



## *The Taste of River Water*

There was a time when we would've thought nothing about bending to drink directly from the river's edge, never questioning the sources purity, nor musing about what possible role we might have in any downstream contamination. Even now this image in my mind is about pleasure and reward, sustenance and wholeness. There is something of a Famous Five naivety about it really... nature as self-cleansing provider.

Recent revelations have rocked New Zealand – a country with the epitome of a self-congratulatory “clean green” promotion – rather the quality of its river water is amongst the most polluted, defiled by cattle, phosphates and chemical run off. New Zealand's magnificent waterways are in fact conduits of a poisonous cocktail that threatens immediate livelihoods whilst eroding the long-held fictions we create about ourselves as guardians of a respectful balanced ecology.

Jenny Topfer's paintings have long been hostage to the environment. There are various sites she has chosen for her life that inform, indeed beget, her response to contour and scale, to colour and composition - sites that are shaped by weather and geology. Jenny is a sensitive traveller across that ground and when walking with her, I'm most mindful of the hot tea that awaits me at the end of the hike, whilst she, Rilka and Griff are deeply committed to the trail, the pinecone chasing and the adversity of the landscape. For Jenny there is pleasure and reward, a sustenance in the landscape, but there is also a reflective opportunity that is delivered by time in the landscape that I suspect comes more easily than in the studio.

If I think back to my earliest visits with Jenny in her studio, I could feel that tribulation. One might assume that it is confidence and bravura that attracts you to a painter's work but seldom are the seductions of flourish and assurance that keep you looking, what makes you feel beyond the eyes.

When I look now at Jenny's new works, I don't sense any quietening, any happy resolution in the works. What I sense is that she has faith in the contest if not in the result and her capacity to be increasingly clear and honest about this dispute is compelling to me. She makes paintings that demonstrate exertion and skirmish, some reach a version of détente, but look closely and that apparently hushed tonal restraint camouflages a turbulence and exertion that gives the paintings their gloriously stubborn character, their buoyancy and their thickness of white.

There have always been preparatory gestures that Jenny lays down - a mapping process of sorts - a way to measure the extent of the linen and the scope of her own gesture. Often there are traces of calligraphy, visible connections to language, more particularly to poetry. Jenny has long been loyal to language, enjoyed its shape and cadence, been convinced by its structural regimes and its widely agreed communicative power. Painting on the other hand can seem wilfully disobedient. The material has an insubordinate mind of its own. If it's too compliant it can quickly lose traction. There is an in-built resistance to the relationship between toothy linen, oil paint and a brush. It's a menage-a-trois that adds even more liability.

These looping gestures can at times push through to the surface but by that stage their lifeline to language has been tested, overcome by the intrinsic needs of (the) painting. The material and the process demand a different kind of expression, one whose vocabulary requests constant reinvention, one whose apparently familiar cadence and voice raise doubt, rather than comfort at every turn.

Strangely though, it is this uncertainty that Jenny invites. Robert Hughes, on one of those occasions when he was completely correct said “the greater the artist, the greater the doubt. Perfect confidence is granted to the less talented as a consolation prize”.

*Auch ohne Sprache (II)*, 2020  
oil and wax pigment stick on linen  
84 x 84 cm



*A Far Sea Moves In My Ear (I)*, 2020

oil and wax pigment stick on linen

153 x 153 cm



In Cate Kennedy's poem *The Taste of River Water*, from which Jenny has taken the title for the exhibition and the major diptych in this exhibition, there is a stanza that I sense, describes painting, or more particularly, the conditions that beginning a painting might feel like...

*I have no answers, and nothing here could care less.  
It is so delicate, and so calmly relentless,  
this implacable current,  
exposing the stiff swollen hinges of our longing.*

Nothing and everything at stake all at once. The tools of making don't seem suited to our desires and needs. However if Cate Kennedy's first stanza makes evident the difficulty in initiating this unlikely action, then the last stanza might point to what it feels like to conclude a painting. Gratefully there is a glimmer of satisfaction in this anticipated state...

*And here we stand, and here's the miracle of it  
We're somehow still thirsty,  
braced dogged in the current  
rooted in mud and leaves  
still testing the hope of weightlessness*

In my mind's eye I see Jenny, Rilka and Griff, braced, "dogged" (excuse the unintentional pun), rooted in mud and leaves, testing the hope of weightlessness. Because to go back and drink from the river, to attempt to quench the unquenchable is the very stuff of painting... and poetry of course.

Andrew Jensen



previous page. *The Taste Of River Water*, 2020  
oil and wax pigment stick on linen  
two panels. 183 x 183 cm each

