

The Promise . . . and the Fall.

Michael Greaves

2022





Michael Greaves – The Promise . . . and the Fall

Pennie Hunt

We sit huddled in front of the small heater in Michael Greaves' Dowling Street studio, the iridescent orange of its warming coils radiating like the neon bands of colour vertically framing the paintings on the walls around us. The works for his latest show dominate the space, their brightly stacked colourfields a visual assault. Too large to be domestic and that bit too adventurous to be decorative, the paintings feel dualistic, at once a departure from, and a return to the ideas and forms Greaves has been exploring throughout his career.

In the past Greaves' work has played with surface, using painterly texture to subvert ideas of modernism. He's grappled with the eternal paradox of the painter: what exactly do you do with your flat two-dimensional canvas? Whether you veer towards it, or away from it, the age-old question of representation follows. "It's the stone in your shoe" Greaves tells me. "It causes you grief but when you take it out, strangely you miss it."

For this collection, *The Promise . . . and the Fall*, Greaves has let himself get a little uncomfortable. The stone's not back, but there's a definite rub. The works are characterised by vertebra-shaped blocks of colour, some grass green, others cobalt blue or banana yellow, all seductively cheery pigments that vie for our attention, virtually screaming at us not to look beyond their surface.

The Hidden gives the game away with its title, but the deciphering of its masked objects takes some time. I find the shape of an upturned vase, foliage unfurling, and what might be . . . flowers? This decoding of forms is like penetrating a memory through the haze of time. Reinforcing this analogy are the parts of the painting that have been obliterated – quite literally blacked out – as if suggesting some things can only be reconstructed in the mind's eye. Another painting *Being held one inch above the floor* conceals a table lamp, the plug peeking from beyond an opaque film of lemon, while *Covered* in a fine brown dust actually buries a printed picture at its heart – a memento of something, but we'll probably never know what.

The occlusion contained in these works is unsettling. The simultaneous concealing and revealing feels all too real. It's a personal admission followed by a deliberate retraction, but all the while the ghost of some truth still floats there, unable to be erased entirely. Instead, the viewer is forced to seek it out, detective-like, discovering that the hidden objects are sometimes visible in certain lights and at certain angles . . . and then sometimes not. I feel like I've got a sense of the work and then just as quickly, I don't.

Imitation is deception, as Greaves is well aware. He works with sketched contours on an orange ground, a nod to the painterly tradition of priming the canvas for the layers to come - and in this case, there are plenty. In Parrhasius he references the Ancient Greek painter known as a master of outline drawing. Parrhasius painted a curtain over the surface of his painting, a curtain so realistic his contemporary Zeuxis tried to draw it open to see what was underneath. In some ways it's a parable about trickery, and although the works in this show are coy, I sense that's not what Greaves is trying to do here.

I was curious to know more about *Sitting on my hands*, a rare painting in which there's an identifiable background. Greaves tells me it's the sculpture studio at the Dunedin School of Art and the object concealed by paint is a wax model - the type a sculptor uses when casting bronze. He explains how the analogue for a bronze sculpture is first made in wax and slip coated in ceramic to prepare the vessel into which the bronze will be poured. When the metal sets and the ceramic is chipped off, you're left with your sculpture - but the original object, the wax mould itself, is destroyed in the very process of making. It's there and it's not there in the finished product - much like the objects in these paintings.

The Promise... and the Fall is a weighty title that suggests the biblical Fall of Mankind and the promise of redemption, but in talking to the artist I found out it's less mythical and more personal. Greaves has brought himself to this work. Utilising a 'frame' constructed of vertical colour, held in place by a mere sketched line, it feels like these paintings are simultaneously holding things tightly and ready to let them go again. Greaves deftly shows us how everything shifts and moves - both in painting, and in real life.

Pennie Hunt is a writer and film director based in Koputai Port Chalmers, Dunedin.



The Hidden.

Pigment and oil on canvas. 90x120cm (94.5x124cm framed – pine frame). 2022



Tomato, Tomato.

