

DALE FRANK

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth 31 May - 13 July 1997

GowLangsford Gallery, Auckland 22 July - 9 August 1997

City Gallery, Wellington 4 October - 30 November 1997

MOLECULAR REALITY

In Ken Russell's 1980 film *Altered states*, William Hurt isolates himself in a sensory deprivation tank in order to amplify the effects of hallucinogenic mushrooms he has ingested. The film's plot tracks his increasingly intensified drug experiences; eventually Hurt's psychological states become physically manifest — his body actually becomes a mass of swirling cosmic antimatter. On the way, his hallucinogenic lightspeed travels are imaged in terms of cosmic organic erupting bubbles of fluid colour. Like a flashbulb in the face, these exploding balloons of liquified light send the senses reeling although the reference remains a bodily one. What is suggested by these fireworks is a corporeal energy that accelerates to become one with some sort of cosmic energy; all those little corpuscles getting faster and faster until they become pure energy.

What drugs do is redesign the world a little. Not too much, just enough to make you realise how fascinating your surroundings could be if you really paid attention. And drugs never let you forget for a moment how much pre-existing information you have to ignore in order to believe your life is significant.¹

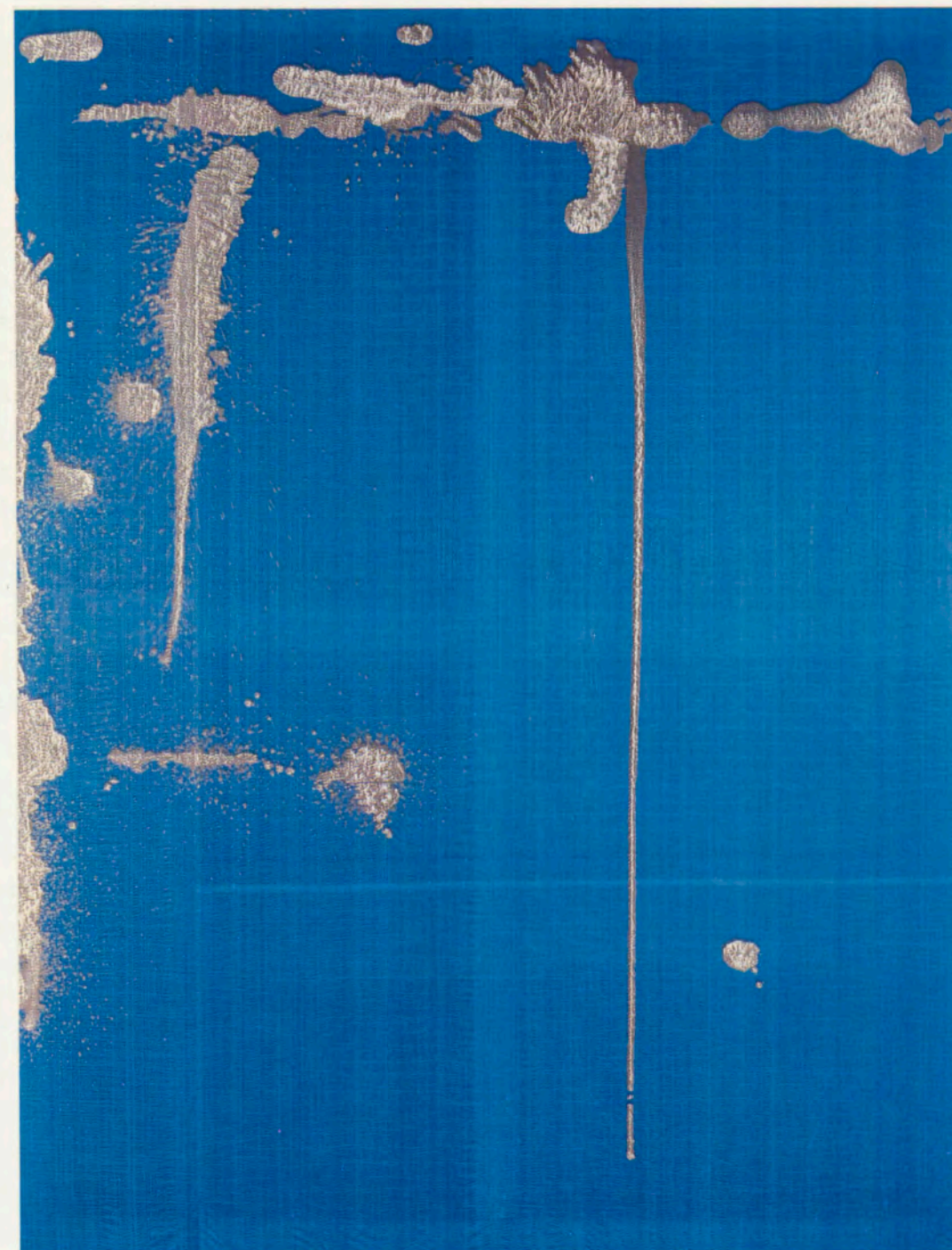
As Charles Ray's statement above affirms, the drug experience is all about experientiality. It is about the experiential nature of the world and the body. Here there is an intensity that focuses on objects and things outside, while simultaneously amplifying everything our body does from within. The physiological state of being stoned, for instance, can double as a metaphor for perception. "Rather than use the term simply to describe a mild hallucinogenic state, we have adopted it to characterise a sustained and close interaction with the images and surfaces encountered daily."²

