

SEAN BAILEY — COLLAPSING VIEW

Exhibition Dates:

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Gertrude Contemporary and *ARTAND Australia*

Emerging Writers Program

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Sean Bailey is an artist and musician. Just as his dark, apocalyptic punk outfits TÄX and Lakes explore concurrent ideas of containment and release, so too do his paintings and sculptures. The paintings exhibit an intriguing fusion of two distinct modes of abstraction: lyrical and hard-edged. This curious stylistic marriage is a distinguishing feature: in Bailey's paintings the integrity of mathematically precise circles, triangles and squares is compromised by amorphous swathes of paint spilling out of the shapes that seek to contain them.

This catalogue has been produced as part of the Gertrude Contemporary and *ARTAND Australia* Emerging Writers Program. The Emerging Writers Program pairs four young writers with an experienced mentor each, culminating in the production of a catalogue essay for Gertrude Contemporary's Studio 12 exhibition program and a review to be published in *ARTAND Australia* magazine.

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Image Captions:  
Sean Bailey, installation view, *Collapsing View*, Studio 12, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, 2014

Photo credit: Christo Crocker

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(cont.) The ever-present threat of overflow or occlusion in Bailey's paintings takes on a special significance in works that incorporate collage elements — a handful of such works are included in this exhibition. Here generous amounts of synthetic polymer paint are spread like molasses over printed images sourced from books and magazines. These previously intelligible images are almost completely obfuscated such that the remnant visible fragments become ambiguous visual cues, inviting the viewer to speculate as to what might lie beneath the thick film of paint. Bailey's collage works are the starkest illustrations of the artist's dual obsessions with surface and composition. Bailey paints on linen and finely sanded hardwood. The clean, smooth finish of these foundations are deliberately marred by viscous contours of paint; Bailey defaces his base materials in the same way that he disfigures his printed images and precisely painted geometric shapes.

Recently, Bailey has begun to transfer the tensions manifest in his paintings to three-dimensional works of concrete, linen and wood. He has chosen to include one sculpture in this exhibition, and it signifies an important extension of the ideas present in the paintings. Looking at the exceedingly painterly sculpture, one cannot help but feel that the ill-defined form is aching to seep out of its rigid wooden frame. Anyone who has heard Bailey in his musical incarnations will recognise similar themes expressed in military drumbeats that strain to hold down cacophonous synths and serrated guitar lines.

The pleasure of viewing Bailey's paintings and sculptures (and listening to his music) comes from the challenge of resolving the tensions at play in them. Clean surfaces abut rough and aggregated ones; precise shapes are lost beneath coagulating lava flows of paint and concrete. Given time, the apparent contradictions of Bailey's works settle into states of harmony and balance. This equilibrium

is a precarious one but that is what motivates the viewer, and the artist, to return to the works. Bailey says that his artistic process is one in which he alternately releases and contains the lyrical elements of his works. He tells me that he returns to works again and again, making minor alterations or major reconfigurations, before feeling that the work has achieved the requisite state of balance between disorder and containment.

Visiting Bailey's studio at Gertrude Contemporary on multiple occasions, I discerned the workmanlike approach to painting that Helen Hughes refers to in an introductory essay on his practice.<sup>1</sup> Apart from running a record label, making his own music and working in an organic grocery store to pay the rent, Bailey logs near on nine-to-five office hours in his studio. The makeshift kitchenette in the corner attests to the long hours spent there. After arriving at the space each morning, he approaches the unfinished paintings and sculptures propped up on Besser bricks and leaning against walls. Picking up where he left off the night before, he puts brush to surface in another attempt to bring his pieces to their final states of tenuous balance. And he does it again and again.

Progress and repetition are key to Bailey's practice. In his interview with Dan Rule for *Vault* he said: 'It's all very instinctual... It's just process, the ritual of it, the improvisation.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed Bailey's oeuvre to date has an intensely logical narrative, or trajectory: a narrative of incremental changes and innovations, a sort of methodical exploration of possibilities, always moving towards the fullest expression of the productive tensions at the heart of his art. *Collapsing View* is the latest instalment in this narrative, and the thirteen works that comprise the show make up the most fully realised expression of Bailey's central concerns to date.

1. Helen Hughes, 'Sean Bailey: Union of Opposites', catalogue essay for *Sean Bailey, Union of Opposites*, Daine Singer, Melbourne, 3 – 19 November 2011.

2. Dan Rule, 'Forecast: Sean Bailey', *Vault*, No. 7 (August 2014), p. 123.