Pigment and oil on canvas. 90x120cm (94.5x124cm framed – pine frame). 2022

Between Palimpsest and Pentimento: figuration, abstraction and painterly process in Michael Greaves' 'The Promise . . . and the Fall'

Federico Freschi

*"For the viewer, painting is a noun: the finished object we see. For the painter, it can also be a verb: the activity in which he or she is engaged. When painters succeed in evoking and disclosing painting-the-verb within painting-the-noun, they offer the rest of us a rare gift."*¹

– Barry Schwabsky

There is an inherent quality of painterliness – that is, of painting being unapologetically about painting – in Michael Greaves' work that is at once both conceptually intriguing and deeply viscerally satisfying. Like much of Greaves' recent work, the paintings in this exhibition hold abstraction and figuration in a fine balance: Bold blocks of colour positioned asymmetrically between parallel painted lines reaffirm the flatness of the canvas and the obdurate limits of its frame while at the same time masking figurative elements that call for attention, like tendrils of plants pushing with quiet insistence through neatly laid flagstones. In balancing figuration and abstraction, they enter a long history of painting both as a mimetic window into the world – with all the technical skill that demands – and the Modernist tradition of self referentiality, of art unabashedly calling attention to art (to paraphrase Clement Greenberg)². As such, they extend and complicate debates about contemporary painting, not least, as

Barry Schwabsky argues, the notion that "contemporary painting retains from its modernist and Conceptualist background the belief that ... a painting is not only a painting but also the representation of an idea about a painting."³

The power of Greaves' paintings certainly lies in the extent to which they exist on and hold in tension the porous boundary between the formal and the figurative. This in turn sets up a particular relationship to viewers, who become active participants in constructing their meanings. By complicating the Greenbergian dogma of flatness, they challenge us to see both what is in the painting as well as seeing them primarily as paintings in their own right, as an accumulation of painted marks on a flat surface. As Greaves puts it, "painting operates in two ways – first it kicks you in the guts then it works on your head. If it goes to your head too soon it's too easy."⁴ In effect, by challenging both our intellect and our

emotions, these paintings compellingly evoke what Dario Gamboni calls 'potential images', that is, images created by the artist "but dependent on the beholder for their realization ... [their] property is to make the beholder aware – either painfully or enjoyably – of the active, subjective, nature of seeing."⁵ By compelling the viewer to confront the painting both as an object in itself and as a potential carrier of coded narratives, Greaves challenges us to reconsider what we think we know about looking and seeing. At the same time, the elusiveness of the visual evidence and the poetic nature of the titles remind us that all paintings are the result of a complex and intensely personal agglomeration of time and thought. As Greaves puts it, "paintings have a relationship to the abstract idea of time and making; they are a physical object that is the coagulation of that process. Sometimes you try to hide yourself, and sometimes it's okay just to let yourself be. All paintings are a palimpsest."

The notion of painting as palimpsest is particularly apposite in these works, which at first glance appear abstract but whose veiled and masked figurative underpaintings are clearly, if not always immediately, apparent. These constitute at once a palimpsest of the accrued processes of thought and making that constituted the finished works, as well as a form of pentimento or concealed underpainting. Derived from the Italian verb *pentirsi* (to repent), pentimento is usually understood as a form of erasure, a 'correction' of something that the artist might otherwise regret in the finished painting. In Greaves' hands, however, the partial pentimenti are not so much the result of an act of corrective erasure as a strategy to engage the complexities and contradictions of the painterly process as it navigates between head and heart. Reinforcing the tension between the figurative and the abstract, the pentimenti are a reminder in the first instance of what painting has always been, namely an essentially abstract way of presenting the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. They paradoxically

challenge and affirm illusionism and compel us to question what we expect of painting both as a conceptually and culturally loaded act, and as an object in the world like any other. On a more instinctive level, the tension between the half-concealed and half-revealed balances for the viewer the pleasure of the seen with the allure of the unseen.

