

COASTAL SIGNS

Parts of this text evolved from notes I made in 2019, during and after a trip to Europe in which I spent time with Milli in her studio in Porto. Other parts were written more recently, in 2023, thinking about Milli's new paintings for an exhibition called *Hothouse* at Coastal Signs in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.



Milli has several journals full of quotes drawn from all kinds of books. She reads a lot, and she often reads literature that has a connection to the place where she is, and she is, or has been, itinerant for the past 15 years or so. She told me this practice, or reading-to-place, helps her to access to the psychology of a city and its culture. It used to be that the title of a painting referenced the quote from which the work developed — she used them as hooks, or simply a place to start. The specific connections between literature and Milli's painting have loosened in recent years — I get the sense now they are just two things she does: read and paint.¹

... and the whole mystery of things seems like an oil on the surface, and the whole universe is a sea of faces with eyes bugging out at me. Each thing — a corner lamppost, a stone, a tree — is an eye that stares at me from an inscrutable abyss ...²

Allowed to read her journals during a prolonged studio visit a few years ago I noted that the quotes are almost all from fiction or prose, and they almost all relate to a protagonist's apprehension or negotiation of the tangible world. Many of them seem charged with emotion, animated by doubt or grief, as if a psychological event, off screen, has altered their perception of reality.³

*My universe flat. Nothing echoes here — nothing crystallises either.*⁴

*It was as if her consciousness had eaten up its surroundings. Everything was now subjective.*⁵

Milli said she likes it when characters, particularly women characters, seem on the edge of madness, maniacal, losing their grip on reality. We discussed the idea that women's hysteria was a result of living in a world not designed by or for them ... and the stronger version, a war of attrition waged by patriarchal society.

*I was depressed, I was entirely the white female bosom shot full of cruel male arrows*⁶

*How can I humiliate myself sufficiently, how can I expose myself to the world and death?*⁷

Some of Milli's early work pictured confinement — a lot of windows for looking out of — or contained subtle references to interiority, both in the still life genre and in the individual object forms of still life; such as urns, bottles, and vases of flowers. I noticed that many of her quotes focus on a detail, often a nondescript commonplace object, that is imbued with surprising (contrary) emotion. Milli's vessels are full to the metaphorical brim with phantoms of literary women and their electrified domestic spaces.

Milli joked that hers wasn't particularly innovative subject matter, but this is from an artist who, during art school, decided to only paint the ocean for a whole year. We circled back several times to a comment by Zelda Fitzgerald — that you can find "everything in anything if the thing is complete in itself."⁸

I regularly hear viewers express surprise (sometimes dismay) at how different Milli's works are from one another. Her scale ranges from diminutive to enormous. Some paintings swoop and soar, luminous, barely there, others tower or slump, densely layered. Some do all those things in one picture.

There are early paintings by Milli that I think about regularly. A work called *Night opened out* (2014) from an exhibition called 'As the light dips'. Hard, dark lines criss-cross an arid yellow surface; a scene populated by a crude cactus and a half-formed bat. The bat featured again in a small painting from the same year called *Benevolent Monsters*. The bat floats in

front of the blue-ish surface. Is it a bat, or is it a dark jagged hole? To me as I was then, the bat was a rupture in the surface of the world, revealing the dark thing behind things, a flash of the sword that hangs above.

Fast-forward to 2023. Over Easter, I took myself away to find some isolation at a friend's beach house with a book by Rebecca Giggs called *Fathoms: The world in the whale*. Milli read *Fathoms* while she painted through the Stockholm winter. It is a heart-breaking book in both form and content, that is itself difficult to categorise. It's a nature book about whales as marvels of science, mythical totems, and spectres of environmental change, but it is also very much about human consciousness and our entanglement with the natural world. I see why Milli liked it. Giggs sweeps the viewer/reader up in metaphor and then reminds you of a (usually) shocking material reality that plonks you back down on your base matter. I sense that Giggs might like painting — I sense it in the way in which she describes forms and time, and in the surrealism that weaves through the book. Talking about human's insatiable desire to map and understand the varieties of intelligence and ingenuity in the natural world: "we enchant ourselves to think there may be more dimensions to this world, and wilder ways to experience it, than we have the scope to fully comprehend."⁹

It's a loose idea, but I think this is what painting does for me, or can do for me: reflect the already-wild conditions of the world, and suggest wilder ways to experience it. *Early Eyes* looks like I feel when I've taken a psychedelic. I grasp the exquisite, intricate order of things, and the things behind things and the non-things, and know that it's all interconnected and flows and changes, and I feel calm and my edges soften in that knowledge. It's a more intense, less rational, version of the awe induced by a particularly weird nature documentary; those ones with the crazy cameras that show entwined slug penises forming a spinning blue diaphanous orb in excruciating detail. It's not ground-breaking to point out that psychedelics, nature, and painting all have surrealist potential. There are novel worlds hidden within our own, and I can access them through these mediums, if I have my sonar calibrated right.

