

A poured, viscous mix of enamel and oil paint dominates the ground of Stephen Bush's recent paintings, replacing the landscapes prevalent in his earlier works. Freed from the constraints of representation when first applied, the shiny paint finds its own shapes and layers, which ripple, pool and melt across the canvas. The materiality and colour of the paint stand in for the mountains, plains and valleys that in previous works recalled the nineteenth-century New World landscapes of Australia and America. In common with many artists of his generation, Bush was troubled by history, both the history of painting and of such archetypes as the traveller, explorer, colonist and artist, all of whom appeared in his work. A remnant of these interests can be found in the large scale in which he continues to work and the swirling vortexes of paint that recall the extreme atmospherics of some early nineteenth-century Romantic sublime and picturesque painting.

While Bush has painted entire series in monochrome red or grey, he now revels in intense, even lurid colour, deliberately aiming for shocking effects and clashing tones that saturate the retina. Working over the strata of poured and layered abstract paint, he mines images that appear to him in the pooled and layered forms, working them up into representational figures, architecture and objects. This can lead to the surreal juxtaposition of a hydro-electric dam, a hovering goat's head and the castle and forests in *I am still what I meant to be* (2009), none of which are scaled in relation to each other. These disparate elements seem to emerge from a psychedelic subconscious, clashing in the picture like Bush's staged conflict of abstraction and representation. While the artist has suggested that a form of automatism is at work when he develops a new painting, the recurring images across paintings and series suggest that they are more consciously selected.

Bush's imagery samples 1970s alpine calendars and posters, photographs of buildings that are exemplars of progressive industrial modernity, and the folksy evangelism of American blues and gospel songs that become painting titles such as *Shout on the hills of glory* (2008) and *Light in the valley* (2008). He has also frequently depicted log cabins and other vernacular timber buildings, wood-burning stoves and the figures of beekeepers and welders. While some of these motifs, such as the hovering stoves and welding men, are more recent, others have appeared over many years, including the decaying huts and the apiarists attending to beehives. The welder and beekeeper are always covered in protective clothing to minimize the risk inherent in their work – intently focused on their tasks, they could be a stand-in for the artist himself, the labour and discipline of painting and the risky business of undertaking exhibitions.

There is a distinctive beauty to Bush's paintings; his technical virtuosity allows a freewheeling merging of painterly incident, expressive abstraction and imagery derived from both art history and more recent pop sources. His vertiginous kitsch sublime and shuddering juxtapositions, and a sense that figures and objects may be re-engulfed by the matrix from which they have emerged, means that this beauty is as dangerous as it is unexpected. - Wayne Tunnicliffe



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1. *I am still what I meant to be*, 2009
Oil and enamel on linen
200 x 310 cm

2. *Salvation Jane*, 2010
Oil and enamel on linen
200 x 310 cm

3. *Shout on the hills of glory*, 2008
Oil and enamel on linen
200 x 310 cm

4. *Tupelo*, 2009
Oil and enamel on linen
183 x 183 cm



4.