The act of partial erasure and overpainting may also seem iconoclastic or vainglorious, the painter playing a game of artistic hide-and-seek with his audience in the mode of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.⁶ For this work, which he produced in 1953 when he was 28 years old, Rauschenberg erased a drawing reluctantly given to him for the purpose by Willem de Kooning, who by then was firmly established as a leading Abstract Expressionist. Working with the 23-year-old Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg labelled, matted and framed the now essentially blank page on which very few traces of the original drawing were faintly discernible. The younger artist thus audaciously asserted himself over the established one, literally erasing the canon to inscribe a place for himself.

In a sense, Greaves' partial erasure of and deliberate painting over his own work is a similar act of conscious artistic reinvention. As a student and young artist his work was figurative and highly detailed, painstakingly concerned with the power of painting to deceive the eye. With growing painterly maturity came the awareness when looking at the figurative work of painters that he admired that, no matter how convincingly the figurative elements were depicted or how clear the narrative was, there was always something occurring outside the canvas, pushing beyond its boundaries. He became increasingly interested in how the passage of paint could be just as important as the figurative elements that they came to convey, and in so doing came to recognize that "painting is really provisional; it offers the ability to work through the imagination – you have to work

really hard as a maker to ensure that it's not just a formal exercise, a strategy repeating over and over again with different outcomes. Rather, the challenge is to try to control this uncontrollable thing to that point of failure where just one more mark will make it fall apart."

In effect, in Greaves' work the process becomes the painting, although not in the self-conscious sense of Modernist gestural abstraction. Rather, it becomes clear that the painting is the accumulative result of conscious and unconscious decisions – the act of making having its own imperatives that may or may not have been part of the artist's deliberate strategy and intent. Drawing on a personal anecdote of walking in Paris and impulsively taking a left turn instead of continuing on his original route – an impulse that led to a chance encounter with friends, the subsequent gatecrashing of a party and a memorable night on the town – Greaves notes how his paintings similarly benefit from the fortuitous results of 'turning left': "It gets to a point where the painting shakes me, and I realise I've got to a point now where it's time to turn left, to let the painting tell me things I need to know. It's like being in a foreign city, exciting all the senses that you need to survive. Painting is another language ... sometimes it's like being in a foreign country where you do not speak the language, but you can understand enough through gesture and context."

Viewed thus, these paintings are a reminder, as Dario Gamboni puts it, that artistic creation is an interpretative act that involves a "connection between observation, memory and imagination"⁷ on the part of both the artist and the viewer. The title of one of the paintings in this series, Parrhasius, encapsulates both the tensions between figuration and abstraction as well as the interpretive dance between artist and viewer that animate that works on this exhibition. Parrhasius of Ephesus was a fifth century BCE artist, who, together with his contemporary Zeuxis of Heraclea, was famed for his mimetic paintings.

Pliny the elder records that the rivalry between the two artists ultimately led to a competition to determine who was the greater: Zeuxis produced a still life with grapes painted so realistically that birds attempted to eat them. When Parrhasius presented his painting Zeuxis asked for the curtain to be lifted only to be told that the curtain itself that was the painting. Zeuxis had to concede defeat, since he, a fellow artist, had been fooled by the illusion. Greaves tempts us, like Zeuxis, to draw the veil and to enter into a world of both the painting and the painted. In doing so, he offers us a rare gift indeed.

¹ Barry Schwabsky (2019), *The Observer Effect: On Contemporary Painting* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 14.

² Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' [1965], reprinted in Francis Francina and Charles Harrison eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (London: Harper & Row, 1982), 6.

³ Schwabsky, *The Observer Effect: On Contemporary Painting*, 10.

⁴ This and subsequent quotations by the artist: Michael Greaves in conversation with Federico Freschi, 24 March 2022.

⁵ Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 18.

⁶ See 'Erased de Kooning Drawing', SFMOMA, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.298/>.

⁷ Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art*, 88.



