

Jennings Kerr

Hannah Cooper
Slow Pixels

The flames tore through and across the bush. Destruction and the devastation followed, but from the charred ashes came the rainbow. The fires displaced Cooper and her family from their 20 acres but not before the artist was able to experience a rejuvenation that sparked her interest in natural dye. This was the spark that ignited her interest in the alchemy of the dye pot, the squeezing of colour from the world around, but also a new appreciation and respect, a different lens to see the landscape through. Jump forward six years and I find myself in the new family home. I notice the bookshelf, gridded up into cubes, held together through a colour coordinated display of books, another rainbow of squares making up the shelf from a distance but zooming back in to see the cook books amongst the artist monographs and so on. The world around in pixels, the little details as building blocks. We sit down for coffee and I see the arrangement of family photos as square format fridge magnets, and we discuss how we are being conditioned to see in the square, the constant scrolling, the never ending grid of instagram, and I think back to Tetris on car trips and the slotting together, an endless stacking, and spatial awareness comes to mind. I remember looking up from the Gameboy and out the window of the car, out into the blurred expanse of fields. Trying to catch a glimpse or a shimmer of something in the distance. Cooper's land and cityscapes are a freezing of this speed, a slowing down and an absorption of places and experiences in reaction to the immediacy and image saturation of social media. These works pose questions about how we relate to the world, as well as how we use images, and maybe, how do images control us? Did it happen if you didn't post it? Did you see it, eat it, visit it, if you didn't 'share it'? Cooper is able to make her image in the language of the digital, the building block and structure of the image in virtual space. It is a clever manipulation in relation to her new lens, a digital blurring, the pixel represented through the analogue. There is a success in the contrast of the pixel as a digital expression of the photographic image with the analogue nature of its production. The reduction of resolution in the image is contrasted by the hyper detail of the weave pattern, it pushes and pulls the viewer in and out of these works. The two structures are what hold these works together, they come out of a year spent in the dye pot and seated at the loom. 'Slow Pixels' is a show that pushes and pulls the viewer, its weaving questions our understanding of time and our relationship to images of places, as well as how we define ourselves through images, perhaps in opposition to the places themselves.

Eucalyptus and oak leaves, walnuts and tannin-extracts (from acacia and myrobalan), madder root, lac beetle, red onion skins, iron, camellia petals, indigo (native Australian and Japanese), black beans, buckthorn berries, chamomile flowers, passionfruit skins, logwood chips and the list goes on. Cooper's natural dye sources start to resemble a Rauschenberg material listing in length. We have reduced it to; 'Handwoven mulberry silk dyed with plants, insect castings...', it is certainly vast but also complex in process. The silk fibres must go through a mordanting stage that enables them to take on the natural dyes, to accept the colour and give stability. This stage usually occurs over the period of a day and is followed by the actual dye pot. The dye pots vary depending on the materials within them, sometimes a day but often several days in order to achieve the results Cooper has achieved in her silk. The use of natural dye and its success is variable depending on time of year, rain fall and other climatic conditions. It requires a sound understanding of these variances and great patience that has come out of extensive trial and error. When we think about painting we often speak about palette, and this is obviously relevant, however Cooper also needs to consider the variances that can occur when attempting to create her palette. This takes the form of a key or chart, a recipe for the pots, her own cook book. It is an alchemy that keeps this process exciting despite the potential frustrations of subtle variance of colour when not desired. It is a rewarding process that came out of the destruction of a bushfire that ripped through Cooper's family property. This resilience that nature can show and its ability to rejuvenate is what inspired her passion for natural dye. There is a harmony in nature being imaged by nature, the landscape pictured with and through its material. The variance that occurs in the acceptance of colour is very much nature doing what nature wants to, and here this is cleverly guided by the artist.

It is important to consider these pieces in relation to painting but also the history of textile. The woven material is the image, textile representing accessible and familiar images. Cooper will start with the logic of the 'outlook shot' the 'instagram backdrop', a hero image with the most hashtags to abstract through pixelation. This occurs first in a watercolour on paper, a step that is crucial in order to begin planning the weave structure and pattern in relation to the image. It is at this stage that Cooper is able to plan the warp and weft for the weaving of the image, but also the clasp point and how that will work with the image. There are numerous weave structures that might be suitable for different types of images and in this case Cooper is employing a double weave but what is important is that she is bringing a new perspective to this structure. Cooper has a distinctive voice and style in weaving and the woven pixel is very much her space. She has been inspired by the weavings of Anni Albers, and the grids of Agnes Martin as well as the way Ellsworth Kelly was able to use colour field and blocks of colour in imaging abstracted landscape. Here the loom is the brush and the textile once stretched and framed sits as a woven painting. The application of 23k gold leaf is a reference to the social media filter but also creates highlight and is suggestive of something catching the eye in a scene. It might be the glare reflecting off a fence post, the sheen of wet grass, or the lights of an office building late at night. The variance of material and its direct application over the woven image is a direct comment on the ability of social media to misrepresent, a means for people to 'correct', to primp the scene and image. Quick shot and throw a filter on it.

A noticeable aspect in this series of work is the different use of format. Cooper has often used the square in relation to social media and also as a representation of the pixel but activates a further abstraction in the images that are more literal landscapes. Cooper does the opposite with the more abstract images through the use of the panorama. The panoramic proportion has been used for the more abstract image and this signs the landscape through format. It also plays an interesting role when considering it in terms of time and how a panoramic photograph is created through the stitching or seaming of multiple captures. This is clever in that the 'Landscape at 115kph' pieces are representing the rapid viewing of the scene out the car window, a viewing experience that replicates the motion of the phone camera in creating a 'pano'. 'Daily dose of perspective (hashtag sunset)', 2023 splits the sunset up into the instagram grid of nine tiles, and cleverly dissects the nature and importance of the 'feed'. Each piece is a stand alone, a building block of the overall scene, the pixel, made up of pixels.

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'Slow Pixels' is a show that has enabled Cooper to absorb these places into her, to grip on like dye stains on fingers. What stays with you after being in a place and how do we relate to these expansive scenes. It can't just be through our social media feeds. The chaos and destruction of the fires stayed with Cooper, they helped shape her passion of natural dye but also gave her a deep respect for taking in a place through careful observation. A long look instead of a quick phone snap, and as her silk threads across her loom, she is able to see her world in pixels, to zoom in and focus on the make up and the building blocks of these awe inspiring scenes.

James Kerr, 2023