

Friday 1 November, 2024.
Bidjigal & Gadigal Country
Sydney

Purple. At the moment, I have an overwhelming sense of purpleness. Jacarandas are blossoming, so that when I walk to work in the mornings, I pass beneath their branches and walk upon their flowers. Fallen flowers carpet the streets, alleyways and pavements, softening the hard edges of everything. The ubiquity of purple, purple everywhere. I stare and stare... trees with purple flowers instead of leaves. Trees dropping petals from bare wood, unabashed. In my mind, Stella Corkery's *Drummer Leg* (2024) is a purple painting.

Painting as a decompartmentalised space

Every painted form has the particularity and timbre of an utterance. So says Montreal-based authoress Mimi Haddam, who proposes that painting is a language that aligns with sensation—“every form is a vibrant voice.”¹ There is an acute specificity at play, in each part of a painting. For Haddam, the image shares with the voice an energy that escapes capture. Haddam describes a process of “listening to pictorial material,” so that a painting is “caught by a listening eye,” a hybrid organ which captures the sensory world and multiplies the possibilities of form. What is required, is a “sharpening” of listening skills, so that one can witness “intangible and substantial exceedance, a subtle, traversed and traversing trace.” Perhaps it is with my listening eye that I contemplate *Drummer Leg* and feel the colour purple. According to Haddam, painting is a decompartmentalised space, one characterised by a specific resonance, it evades conceptual formulae and allows prescience to operate.

The exhibition of a single work

In 1983, the One Picture Gallery opened in the Russian city of Penza.² As part of a 1986 interview, director Valery Sazonov described how a single canvas, selected from a Soviet museum, is exhibited for several months, in a customised, nineteenth-century building. The rationale for the initiative, explained Sazonov, is that large exhibitions with many artworks on display, can be overwhelming, “The exhibits flash past like the countryside seen from the window of an express train.”

By contrast, “The exhibition of a single work produces a greater emotional impact on the visitor.”³ The One Picture Gallery allows visitors to study and experience one work in a relaxed way.

Those who wish to visit the gallery must purchase their tickets in advance, 35 people can attend at a time. Guests are asked to leave their coats in a cloak room and from there they are led to the picture room, where they can sit in casually arranged, comfortable armchairs. A restful atmosphere has been created. Once everyone is seated, the lights are turned off. To prepare visitors to appreciate the artwork, a slideshow and audio soundtrack provides a certain amount of information. Five to 50 slides draw attention to specific areas of a painting, or introduce visitors to other works by the artist. The accompanying audio, scripted by an art-writer and produced in a radio-studio, is played. The recorded commentary is designed “to convey to the viewer a sense of the atmosphere of what the picture is about, the flavour of the period in which it was painted and the personality of the artist.” Sazonov describes the experience as “a form of theatre,” one taking conventions from different art forms. Once the audio-programme has finished, the screen is raised, the footlights are turned on, a custom-made curtain (itself a commissioned work of art) slowly opens and visitors can see the painting. The artwork can then be examined carefully without a commentary, whilst hearing a specially selected musical accompaniment, one that creates a “suitable atmosphere.” The session lasts 40 minutes.

According to Sazonov, the initiative is aimed at members of the local population rather than visitors from out of town. The idea is to gradually introduce locals to outstanding works of art. “The level of presentation is high enough to satisfy art lovers while remaining comprehensible to the uninitiated.”⁴ The format of the gallery means that it gets regular visitors and many repeated visits. At the time of Sazonov's interview, records show that many of the visitors were students and teachers, and half workers from industrial enterprises. Historically, the gallery has been popular with the rural population,

1 — Mimi Haddam, (trans. Oana Avasilichioaei) “Listening to Pictorial Material,” *esse*, issue 102 - (Re)seeing Painting, Spring / Summer 2021, 60.

2 — Valery Petrovich Sazonov, “The One Picture Gallery” In Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Grenberg and Sandy Nairne, *Thinking About Exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 1996, 211-217.

3 — *Ibid.*, 211.

they accounted for one-fifth of visitors over a six-month period. This essay is inspired by the cultural programme Sazonov describes industrial workers designing for themselves, one that might include a circus, a show, seeing the sights, or experiencing an art gallery with one picture on display at a time. In my case, the artwork in question is Corkery's *Drummer Leg*.

