

## **messmates**

'Body' is the common collective noun for a group of artworks made together, shown together. Employed in this way, it refers to a group of discrete if related entities. It corresponds to Western medical conceptions of the body as a collection of organs that co-operate, yet remain distinct from one another. This way of understanding a body is a means towards order and control. It does not account for the body as such, as something multitudinous, swirling, ineffable. Full of exchanges and changes, and porous, the body is not really a whole at all, and far from a neat collection of labelled parts.

Donna Haraway uses the term *messmates* to refer to the 90 percent of cell matter in the human body that is 'filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such', as distinct from the other 10 percent that actually contains a person's genome, the part we seem most invested in as an idea of what we are constituted of.<sup>i</sup> Messmate has other meanings too: in a naval context, it refers to the fellow sailors with whom one shares accommodation; in south-eastern Australia it is another name for *Eucalyptus obliqua*, a stringybark common to the region, in reference to its tendency to grow among other species. At the centre of all these meanings are ideas of community and exchange, or as Haraway puts it, *becoming with*. This idea seeks to do away with hierarchies as givens, embracing an ethic of symbiosis.

Jahnne Pasco-White has chosen *messmates* as the title for this exhibition. It constitutes a body of work, but one that doesn't engage with the aforementioned idea of discrete entities. There is painting here rather than paintings, swathes and skins that overlap and connect, give and take. Like a complex body, the painting here is not strictly constituted: there is an intermingling of fabrics both natural and synthetic, of drawing, dry and wet application of pigment, of language and cuts, as well as the fog of Jahnne's breath, and her skin cells, oils and sweat no doubt, from working in an uninsulated summer studio.

Yasuo Yamamoto, a maker of traditional Japanese soy sauce, has said of his craft 'I don't make the soy sauce. The microorganisms make it. I just create an environment where they can thrive.'<sup>ii</sup> This process of production is a process of digestion. The waste of one organism is the treasure of another. This sort of give-and-take has become an ethos for Jahnne's processes – the creation of a condition under which the work emerges, the artist facilitating the exchange. Just as Yamamoto removes the sauce and adds fresh soybeans, water and salt to his barrels, occasionally Jahnne, when she feels a work becoming too full, will cut a large section out and in that space, introduce fresh canvas to feed the painting. The excised parts sometimes become works in their own right, or reappear in another part of the work. This feeding and proliferation mirrors the fermentation process; the painting has a sort of 'mother', like vinegar. The paintings are fed, they digest and excrete.

This connection to an idea of mother is not incidental; the first time I visited Jahnne in the studio to see this work, we had both quite recently become mothers. As such I cannot help but read Jahnne's language of abstraction through this lens. I question the fact that my mind leapt to the phrase 'I cannot help', as though I wish I could; I think I have embodied an idea that mothers and art don't mix, that art about motherhood is boring. This idea is entrenched in the artistic canon, though there are occasional points of rupture. It ought to be dismissed, not simply on principle, but because the way a mother connects to her creativity is particular and interesting; in Jahnne's case, working in the realm of large-scale painterly abstraction as a mother refreshes the possibilities of that field. Abstract painting has long claimed to scud along before the forces of nature, manifesting in the ejaculations of a Pollock or the mystical reverie of a Rothko. Here the associations are not heroic or grandiose, but intimate and generous. The idea of 'all-overness' that has enjoyed a place in the vernacular of abstract painting since Greenberg meets a different idea of the body here, one that is echoed in Rachel Cusk's account of her living space during her daughter's toddlerhood: 'Unidentifiable matter describes paths, like the trail of a snail, over walls and surfaces. The room has acquired a skin, a crust of dried milk upon which old food sits like a sort of eczema. The kitchen is pollinated with every substance with which my daughter comes

into contact: mess spreads like a force of nature, unstoppable.<sup>iii</sup>

Jahnne's palette is fleshy, venous, digestive. There is no focal point, no centrepiece, but there are heteronomous qualities, moments of density and lightness. The limited wall space in the studio means that as this body of work has come into being the sections have hung in layers, the whole system never able to be beheld at once, only wandered around inside of.

I have observed and admired for years the way that Jahnne puts paintings together. Sometimes the marks she makes seem simple, offhand, each with its own character. A surface can seem like a material analogue for the energy of an animated argument with an old friend. When I think back to the first exhibition I saw of Jahnne's in 2015, the works were close together in the space, conversing and wanting to touch. I think they have always been trying to connect, seeking one another the way trees seek one another's roots to form a network and exchange nutrients. The *Messmates* paintings revel in their togetherness, finishing one another's sentences and producing a sense of wholeness between them that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Helen Johnson

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<sup>i</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 3

<sup>ii</sup> Interviewed as part of *Salt Fat Acid Heat*, episode two: 'Salt', 2019

<sup>iii</sup> Rachel Cusk – *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, London: Faber & Faber, 2008, p. 144