



Photo: Sam Hartnett

WAITĀKERE CONTEMPORARY GALLERY

*PHILIPPA BLAIR:
DOWN UNDER COVER*

4 July – 6 September 2020

PHILIPPA BLAIR: *DOWN UNDER COVER*

Welcome to the electric world of Philippa Blair. Fluent in translating the tumultuous world around her, Blair has been stretching the conventional limits of painting for 50 years, both in Aotearoa and abroad.

New York-based art critic Lilly Wei has observed: “Her gestures crash against each other like a multi-car pile up but in fact are controlled impulses, rhythmically taut, expertly choreographed body movements embodied in stroke and color, a bravura orchestration that is both physical and emotional.”

As Blair tunes into the world around her, she feels the energy and rhythm of both city streets and nature alike. In this way, her paintings hum with the familiar rhythms of life, acting as vibrant observations that are boldly autobiographical.

Down under cover displays Blair's all-embracing, ever-contemporary approach to painting, and acknowledges her relocation to Aotearoa after many years working abroad, where she built her reputation as an internationally renowned artist. Since her return, Blair has been quietly working ‘down under cover’ out West in her Henderson studio, continuing to chart new territories in paint.

As poet Jorge Luis Borges once said: “Reality is not always probable, or likely.” In this exhibition, you won't find a chronological hang or a linear exhibition essay. While Blair's two most recent periods are explored—Los Angeles (1995-2014) and Auckland (2015 to present)—the exhibition is a selection of individual painterly statements, accompanied by short narrative commentaries. Thus, *Down under cover* is a series of opportunities to pause, as much as it is a feast for the eyeballs after our recent screen-centric lock down.

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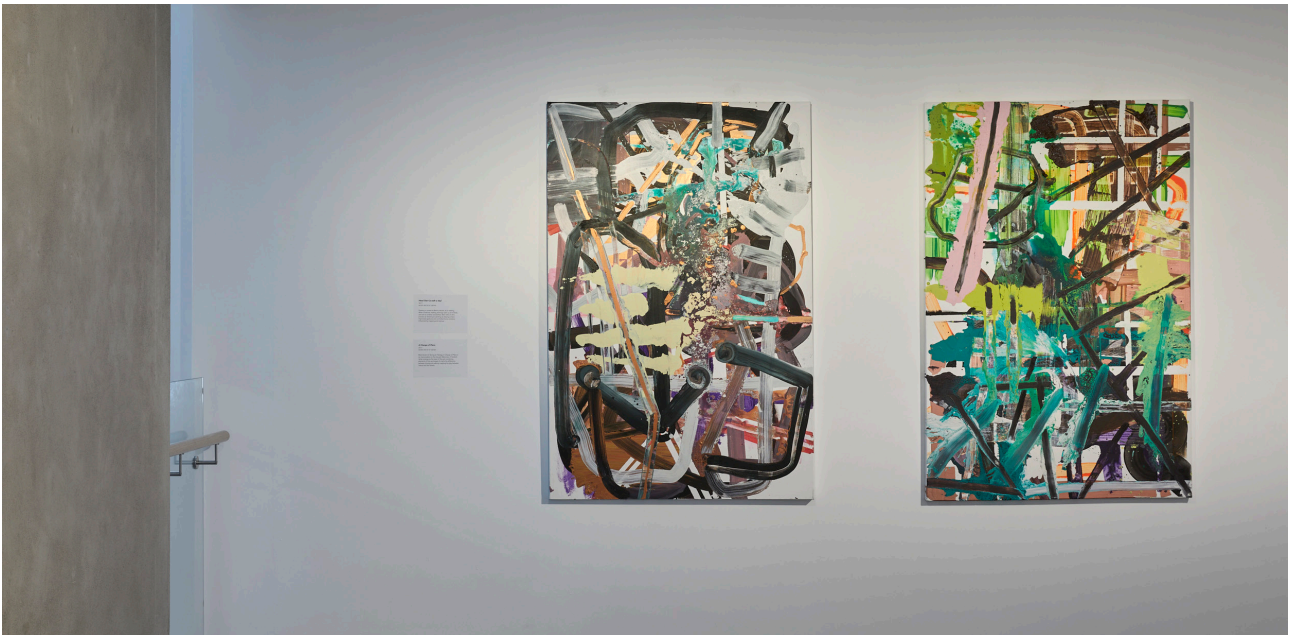
Down Under Cover

2016

acrylic on canvas

Examining the mythology of the labyrinth, *Down Under Cover* represents the shift in Blair's painting that occurred after she moved back across the ocean, home to Tāmaki Makaurau in 2014. Here, Blair works from her Henderson studio, located where the Waitākere Ranges trickle into West Auckland. This site is a space of change, where streams and parks stitch the city and the forest together.

