this year, dedicated to artists' editions. The publication isn't a part of my practice but sits alongside; it's a discreet output.

Your practice has a strong theoretical underpinning and clearly leans on some epistemological philosophy. How do you reconcile the impetus to make with a theoretical point of view?

An experience – or the epistemological questions – are at the end for the viewer. I don't ever want to make work that is didactic. Painting is a one-to-one experience and I'm interested in re-evaluating what

that might mean today. It's simple, but also material. It's to do with looking and walking around something. Very simple premises can engage it and so it's an end-point to a lot of complicated questions.

In an interview with Steven Cox you said 'the idea of the digital can tend to be fool's gold'. It's a compelling statement in a context where our ontology is informed by an increasing hybridised interconnectivity; where chance connections and heterogeneous forms prevail in a way that can be difficult to locate or pin down, much less theorise.

So much discourse in the journalistic realm is about an analogue/digital divide, and involves the separation of these two ideas. Actually, it's not clear where those forms exist. What does it mean to treat digital form like any other kind of material? Can you really dislocate it from the physical manifestation of the same thing? I'm interested to see what happens when you try to amalgamate and treat these things like they are interchangeable.

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No one wants the primary experience of their work to be digital.

Do you go back-and-forth between those two realms a lot, or is it more like a linear progression?

The back-and-forth is where the process gets really interesting for me. Like, sculptures might get scanned at some point in the drawing process and put into a new work. Or re-made, cut up, repainted and reconfigured into another set of drawings. But it can seem linear as I'm process orientated. When bringing paintings together I treat them as a body of work, as the one idea executed in as many ways as I can.

What role does failure play in your practice? Do you embrace it?

I throw out paintings all the time. In a group of ten paintings two don't survive and I destroy them. That's a version of failure.

There's a different kind of failure, the kind you can come back from.

[Laughs] Yeah, that's not embracing failure, that's like, denying it or something. I don't like a lot of the paintings that I finish in the studio. It takes me a few months to get to know them and usually they ship out before that happens, and the next time I see them is in a gallery. Then, I can feel 'Is that successful or not?', or 'What's interesting about this work?'. But the paintings that stay behind kind of linger. When I say 'destroy', I might leave a painting in the corner [but] I will go back to it, and that's where a lot of changes start to happen.

I notice an increasing density in your practice – comparing your 2015 series 'Big Node' and the more recent 'Day Painting' series.

Painting at its most basic form is just a layering of something – a pigment or an image on a substrate – and the other part is illusion ... the subtle shift between materials or the way you read the surface. The 'Big Node' series were more like joke paintings, to be honest, at a time when a lot of painters were making impasto spray paintings. I wanted to riff on that by erasing through the impasto back to this underlying image, which is a scan of the same material.

Are you conscious of how your work will produce digitally, given your awareness of shifts between painting and digital media?

No one wants the primary experience of their work to be digital. I photograph my work in-situ as much as possible to give a sense of scale. Once images are online they just circulate, and if you have a crappy image out there it will get reproduced. So that's something I don't want.

Is that dilemma in itself of interest to you as someone who intensely theorises on those circuits of internet distribution and reproduction?

I actually think in the art world things happen like they always have. People still want to see the work. Instagram probably won't be around in five or ten years, so that circulation of image will be finished. The way the image will circulate as an object in the world is a much slower journey. For me it affirms that making an object still has relevance, even in this moment where it seems like it might be a secondary consideration.

03 'The Imagist and the Materialist', 2018, installation view, COMA Gallery, Sydney, photograph Andrew Butler

04 Day painting #1, 2018, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 224 x 152 cm

05 Sky Painting #4 (evening), 2018, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 185 x 130 cm



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Is there a correlation between the different places you've lived and the work you've made while living there? How influenced are you by your changing external environment?

My nature is to be pretty nomadic. After university I went to London to do the second part of my masters at the Royal College. I came back to New Zealand for a year or two, was flipping between Germany and Korea for different residencies. I would do six months overseas, then six months in New Zealand. New Zealand feels quite suffocating sometimes in terms of discourse, and Australia is certainly more democratised, as is the United States and Germany. Anything can go, there's a coming together of different people and voices, sometimes in conflict. As to whether they influence me? For sure, that's why I move. The highly decorative 'baroqueness' of Vienna; the gold and the materials that look like fabric but are in fact paint, and the dominance of the architecture have all been influences. Or I'll be scanning outside under a certain sky changing from city to city – the top of a warehouse in Bushwick is quite different from a Tuscan sky. It can be a cliché but the Tuscan sky has a beautiful dramatic warmth.

How do you sustain a studio practice between places?

I do need one permanent studio, and Vienna has been that for the last few years, with good infrastructure and a studio assistant. I have an intense, four-month working period [in Vienna] coming up; there are no weekends. I like working with that kind of intensity. And I have scanners in different parts of the world, with friends. I can be visiting people and still doing my work.

You were in Australia while doing your PhD ...

I wrote part of that paper on decentralised networks relating to the idea of 'transaction' and exchangeability in hybridised media, as well as a group of Australian painters with their primary material still in

the digital. I think I was on the periphery of that but ... I am trying to avoid digital more and more. It's more a case of digital material passing through.

There's an awareness that we are in a 'post post' era for internet art, but there's these fetishistic hashtags like #raisedontheinternet and other more mass-cultural framings which sit contra. How do you distinguish yourself from the dated term 'post-internet'?

I've written about changes in practice where people were previously dealing with digital tools [as a] virtual visualisation; it was about the drawing act as materialised with or through software. I come from a dual legacy, so my generation had a digital experience growing up. But I was also drawing and studied printmaking and painting. I have an attachment to the material, physical process. I think in the last three years 'post-internet' kind of died its death, and so artists who were in that digital worm-hole like Jon Rafman have done it properly, have gone all the way down (although he is not a painter). It's fascinating because it was so short-lived. Art history doesn't usually move that quickly. ■

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06 *New Representation #11*, 2016, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 180 x 135 cm

07 *Big Node #30*, 2016, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 120 x 90 cm

08 *Big Node #42*, 2016, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 40 x 30 cm

Courtesy the artist, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland, COMA Gallery, Sydney, Bartley + Company Art, Wellington, Yavuz Gallery, Singapore, Luis De Jesus Los Angeles and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery / London and Berlin