The Lucky Observer.
Pigment and oil on canvas. 30x40cm (32.5x42.5cm framed – pine frame). 2022

Federico Freschi (PhD, University of the Witwatersrand, 2006) was appointed Professor and Head of College of Te Maru Pūmanawa | Creative Practice & Enterprise at the Otago Polytechnic in October 2019, and was formerly Executive Dean of the Faculty of Art, Design & Architecture at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. The bulk of his scholarly work explores the ways in which nationalism, politics and identity are imbricated in art, architecture, and design, with a specific focus on South Africa and other settler-colonial contexts. Recent publications include two co-edited, peer-reviewed books, *Troubling Images: The Visual Culture of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Wits University Press, 2020) and *The Politics of Design: Privilege and Prejudice in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and South Africa* (Otago Polytechnic Press, 2021).



Sitting on my Hands.
Pigment and oil on canvas. 90x120cm (94.5x124cm framed – pine frame). 2022



The Promise.

Pigment and oil on canvas. 90x120cm (94.5x124cm framed – pine frame). 2022

The Promise . . . and the Fall

In Conversation with Michael Greaves, February 2022

Compiled by Hilary Radner and Michael Greaves
Edited for coherency and succinctness by Hilary Radner

Hilary Radner – Over the many conversations we have had in the past three years, I have come to understand your journey as a painter as one defined by the advent of the photograph – and by “photograph” I mean the analogue photograph – as a technology that can offer “a window on the world.” As you recently explained, during your early experiences with painting in New Zealand when you first came to identify yourself as a painter, in the milieu in which you found yourself, “a good painting was one that looked like a photograph.”

As we all know, many paintings today use the photograph in a variety of ways – whether as source material, or as literal projections on the canvas that directly reference the camera obscura. The camera obscura, a predecessor of twentieth-century cameras, was developed largely by painters during the Italian Renaissance. It served to project an image on a wall, with the purpose of assisting artists to depict the world in terms of the specific geometry of one-point perspective. As we know, one-point perspective is a technique at the heart of many *trompe-l'oeil* paintings – paintings that, at least momentarily, deceive viewers into thinking that the two-dimensional representation of an object is, in fact, the three-dimensional object itself. In this context, I note an anecdote that you recounted recently: you said that, at art school in the 1990s, you painted a detailed image of a small spoon on the face of an otherwise non-

representational painting. One of your “studio-mates,” was initially convinced that you had attached an actual spoon to the canvas, recalling the Ancient Greek tale of the two painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios. Parrhasios tricked Zeuxis into believing that his painting of a curtain was an actual curtain, seemingly hiding another painting underneath.

Coincidentally in many of your works, the viewer sees another painting hidden beneath a boldly abstract pattern, as is the case with the works included in the series “The Promise . . . and the Fall.” Yet, this strategy has a very different purpose compared with that of Parrhasios, who was deliberately trying to trick his viewers. Your purpose, one that animates your work over the past twenty years, is to explore what a painting can do if it refuses the model of representation defined by the camera obscura. In this series “The Promise . . . and the Fall,” you implicitly contrast “the immediacy of a painting” when presented to viewers in which they “see the painting in one go” with the process through which artists themselves create a painting.

Michael Greaves – When I’m talking about “seeing a painting in one go,” I’m not talking about how it unfolds over time for the viewer. When the maker makes the painting, it might take weeks or months to make, and during that time the painter will encounter that work in multiple different states. It will alter and shift and change. It’s part of the process of making a painting and that’s part of the interest that I have with painting. You end up covering things up and erasing things and shifting things and moving stuff around. There’s a delicate balance between something looking good and something doing what it is you want it to. You often destroy, or erase, a painting . . . or ruin a painting – or what you think is destroying or ruining it. But you may find something quite exciting because there’s something that you didn’t expect that happens. Even when you are looking at an object in the world to paint or to draw, there’s a slippage that

occurs –“in translation.” You see it, you experience it and then you try and make your hand move to make it work. That’s the whole process and it unpacks over time.

What I’m talking about when I say “seeing the work in one go” is that when viewers confront a painting for the first time, they see those weeks, months, even years, compressed into a very, very short moment. Now that short moment might be a half-an-hour, the time that they spend looking at it in the gallery. That time might be less, but it also might be the only time that they ever see it. So, they have a half-an-hour of that compressed time. That initial elongated period of time, the time of making, is condensed into a single moment. That’s the thing that operates on the audience. There’s also something that’s left in the art that might trigger someone to think about something.