What is time made of? That is a question I wrote in Milli's studio. My meagre answers: Scratched black clouds. Brushmarks stretched thinly and padded tightly together. I reflect now that my answers describe something very physical, because paintings aren't made of metaphors, they're made of ... paint. Amy Sillman is great on the low work of painting. She reminds us that the thing she is doing, day-after-day, is moving muck around, mixing putty-like pigments, worrying this shape and that edge.¹⁰ I think it was Peter Doig who said painting is really just a search for recognition in a rectangle of oily mess.

I've learned there are colours painters fear, or are at least wary of. One is the result of mixing gone awry when expensive pigment returns to the base-est of browns. It's Shiraz Sadiqueen's kind of brown: not a colour in itself, but the result of a bunch of junk boiled up together, the colour of waste, shit, mud. The other is a sickly lime green. Both colours appear in *Hothouse* — a muddy void here, an algal bloom there.

One of the passages Milli sent me from the *Fathoms* was about Anais Nin and the concept of 'inward clairvoyance'. In her diaries, Nin records being disarmed and transfixed by images of giant blood cells at the American Museum of Natural History. She has an epiphany in which she "intuited appreciation of shapes that are intimate to us, but impossible to observe — the somatic design of the platelets in our blood, the uprooted fan-corals in our lungs, the squat urn of a womb".¹¹ I sense inward clairvoyance at work in *Hothouse* — in particular in the quasi-biological structure of some paintings. To find the image of *Seen, sensed, sorcelled* (2023) — the organic creamy branches twisting through soft brown membranes embedded with various growths and patterns — one can imagine the artist, like Nin, 'shrunk to dimensions tiny enough' to wander her own interior. Nearby *Thrips and midges* (2023) thrums and surges with different kinds of life, birds morph into plants, plants morph into rocks, a brush of paint or a flick of a tentacle.

Back in the Porto studio, Milli told me she was working out how to paint a maze without painting a maze, or later, working out how to paint a maze without repeating herself. If it's useful, if you need a thread to follow, maybe you could consider all her paintings as mazes? Pathways, crossroads in the desert at night, staircases, tunnels, walls of eyes, scenes turned inside out and painted over and over and over until they curl and knot into abstraction. The labyrinth, in literature and myth, is a repository of complex and contradictory emotions, which seems like good way to describe Milli's paintings ... and life in general.

... rather than a way of getting from A to B, the path seemed to have become quite simply a way of departing from all points at once.¹²

1. Jim Nutt in conversation with Carroll Dunham: "My work isn't even close to an idea. It's just something I'm doing."

2. Álvaro de Campos, "Sometimes I meditate", *The Collected Poems of Álvaro de Campos, 1928-1935*

3. I was reading Isabelle Graw's then new book on painting that same trip, and I highlight this passage: "There is no such thing as life, we only encounter it in a mediated form, its manifestations are always mediated." Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (London: Sternberg, 2018)

4. Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), p.88

5. Iris Murdoch, *The Bell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958)

6. Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London: Michael Joseph, 1962)

7. Clarice Lispector, *Selected Cronicas* (New York: New Directions, 1996), p. 180

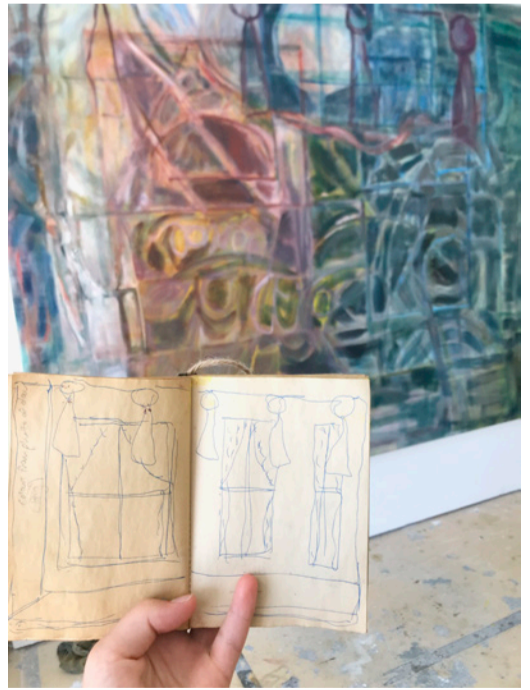
8. Zelda Fitzgerald, *Save me the Waltz*, 1932. The full sentence is "Children are always glad of something new, not realizing that there is everything in anything if the thing is complete in itself."

9. Rebecca Giggs, *Fathoms: The World in the Whale* (Melbourne/London: Scribe, 2020), p. 25

10. Giggs, p. 121-122

11. Amy Sillman, 'Further Notes on Shape', *Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings* (Paris: After 8 Books, 2022), p. 98

12. César Aira, *An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*, 2000



Title: Early eyes
Artist: Milli Jannides