Between stretching and falling

Drummer Leg is a large-scale painting, it is more than human height and extra-long, stretching across one wall like a cinema screen. There is a strong sense of latitude, or sideways travel. In her solo presentation *When E Met C* at Michael Lett 3 East St, it was simply hung from nails. She is tight up top, but at the bottom she lets it all hang loose. The lower edge of the painting brushes the floor like a long-length skirt. She sits upon the ground, in the same space as her viewers, brazenly breaching the gap between wall and floor, as if getting up to walk away. This form of display makes the painting object-like, it has a weightiness, there is a tension between stretching and falling, letting gravity do the work. Why do I refer to this painting as a 'she'?

The painting feels crumply, like it has been folded up, then unfurled. What has been concealed is now revealed. There is a sense of release and display after a period of reticence. I can make out a horizon line and sections, though as soon as I think I see one, everything melts together again... It is as though Corkery has softened the hard edges of things. My eyes sort-of scuttle around and the word that comes to mind is *indiscernibility*. I remember that for theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari *indiscernibility* was one of "three virtues" together with "imperceptibility" and "impersonality."⁵ They posited *indiscernibility* as relating to proximity, something occurring "at the level of relationships." Perhaps appearing here, is what they would refer to as becoming:

If becoming is a block... it is because it constitutes a zone of proximity and *indiscernibility*, a no-man's land, a non-localizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other...⁶

Gosh, why am I bringing in these two old queens? Maybe because I feel like they capture this idea of evasive painted features, different elements being swept up together and contaminating each other in a perpetual exchange or feedback loop. Like Haddam's thesis of painting as decompartmentalised space, things, or stuff catch the eye before it gets washed away again. I can't really focus,

though when I can, it's delicious.

An image can emerge just as representation fails.⁷ In the centre of the canvas, cymbals shimmer lilac-white. I spy the drummer's leg. Is she wearing one-legged pants? Is she drumming in a bikini, or in bloomers? She is shod in a green shoe. Fragments of painted lines make me think of musical notation, of a score. There are six, grey-black circles, like hits with the foot-pedal on a bass drum. They remind me of finger holes on a recorder or a clarinet. Drumstick hits on animal skin appear as bright yellow cones with red, emanating lines of force. In the top centre of the painting, I can make out the faint form of a bass clef. Then I think about dynamic markings on sheet music, crescendo and decrescendo. The funny thing is, *Drummer Leg* is not really purple, and it's not really mauve, it's actually pink. Mostly a washy pink and peach, there is a blurry application of paint and within it, mysterious forms. Sound waves, vibrations, rippling, wavering, resonating... there are even eye and ear forms receiving them. There is a contrast between watery washes and dry-brushed motifs. Orange-red sound-waves; large, built-up wedges of purple-ish smudges; expansive, repeated curves in red; dark orifices or pupils.

*Are you a bear? Or are you a wolf?*⁸

Haddam's thesis of listening to pictorial material is apt because Corkery herself is a musician as well as a painter, she is in fact, a drummer and has been since the time she spent living in Ōtepoti Dunedin in the 1980s. The twin concerns of music and visual arts are woven tightly into her very being, so that it is difficult to separate one from the other. It goes without saying, but many would consider that Dunedin in the 1980s is to music what Paris was to painting in the 1910s. Corkery worked as an administrator at The Chippendale House Arts Collective with Flying Nun Records artists David Kilgour and Michael Morley.⁹ She later set up house on Grey Street in Port Chalmers with Morley and Rachel Shearer and it was here that The Dead C was formed, and Xpressway records was created. Corkery played drums with Morley, Shearer and Debbie Hinden in her first band, Angelhead. And when she found her way to Tāmaki in the 1990s her band Queen Meanie Puss (QMP) had releases on Xpressway, Flying Nun and Siltbreeze. When QMP eventually came to an end, Corkery went on to co-form experimental noise band White Saucer and Fake Purr, one of the burgeoning Riot Grrrl bands to come out of Aotearoa. Apologies for the hagiography, but the point is, it's highly likely the drummer's leg is that of the painter herself.

4 — Ibid., 216.

5 — Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. London: Continuum, 2008. 258.

6 — Ibid., 323-324.

7 — Haddam, 60.

8 — "Bear Wolf" is a track on Fake Purr's self-released 7" EP Nazi Fuck Wit which was released in 2000.

9 — Stella Corkery, email communication with the author, October 25, 2024.