I feel that this process of “making” is analogous to experiencing life itself. Moving through life is a process. Things happen to you. You experience certain things. They all come back as memories. Sometimes they come back to you as false memories. They may come back to you as memories that provide some kind of element of something that happened before – a “*déjà vu*,” maybe.¹ And you are always trying to “scrape” back that moment of *déjà vu*, which is effusive and somehow always escapes direct interrogation . . . like it sits on the periphery, like you know it but cannot pin it down . . . and you are trying to get close to that thing. From multiple experiences, I think, you end up presenting certain shapes or objects that stand in for other things. In painting it might be that you resonate with a particular shape, or you resonate with particular colours, or you propose a certain striation of things that you look at on the surface. You’re trying to work that thing out.

I’ve constructed or made things to try and articulate stuff that I remember and that I don’t have access to anymore. And when you do that, that creates something new that encapsulates

the thing that you’re trying grasp or to get close to. It’s never, however, the same. I’m not trying to replicate a thing in two-dimensions, or make a painting of it, I’m trying to actually grasp it itself. And . . . I’m always going to fall short. It’s always going to be wrong. And in doing so, I’m going to enjoy looking at the different ways this kind of muddy colour stuff that goes on with the brush makes me feel or makes me think.

HR – Hmm . . . then really what the viewer “sees in one go” is what remains, the traces of your process that coalesces into a whole at a moment determined by you as at least an interesting failure in your attempt to grasp “the thing itself.” In your attempt to address “the thing itself” you often end up with one painting superimposed on another, as is the case in an exhibition held at RDS Gallery, “Time Steals Some Things, But Gives Us Back Others,” in October 2021, a collection of work made five or six years earlier, but also in this current exhibition “The Promise . . . and the Fall.” How and why do you arrive at that point?

MG – I was always interested in how I would remember instances and experiences, and how much of “a thing” was needed in order to represent “that thing,” that initial experience. For example, in a series of paintings that I made in my final year at art school, I used the café and the ritual of sharing food as the focus for my interest in the image. I would photograph scenes from the café and then reproduce these scenes in paintings. In these works, I would leave things out, the chair might only have three legs or there would be a substantive area of the painting that was unfinished or underworked. It was as if you didn’t need the full representation to make sense of the painting.

So, from this I began thinking about how a painting presents itself and the process that is undertaken to make a painting, from the white or raw canvas to a depiction of a coherent scene, to create what might be termed “a visual coherence” within the frame. This static end, in

my mind, became a relationship between layers and times when things were out of sight or partially unseen – as if the reading of a painting were about an accumulation of moments. This is what I enact in these paintings. The painting under the painting is often the failed thought of what the painting was supposed to be. Trying to find a relevant way to translate an idea into an image results in an inevitable loss, a kind of absence, or failure, realised in the moment when you understand as a painter that you are unable to “image” the things that you really want—to make an image that corresponds to your idea. This initial failure also acts as a clearing house, having an intermediary function, that results in the emergence of an idea on which I can make good. It is as if I need to make this (the first iteration) to make that (the final work). This strategy also lets me experience compositional moments that might not have occurred if I had attempted to plan everything in advance, and thus control the outcomes in their entirety. So, the superimposition of one painting over another has both a mechanical and conceptual function for me in developing work.

I begin a painting with drawing. Drawing is an integral process for me, either in a traditional sense or digitally. I have been using digital methods of drawing now for a couple of years. This allows me to remove unnecessary risks entailed in the act of painting. The digital, however, cannot accurately substitute for the process of painting. Painting as an activity might be informed by a drawing process that mitigates some of the risk, but the painting process means that this same risk must be reactivated in some way, which I enjoy. In the past, I used charcoal to sketch in an object, most often on a coloured ground. I like the way that I can activate a “colour mixing in the eye” in a drawing that will occur later when the painting is subjected to different lighting conditions.

