



Juan Ford

STORY ASHLEY CRAWFORD

RENOWNED AS A painter of meticulously rendered landscape-based works and borderline hyper-realist portraiture, Juan Ford appears to have 'suddenly' expanded his oeuvre to include powerfully conceived and executed installations and sculptures. This is, of course, somewhat inaccurate. Since his first solo exhibition in 1998, Ford's work has almost always been an amalgam of various forms of creativity. His skill with the three-dimensional became abundantly apparent in such works as his 'Anamorphic' series of 2006 in which everything from a toilet brush to a car exhaust muffler was used in spookily reflective pieces that, via tricks of reflection, created 'shadows' of a human skull, Duchamp's urinal and other 'fictions'.

But then Ford doesn't have the average past of a visual artist. With work in electronic engineering predating his art practice, he is a natural born tinkerer, and three-dimensional works have always floated alongside his painting. His depictions of landscape and flora garnered numerous awards and he scored a number of high-profile residencies, which afforded him stints in New York and Rome. But Ford has always been determined not to be easily categorised.

"I have this voice within me saying to all 'do not try to understand me, pigeonhole me at your peril, I will not be characterised'," Ford says. "I feel as if I'm always forming complex and complicated structures, then inverting them at the next turn."

He could all too easily have bided his time executing easily digestible figurative imagery, but has constantly sought to stretch and even pulverise both his own and his audiences' expectations. Increasingly, he is delving into experimental forms of sculpture and installation while maintaining his central themes of concern for environmental degradation and humanity's role in destroying its own environs.

Ford's "wrapped" paintings smash together three essentially conservative elements: figuration, botanical illustration and Australian landscape. "The 'paint poured on flora' paintings are about the absurdity of trying to represent a landscape in painting – i.e. gazing



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at a painting in a gallery is *nothing* like actually being in a landscape, a massive disconnect," Ford says.

Your giant sculpture *Vertigo* (2012), for the satellite program of Manifesta 9, 2012, in Belgium, utilised an array of found materials and it seems that recycling materials is becoming an increasing part of your approach.

That is accurate. I found that dedicating myself to only painting for a few years led to me being pigeonholed as a painter. I suppose that's fair enough, but it's not how I see myself. While painting is a substantial part of my practice, it is but a medium, and the artist uses a medium as a conduit. When the medium is altered, one's intentions metamorphose, and very different work results. This is a process that I find fascinating; it keeps the mind sharp, the senses alert, and makes everything fresh again.

My paintings have used all manner of building materials in their pictorial inception and, really, while it's only a small step to make work with said materials instead of oil paint, the results greatly differ. There's also something else at play: I have found that in being labelled a 'painter', people tended to treat me as such, and that can have some undesirable outcomes. Some people in art still mistrust realist painting, for understandable historical reasons as well as irrational ones. This is a way for me to assert that there are no rules, that these are just mediums we are talking about; that painting, video, performance, sculpture, land art and so on should be treated equally as art, and judged on their individual merits. The stratification of art by media is stupid, something I have no time for. I wish to keep the informed viewer *en gard*.

There will be plenty more work like this to come.

***Vertigo* clearly references a swimming pool diving board but lacking water to leap into – is this a metaphor for environmental Armageddon?**

Yes, it could be read as such, but then I always make work that opens itself to multiple interpretations. I want to create artworks that can

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continue to speak for themselves long after I'm gone. The satellite program for Manifesta [the European Biennial of Contemporary Art] I was involved in dealt mostly with issues of hybridity and migration, and I responded in such a way that not only spoke to the vertiginous experience of the new migrant (high up on a rickety diving tower, poised to perform the seemingly impossible), but also allowed for more of my usual subject matter to be embodied within.

So it's a fair reference, but it's good also to understand how the work progressed.

In your *Sub 12* installation from last year you included a painting of a man rolling a massive boulder. Was this a reference to the myth of Sisyphus ceaselessly rolling a rock up a mountain?

It is. The outcome for Sisyphus is something everyone can relate to. Yet there's a second layer of meaning there as well, and it's a bit art-nerdy: the rock is painted very loosely, with slathered-on, splattered paint mixed with mediums and solvent. It was great fun, and a welcome release from the usual focus of my work. I wanted to try and combine such a liberal approach with highly focused realism, and see what might happen. Thus it's also a tale of the internal struggle with the nature of the medium – the paint wants desperately to spill free, and my will wishes to control it.

The same show featured constructions made from rusted metal, found timber, cardboard, screws and various found materials with decidedly abstract results – is this indicative of where the work is heading? Was Rosalie Gascoigne an influence at all here?

I suppose I thought about her work a bit but, once again, I wished to generate work out of what was dumped out the back of The Substation [arts centre]. I didn't really have anyone in mind, but rather intended to reflect some of the content of the painting in a completely different medium. Thus I spelt out 'ETERNITY' using garbage and industrial offcuts, but so that it could only be read anamorphically.

Again, with the huge installation *Lord of the Canopy* (2012), in which you reconstructed a massive eucalyptus tree inside the





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Bendigo Visual Arts Centre space, you concentrate more on installation than painting. Are there plans for more works of this nature? I assume this is a reference to rampant logging policies?

Yes, that’s part of what it’s about. In my paintings, I try to express the notion that the age of the Anthropocene is only briefly allowable by, and subject to, the immense natural forces that dwarf ours. We’re unbelievably arrogant to think as a species that we have all control over this dominion. We don’t.

So, again, it’s expressed in another medium, it’s an absurd construct: a ‘tree’ reconstructed flat, modified and crammed in to fit the dimensions of the gallery space. It’s some analogue of how I understand our interventions with the natural environment. It’s a strange and preposterous monstrosity, yet curiously natural as well. We treat the environment as if we are separate to it, when really we are a product of it. This is the absurdity at the heart of many of the works.

There is a giant anamorphic painting on the wall, which corrects itself in the mirrored possum ring at the base of the tree. All you can see in the painting are two huge eyes, darkly surveying the scene, but then it resolves itself in the ring.

The figures in your paintings are often cloaked in white linen, as though part of a priesthood or cult – is that a fair reading?

Perhaps. It’s a strange shamanic figure, another self I carry within. Perhaps people respond well to these because they carry such a

being in them too. He’s our wild side, that which cannot be tied down and rationalised.

In *Ultrapilgrim* (2012) the central figure carries a bulging black rubbish bag. Is this referencing human blindness towards the environment or is it about forced nomadism?

This is a painting about life’s journey. It’s also about endless migrations, deprivations, thoughts of a time when we were molded by starvation, hardship and physical struggle; about how many still live this way. ■

Juan Ford is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney; and Diane Tanzer gallery + projects, Melbourne.

www.sullivanstrumpf.com
www.dianetanzergallery.net.au

EXHIBITION

Art Basel, Hong Kong, 23 to 26 May, with Diane Tanzer gallery + projects

- 01 *The Reorientalist*, 2013, oil on linen, 122 x 183cm
- 02 *Circular Logic*, 2013, oil on linen, 107 x 92cm
- 03 *Redeemer*, 2013, oil on linen, 51 x 41cm
- 04 *Disobey Yourself*, 2013, oil on linen, 91 x 71cm
- 05 *Nothing Rhymes with Orange*, 2010, oil on linen, 76 x 61cm
- 06 *The Revolution will not be Painted*, 2011, oil on linen, 51 x 40.5cm
- 07 *Entwine & Implode*, 2013, oil on linen, 91 x 71cm
- 08 *Ultrapilgrim*, 2011, oil on linen, 167.5 x 213.5cm

Courtesy the artist, dianne tanzer gallery + projects, Melbourne; and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney