

Text by Julian Bell

Nick Bodimeade seems incapable of producing art that's less than handsomely made. Whatever he brings back from the paint shop to the studio, he flatters. He pits his oranges and pinks, his prussian blues and naples yellows against one another like vegetables chosen for a salad, accentuating the flavour of each. This is an oil painter with a relish for oiliness, too: 'succulent' is a word that viewers often reach for. The brushloads hit the canvas with a robust and dextrous swipe. It is not just the calligraphy of the paintings that breathes assurance, but their overall loading – the way that weights have been spread about the canvas's rectangle. Bodimeade's creations are immensely solid, even when he scrapes back his own walls of pigment to reach for firmer ground beneath. Those revisions do not take away from his status as a natural construction man, an artist for whom building and painting are one.

All of which sets something of a problem, if we ask what this art is about. Walls have no need for themes. Is any such question in order, in fact? 'What you see is what you see' was the conversation-stopping creed of Frank Stella, the New York abstractionist whom Bodimeade cites as one of his crucial reference points. Abstraction was Bodimeade's own mode, till recent years. But his current turn towards figurative imagery reveals concerns that were implicit in the big upright ovals he painted before. An artist that also mattered to him was Howard Hodgkin, who has fashioned his pictures as loaded receptacles for yearning, catering to the aching lust of the eyes. Bodimeade's ovals had been of this nature – formats that could absorb and answer the viewer's own bodily awareness. Now, picturing spaces that bodies themselves might occupy, he complicates the whole issue of what he calls 'desirous looking'.

Typically, his procedure is to latch onto the pattern of information that some passage of a photo provides. The excerpt tugs at his visual appetites, and he wants to work out how. To rebuild the image is also to investigate it. Sometimes the appeal it contains is very direct – a series preceding the present show focused on the friendly concavity of an armchair in the same way that Chardin or Cézanne sought satisfaction in the convexities of vessels. But the present body of work began, effectively, with the very different subject of rooftops in Seville. The arrays that an ancient urban warren presented, seen from on high, jump and shuttle the attention – as if one were scanning possibilities on a chess board – rather than absorbing it. It becomes an issue of how the dwellings pack the canvas, as they interlock: what they eye desires, it emerges, is to actively reason things out.

After Seville, Bodimeade was in New Zealand. From the dense, history-laden clutter of old Europe to the uniquely raw and open, to a pair of islands only a few centuries inhabited by anyone. He describes how he was startled, driving about the New Zealand landscape with a camera and sketchbook to hand, to glance up at a steep hillside of grazing cattle and find shot back at him just the same kind of stimulus that had previously come from the view from his inner-city eerie. Here too was a replete, glutted array, created by group activity. The pictures he has made of this visual incident bring out further complication: are these images purely of concrete, chequerboard order, or are they also meant to evoke a certain light in a certain place?

A unique light and a local magic are what so much landscape painting has yearned after, from Claude Lorrain to Monet. Against that, there is again Cézanne with his claim that 'for the painter, light does not exist' and that structure alone must be the artist's proper object of enquiry – a lesson heeded by Cubist landscapes, for instance. At the end, what the view will present you with is the look of your own mind. It turns out that in his trip to the world's other end, Bodimeade was willing

to be enraptured, but that he fully expected to meet up with his own self-consciousness. He would be a tourist and a newcomer, imposing his unasked-for reasonings on this novel terrain. But as such, he might in a sense be at one with New Zealanders themselves – at least, with the settlers of South Island.

And thus, much of the imagery Bodimeade brought back from his voyage has turned on intrusion. Hikers pick out their way over a glacier, detached silhouettes that cast no shadow on its white. The gaze slithers and glances off the stuff of the land, as the car hurtles on past. Copses frame a view and hide the viewer, making of him a spy. Yet what he is looking at is a settlement, a farmstead, an occupation of the land. Isn't this the normal business of humans all over the planet, to plant ourselves down and construct? The anonymous operative in the protective suit who emerges from his truck onto the open road – an industrial intervener in the environment – could be Everyman. Building is what we are bound to, wherever we are, and in his most lyrical canvasses, Bodimeade exults in the gladdening geometry of roof-frames going up.

The journey that these images reflect is ongoing. This is an art that is deepening its game.