The object [in the hidden painting] has significance. For example, the objects that are

included in the body of work in this current exhibition have as their point of departure sculptural objects, separated from their space, on plinths of some sort, to be viewed as such. These objects for me come with a story, a history, and that is important. The object might be banal, a lamp, or a rock, but usually they have been altered in some way. These objects are framed, placed specifically within the parameters of the canvas.

Paintings for me begin as a way of accessing a “*déjà vu*” moment, an “already seen” moment, an image that I feel that I have seen before that re-emerges, that “reoccurs,” in times of contemplation. These remembered moments or images activate threads that are not quite formed, or, perhaps, not quite within my reach. So, I cannot pin down the exact moment or time to which a memory relates, but I feel that these two moments are connected, the memory’s moment of origin and then the time when that memory returns as a “*déjà vu*” moment. The painted representations exist on the canvas for a period of time before they are replaced, covered, or reworked, a respite in which their significance can be felt. The final surface is made in what seems a brief moment, during which I tend not to “overthink.” Time stretches. You might call it a meditative moment – one in which things are revealed or hidden.

HR – In a sense, you suggest that painting affords you a set of strategies that simultaneously reveal and conceal a web of inner concerns that remain at arm’s length from artist and viewer, echoing another spate of issues that you have raised in past conversations. It would seem, as you have explained to me on several occasions, that your journey as a painter is one that appears destined to avoid any definitive resolution. You once compared it to entering a room through a door which you unlocked with great difficulty, only to discover yourself in yet another room with yet another locked room.

MG – Strangely, I was thinking along the same lines—that to continue this conversation would be like opening another door. So maybe this a good place to end—until we open the next door, the next conversation.

¹The “moment of recall” – what I am calling a *déjà vu* – that I am experiencing is an already seen thing, usually something “on loop” as if it were a film clip or the like. It is usually associated with a sound, and it drags me closer without giving up its truth . . . the truth of where and when I saw this first. It [this experience] occurs often under times of stress or meditation, at either ends of the spectrum – which I also associate with the state one enters when painting.

Hilary Radner began her career as a video artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with work shown at MOMA (1981), and the Biennale of Sydney (1982). In 1988, she completed a PhD at the University of Texas, Austin and was awarded the position of Assistant Professor, and later Associate Professor (1995), at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. In 2002, she was appointed Foundation Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Otago. She currently holds the title of Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, and has published widely in the areas of visual culture and cinema studies, most recently *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image*, with Alistair Fox (Edinburgh UP, 2018). She and Alistair now run RDS Gallery in Dunedin.



Parrhasius.
Pigment and oil on canvas. 60x83cm (64.5x87.5cm framed – pine frame). 2022



Being Held One Inch Above the Floor.
Pigment and oil on canvas. 90x120cm (94.5x124cm framed – pine frame). 2022



I Make Paintings, and Paintings are Things.
Pigment and oil on canvas. 30x40cm (32.5x42.5cm framed – pine frame). 2022



Covered in a Fine Brown Dust.
Pigment and oil on canvas. 30x40cm (32.5x42.5cm framed – pine frame). 2022

The Promise . . . and the Fall

Michael Greaves

Essays by Federico Freschi, Pennie Hunt, and Hilary Radner.

Published by Otago Polytechnic Publications on the occasion of the exhibition *The Promise . . . and the Fall*

at Olga Gallery, Dunedin. 12 May – 1 June 2022.

Director: Justin Spiers

Published in New Zealand by:
Otago Polytechnic Publications
Forth Street
Dunedin 9016
www.op.ac.nz

Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of Te Pūkenga - New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology.

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The author gratefully acknowledges the publishers, institutions and individuals referenced in the document for their contributions

First published 2022

An online version of this publication is available free at
www.op.ac.nz/industry-and-research/research/epublications

ISBN 978-0-908846-75-7 (Print)

ISBN 978-0-908846-76-4 (Online)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.34074/cata.220512>

Copyediting: Michael Greaves

Design and typesetting: Michael Greaves

Printing: Otago University Print

Cover credit: Michael Greaves

Inside cover image: Installation shot at Olga Gallery Dunedin (Artist image)

Inside Back Cover Image: Studio wall of the artists studio (Artist image)

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