Stella Corkery
Drummer Leg
2024

Fake Purr is also fundamental to the genesis of *Drummer Leg*. Band members Stephanie Cook, Brenda Dwayne, Brigid Raine, together with Corkery, were invited to support Bikini Kill when they played in Tāmaki in 2023. The gig necessitated serious practising, which took place in Corkery’s Glen Eden basement studio in the summer prior. The physical and psychic residues of re-learning songs originally composed and performed twenty-two years earlier lingered in the room afterwards. The space had been reorganized to accommodate three additional people plus their equipment. When painting *Drummer Leg*, cables, microphones, amplifiers and drums were yet to be packed down and stored. Corkery reflected “In making this painting it was as if I had cleared a pathway towards visualizing feminine-noise. I felt like I had nailed the painting before I began, the vibe was already in the room.”¹⁰

*If I had a band it wouldn’t sound like anything at all, it would just sound like air just air and the earth around me.*¹¹

Corkery’s objective in painting *Drummer Leg* was to somehow capture the experience of attending a riot grrrl gig, thinking back to her own experience playing these in the 1990s and then in her more recent Fake Purr reunion shows. Of paramount importance was pulling in and including the audience so that the painting echoed the symbiotic relationship between them and the musicians. At the forefront of the artist’s mind were post-riot girrl bands from the 1990s, those who sustained politics and kept the energy alive. Many of these groups shifted the style from folk and rock-like performances with electronic components. Both Crack War We Are Rock and Numbers left Corkery with a strong impression of melding on-stage performances with electronic beats and energised audiences. Lo-fi video clips can still be found on YouTube, there is one in which a hyper-enthusiastic audience responds to the driving intensity of CrackWAR’s track ‘Hooker Leg.’ There is also a recording of a Numbers performance at a house party in which the manic, fast beats and driving synth-waves caused the dancing audience members to disrobe. The idea is that *Drummer Leg* might capture what a room turns into during such a performance or what Corkery refers to as “an intense dance situation.”¹² The painting resembles the bizarre theatrical form of Sazonov’s One Picture Gallery in that it also takes conventions from different art forms, from performance, music, dance.

Drummer Leg instantiates multiple herstories in music and art. Corkery invokes the musicians of CrackWar, Numbers, Odwalla88, Julie Ruin, together with artists Carolee Schneemann, Maria Lassnig, Jutta Koether, Eliza Douglas, and Monika Baer. Embedded in the crumpled canvas surface are responses to questions such as: who gets to make noise? Is there a way out of the patri-lineage of noise music? How might more marginalised figures get recognition? How do you put sound into a painting? What is the sound of the colour purple? How does painting mimic the shaking of a piece of percussion?

What happens when sounds meet each other? When E meets C? There are collisions of various kinds. I guess drumming and perhaps even painting are manifestations of little collisions, in other words, touch. As Corkery explains:

Throughout the ‘90s and the 2000s I would have called my drumming free noise or free drumming. Nowadays, my playing has become increasingly self aware—for example a little less noise and more touch, developing a heightened awareness of the haptic potentials of the instrument. This has developed through my painting methods.¹³

When one thing hits or touches something else, both change and move on. This brings me back to Haddam’s thesis of listening to pictorial material, a project closely linked to Corkery’s *Drummer Leg*. For Haddam “Materiality shifts from tonality to tonality, from granulation to granulation, from texture to texture.”¹⁴ Thinking of the painting as materiality, as “the mirror of sound and an image of noise.” By linking materiality to sensation, it can be “distorting, alive and transformative” taking place “at each impulse of self-propulsion.” At each push of the kick-pedal. At each dab of the rag. At each touch of the brush. Thinking about the ambiguity in Corkery’s canvas, I recall Haddam’s words: “In places where the image is enigmatic, resonance is all the more audible. It awakens echoes in the world it abandons, it summons future subtleties.”¹⁵

Victoria Wynne-Jones is an art writer, curator and researcher based on Bidjigal & Gadigal Country.

10 — Corkery, email communication with the author, October 11, 2024.

11 — This cited poem has no title and is printed on a fold out poster insert from Odwalla88’s album *Earth Flirt* on OOGA BOOGA records, from 2015.

12 — Corkery, personal conversation with the author, October 3, 2024.

13 — Stella Corkery, “Questions for Stella Corkery” *Blot*, Issue 1: The Manifesto, September 2022, <https://www.blot.online/journal/1/questions-for-stella-corkery/>

14 — Haddam, *ibid.*, 60.

15 — *Ibid.*, 61.

First published 2024
by Michael Lett Publishing
Text © Victoria Wynne-Jones
All photography © Sam Hartnett
Artworks © Stella Corkery
Edited by Michael Lett
All rights reserved

No part of this publication may
be reproduced in any form without
permission in writing from the above
publisher and copyright holders

Designed by Inhouse

Typeset in Helvetica Neue Text

ISBN 978-1-99-117278-5