Dale Frank's work, through its imaging of the corporeal, induces a similar sort of intensity. His drawings and paintings from the early 1980s also

concern themselves with extremes of bodily experience, often represented by sinuous and slippery humanoid or organic forms. His graphite drawings in particular suggest fields of taut skin or musculature punctuated with eyes, orifices, genitals. Where the drawings exist on a continuum of physiological energy eternally suspended, Frank's newest paintings arrive at the final moment of full bodily realisation — the orgasmic or amphetamine rush.

If Frank's most recent works are about the exigencies of painting, they also make clear the crucial relationship between painting and corporeality. The exemplars of this tradition, Yves Klein and Jackson Pollock, differently embody intensity as manifest in painting. Klein's blue paintings suggested that the painting could inaugurate an intense effect of physiological and psychological perceptibility (Wolfgang Laib's pollen installations, or James Turrell's light works produce a similar effect). Pollock essentialised the physical gesture; the loops and skeins of paint that existed in the air prior to their falling across his canvases are the trace of an intense physical action.

Frank's recent resin paintings actualise the bodily experience via their creation and the visual representation that is their result. To produce the works, Frank pours the resin across the canvas; this must be done while the canvases are almost flat, propped slightly on paint tins or boxes. For up to 36 hours the paintings are rotated, tipped at different angles so that the resin can form pools without collecting too heavily in one area, or running off the surface. The performative element of these works is obvious. Once completed and hung on the wall, the resin often continues to slowly move and form sacs, the outer layers plasticised, the insides still liquid. It takes months for the works to cure, and they undergo perceptible changes over time. In some recent works, the intention has been for the resin to run from the surface of the painting making contact with the gallery floor, producing columns and pools. Here the



The great artists cum shot 1996
aluminium on traditional dyed woven Chinese fibreglass, 2600 x 2000mm

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visual and conceptual references to the body become apparent. The paintings are oozing, living beings, they speak of the liquidity of the body. I am reminded in this instance of certain works by Mike Kelley, particularly his *Rothko's blood stain (artist's conception)/body print (self portrait as the Shroud of Turin)* 1985, two sheets suspended and stained/painted. As Colin Gardner suggests, these works traffic in the terrain of libidinal politics: "by associating Rorschach tests (Freud), religious shrouds (mysticism), post-coital stains, and Yves Klein's body paintings, Kelley metamorphoses the religious shroud into a sexual symbology, into a discourse on art."³ The themes of sexuality and mysticism are also strong elements of Frank's work, evident not only in his titles but in the appearance of his paintings as evoking the ejaculatory.

In particular resin paintings, the resin is poured over an intense monochrome field of acrylic paint: red, deep green or blue. These are monochromes in the generous sense of the term: their surfaces are multi-layered, uneven (although "true" monochromes possess these very qualities; despite the familiarity afforded via reproduction, works by Kasimir Malevich and Ad Reinhardt are rich with subtlety). The monochrome, as it was recuperated by minimalism and colour-field painting, is inherently related to the body and to notions of physicality. This is made clear in the work of Robert Morris and others. For instance, Jules Olitski has spoken of attempting to materialise pure colour in real space, producing what might be described as colour-field sculptures.⁴ More recently, work that utilises the monochrome makes complex a relation between painting and the body. Richard Prince's shiny car hoods evoke the body through the implied relationship of the body to the automobile; this is amplified by the intense psychological space the car (and its parts) occupies in contemporary life.

