

## PRETTYBAD, 2007

### *Something from Nothing: Bill Sampson and the meaning of marbling.* by Dr. Alison Ingis

Bill Sampson has created his own quirky term – ‘*Prettybad*’ – to convey the strange mix of emotions and ideas he tries to capture within his extraordinary marbled paint surfaces. His definition states simply:

Prettybad: an aesthetic of the accidental, the meaningless and the valueless; that which is ‘no longer mediated, freighted with human meaning, complicit, but immediate, brutal, direct, as free from artistic content....’

But the artist can’t resist adding: ‘Indubitably, the marbling process from my perspective satisfies a single passion, that being the exhilaration of drawing the image from that murky mire: it is a discovery of something, from nothing - it is drawing desire.’<sup>1</sup>

Bill Sampson may seek an art form drained of deliberate meaning – yet this does not prevent him from enjoying and exploiting his painting’s ability to provoke endless assumptions in the viewer; assumptions that are then slowly undermined or subtly challenged, the longer you study the work.

For instance, at first glance, the dramatic explosions of colour and shifts in spatial field in his large marbled productions are reminiscent of American ‘action painters’ like Jackson Pollock. Certainly the wonderfully random effects created by the ‘automatic’ technique of marbling hint at a shared interest in the Abstract Expressionists’ celebration of chance, spontaneity and the unconscious. But the more we seek evidence of the traditional vocabulary of expressionism, the more we are confronted by its absence; the emphasis on gesture and the studied opposition of formal values are nowhere to be seen. The random eddies and blotches of paint follow their own destinies across the paper or plasterboard surface, without obvious connection to any artistic intent or vision.

Sampson was attracted to this archaic form of pattern-making in the first place because the marbling technique had the greatest potential to flout his control and thereby spawn images that were both ‘uncertain and unrepeatable’. His idiosyncratic process introduces oil-based paint to water-based size within a shallow bath (described by one on-looker as ‘a supersized kiddie pool’). There the various oil colours – slopped, stirred or trickled across the surface – react to the bath’s contents by quickly expanding outward, forming intricate and mysterious patterns. Such variables as temperature, the amount and type of oil or the addition of turpentine can have dramatic and unpredictable results. The final step is to allow this seething liquid composition to be absorbed by the paper or plasterboard, where again, the acts of

---

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Sampson, ‘Introduction’, in ‘“Prettybad”: Towards an aesthetic of the Expressionless’, unpublished Ph.D thesis, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, 2007, p.6. All other statements by the artist quoted in this text are taken from the Ph.D thesis.

shaking, handling and rinsing introduce further unexpected dimensions. In all, the process is designed to expunge artistic control from the creation of the work. As Sampson observes: 'there is little or no room for expression when the paint acts as if it has a mind of its own and the result is more the result of chance than direction'.

The artist is not content with achieving this weird amalgam of the evocative and the expressionless in these paintings. He then subverts this Zen-like quest by introducing a strong element of the burlesque through his quirky titles. One of my favourites – *Asteroid Attack During Global Warming Caused Drought While Earthquake Destroys Island State At Harvest Time* (2007) – conjures up a disturbing sense of biblical cataclysm colliding with recent news events that irresistibly aligns with the vast scale and chaotic 'satellite photograph' swirls and surges of the painting's surface. The imposition of these elaborate narratives transform the abstract marbling into a monstrous multi-coloured Rorschach blot, which the viewer can't resist searching for hidden clues and meanings. Surely the profile of an ET-like creature can be discerned in the turgid ripples of *The Interrogation and Examination of the First Extraterrestrial Discovered in Area 51* (2006) while the enveloping grey expanse of *On the Eve of Judgement Day* (2007) might well be a metaphor for atomic clouds or nuclear winters. But this quest – while enjoyable in its focus on the sheer physicality of these monumental productions – is eventually frustrating. The mirage of possible meanings only reinforces the essential impenetrability of the marbled field, and one is left pondering the nature of the artistic project, with its false trails and humorous self-conscious ambiguities. Should these works be read simply as a meditation on the nature of 'high camp', in which style triumphs over content and sensation?

But, such questions falter before the sheer visual exuberance of these spectacular marbled compositions. If camp sensibility is a mode of enjoyment rather than an aesthetic judgment, then the seductiveness of the molten paint surface is sufficient justification in itself. Despite Sampson's mission to drain all meaning from his images, their painterly pyrotechnics, playful titles and gentle subversion of our expectations ultimately only underline our determination to find significance in visual expression. As Ted Colless has observed so perceptively, Bill Sampson's marbled paintings are 'a mirror to our own desire for a meaningful relationship with art'.<sup>2</sup>

Alison Inglis  
Senior Lecturer in Art History  
School of Culture and Communication  
The University of Melbourne

---

<sup>2</sup> E. Colless, 'Undiscovered: Bill Sampson', *Australian Art Collector*, April - June, 2007, pp 108-181