

Termitarium

Termites build their nests through the slow and repetitious aggregation of soil, sticks, saliva and excrement. Odd and bulbous, these animal architectures rise like monuments out of the earth, pockmarked and baking in the sun. The insects work overtime, collecting matter and constructing their little world, complete with a cellar, galleries, air chimneys, fungus combs for nourishment, nurseries for their young, and a royal cell. With all these components, termitaria are as complex as the architectures humans have built for thousands of years, protruding like ruins in the landscape.

When I describe Paul's work to others, I often fall back on landscape. In the West, landscape images have been arcadias for reflection, mirrors for beauty, markers of the sublime, and colonisers of space. There are real problems with some if not all these functions, as romanticising "nature" through the subjective process of image-making can be dangerous to humans, cultures and the environment. Formally, however, the visual structure of landscape could be seen as open, as in Timothy Morton's understanding, where "things aren't totally meshed together,"ⁱ giving them potential. This is because landscapes don't end; they push out of the frame endlessly, and what is captured in the image is just a moment – an abstraction created through the artist's decision to frame space at a particular point in time. Tony Clark's myriorama comes to mind: a fragmented landscape work he began in the 1980s where the pieces are united by a singular horizon line and a handful of earthy and acidic colours. Now dispersed across the world, these small paintings can come back together at any time, in any iteration – an infinite subject.

To talk about landscapes in connection to Paul's painting is fitting – they have anchored his work. But first and foremost, Paul is a painter consumed by what paint can do. Deleuze spoke about the concept of sensation in relation to Francis Bacon, saying that "the task of painting is defined as the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible."ⁱⁱ Working quickly, often in short, timed sessions, Paul's painting practice has progressively become more engaged with capturing energy, forces or sensation than depicting or illustrating a specific location.

It makes sense then why the landscape in Paul's work is in flux – it is not one landscape, but a handful drawn from his memory and experiences. As a subject, this landscape is a coalesced and changeable site where elements are assembled in their various intensities. For the past several years, Paul has begun his paintings by referencing a series of photos taken in Greece when he explored the ruins scattered like cosmic dust across the country. These photos are not of the ruins in

their entirety but of the rubble that crumbles and gathers at their edges. These images are not landscapes but their parts. They are rock, sea, sky. Blue, ochre, green. Fragments of the whole and, somehow, the whole itself.

In Paul's studio, these reference images are not printed and pinned to the wall or even kept in a box – they don't need to be that solid because they are not that solid. They are open. Lit on a laptop screen, he occasionally consults them to find out what they would do, what nature would do, with various colours, shapes and gestures. When landscapes are collapsed, they are elements in elastic relationships; they are oblique and changeable, like a poem, less a story. Cezanne looked and looked at Mont Sainte-Victoire like Adnan looked and looked at Mount Tamalpais, and there would never be enough time to make enough paintings in their image.

To look at a subject as infinite allows it to shift in and out of itself. Paul takes disparate elements, usually from the natural world, and assembles them to make his paintings. In his exhibition, *Termitarium*, the landscapes from his past works have further disintegrated. They have morphed, abstracted and become nebulous. They are now gestural fields that zoom in and out, privileging the fragment over the certainty of the whole, thinking via their materiality. In this way, painting can be as open as landscapes, never fixed, undone and full of life.

Written by Laura Skerlj

ⁱ Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (Penguin Books, 2021 [2018]), p. 20.

ⁱⁱ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021 [1981]), p. 41.