Despite their liquified surfaces and suggestion of the body's own wet emanations, Frank's paintings do not entertain the idea of the abject. There is nothing

deliberately debased or pathetic about them. Their references to the spilling of bodily fluids are not about revulsion or horror of these substances. The formlessness they propose isn't nihilistic, but suggests a consciousness that focuses on the body's internal flows and rhythms. These paintings are figurative and scientific inasmuch as they seek to define the body in biological terms. The trace of performance that resides in the resin paintings (Frank's own labour and action in creating them) remains in the actuality of the works themselves. And it is also enacted for the viewer in each painting's own internal dynamics.

In his most recent paintings the artist has employed the assistance of the bodies of others. Their impressions on the canvas are direct, and often readable, but the smeared and abstracted marks their activity makes also represent the body as abstracted. Directing his paint-covered assistants to wrestle or have sex on the large canvases, Frank records their activity as a continuity of bodily traces. These paintings carry the physical impression of bodily contact and of temporal experience, conveying a sense of physical and mental energy.

These works also relate to and extend Frank's own performance practice. The artist's direction of his assistants is a performative action, as are their own actions and movements. It is through their performance that the image on the canvas is created, so this image is both actual evidence and an abstracted, allusive bodily trace. The impressions of footprints, torsos and limbs present the body in its real scale actuality. The abstracted patterns and smeared marks on the painting's surface suggest the energies expended by the molecular and synaptic realities of the body. The paintings could be considered both representational and abstract, but they also present different degrees of bodily reality. Like Frank's drawings and paintings of the early 1980s which depicted the body as fields of skin or muscle, the body-print paintings suggest both the

recognisable forms (feet, arms, torso) of the body's external surface, and the pulses and flows of its inner being: corporeal, psychological and genetic.

Frank's work explores the intensities that define our own physicality as biological organisms, and the chemical and electrical impulses (libidinal, narcotic and somatic) that create our psychological life. His performances, drawings and paintings have allowed us to consider the physiological advantages of existence that encompasses both social and molecular reality.

Christopher Chapman

- 1 Charles Ray, from an interview with Dennis Cooper, 1990, published in *El Jardín salvaje* Fundación Caja de Pensiones, Madrid, 1991. p 34.
- 2 Veralyn Behenna and Rick Pirro *stoned (HighLow)* Ruth Bloom Gallery, Santa Monica, 1993. unpaginated.
- 3 Colin Gardner "Let it bleed: *The sublime and Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile*" in Elisabeth Sussman *Mike Kelley: catholic tastes* Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1993. p 130.
- 4 See Kenworth Moffett *Olitski: new sculpture* Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1977.

Sections of this essay have appeared previously in Christopher Chapman, "Reality used to be a friend of mine" and "The liquidity problem and the rush" *Dale Frank: satellite of love* Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra, 1994.

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List of works

The green stripe – Queenie art by someone with three kids – Amen 1996
enamel and acrylic on traditional dyed woven Chinese fibreglass
2600 x 2000mm

The great artists cum shot 1996
aluminium on traditional dyed woven Chinese fibreglass
2600 x 2000mm

The smell 1996
varnish on acrylic on linen
2600 x 2000mm

The Reverend Robert Walker skating on thin ice (room service) 1996
varnish on acrylic on linen
2600 x 2000mm

The problem in translating the loss of self in Giacometti's walking under the rain when confronted Arp's objects arranged according to the law of chance and navels 1995
enamel on acrylic on linen
2600 x 2000mm

The lost cave like an exploding sphincter on a distant shore – the echo – so what's new 1995
ink and acrylic on linen
1980 x 1980mm

The companion to just great guys, a painting for someone we know 1996
aluminium on linen
2000 x 2000mm

The green dead slut painting – Troy 1995
varnish on acrylic on linen
2000 x 2000mm

The green hole 1995
varnish on acrylic on linen
2000 x 2000mm

Summer love and the swimmer problem – the sea of love 1995 – 1996
varnish on acrylic on linen
2600 x 2000mm

Dale Frank is an Australian artist. He has exhibited extensively both in Australia and internationally and has been included in the 1984 Venice Biennale and in two Biennales of Sydney. His work is held in major public and private collections in Australia, the USA, Switzerland, Italy and New Zealand.

Christopher Chapman is Associate Curator of Australian painting and sculpture at the Art Gallery of South Australia.



The smell 1996
varnish on acrylic on linen, 2600 x 2000mm

Cover
The lost cave like an exploding sphincter on a distant shore – the echo – so what's new 1995
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