Rather than physical, the process of navigation in *Down Under Cover* is psychological, as chaos and infrastructure appear to wrestle from inside the painting, pushing clarity and lucidity outwards to the surface.

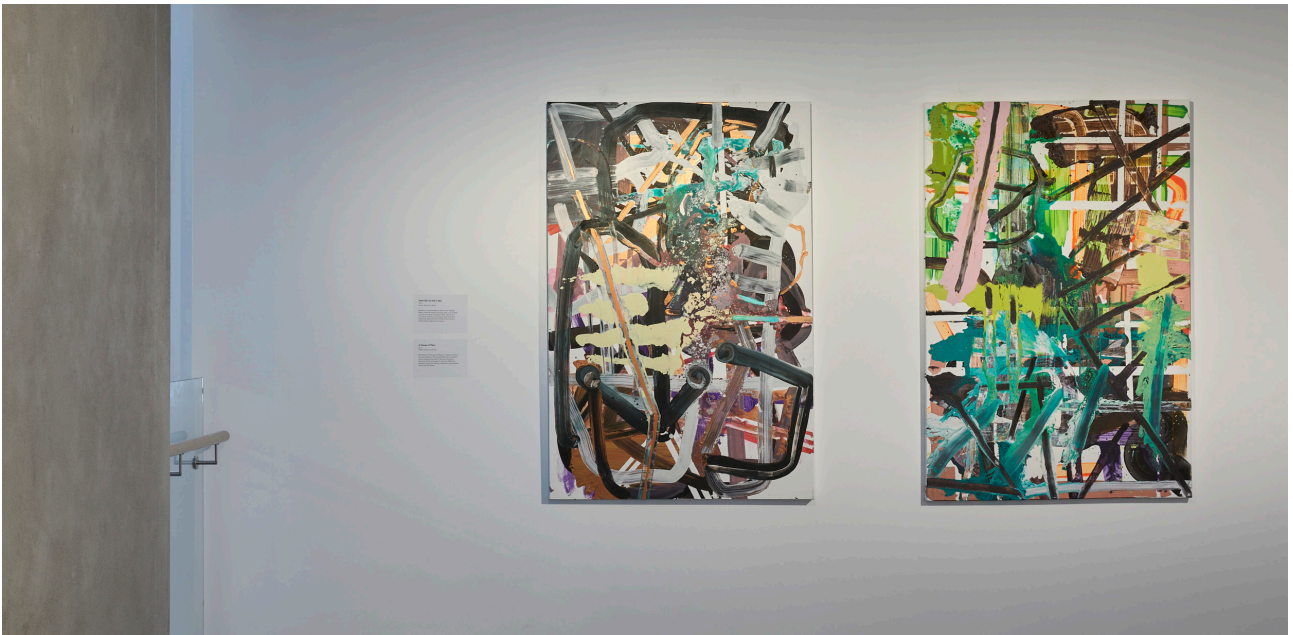


Head Start (a walk a day) (left)

2017

acrylic and oil on canvas

Drawing is central to Blair's practice, as is walking. When combined, walking drawings open up an entirely new set of cerebral possibilities. Blair refers to this process as 'drawing as painting as drawing', where improvised gestures and controlled forms combine, influenced by mapping and memory.



A Change of Plans (right)

2017

acrylic and oil on canvas

Reminiscent of driving to Titirangi, *A Change of Plans* is an improvisation on the city grid. Memories of Scottish tartan emerge as the base of the grid, combining elements of time and space. It charts the difference between driving and walking, mapping the play between nature and the streets.



Conversation (the weight of white)

2018

acrylic, spray enamel and oil on canvas

So often, the use of white is employed in a painting to denote lightness and space. In *Conversation*, white paint adds a dynamic weight to the canvas, creating an awareness of the juxtaposition of light and dark. Moving behind the white is a push and pull between warmer and cooler tones. Blair refers to this dialogue of action and free-play as “archi-tectonic”.



Hatch

2020

acrylic and oil on canvas

Painted in February of this year, *Hatch* is an alchemical meditation, almost jazz-like in the way it transforms, improvises and oscillates like a seismic statement. Mark Amery's 1997 *Evening Post* review of Blair's exhibition *Sound/Tracks* at Janne Land Gallery demonstrates this quality, in a way that could have been written yesterday:

"Like a dance party or the noises of facsimile and the internet, you not only hear it, you feel it. Blair's lines of richly applied paint shake as if the technology of humans is being threatened by natural force. The geographical reference is there again, the vibrations moving across the canvas like those recorded on a seismograph of fault lines around the Pacific Ring of Fire, from the San Andreas Fault to New Zealand."



Of Music and Agriculture

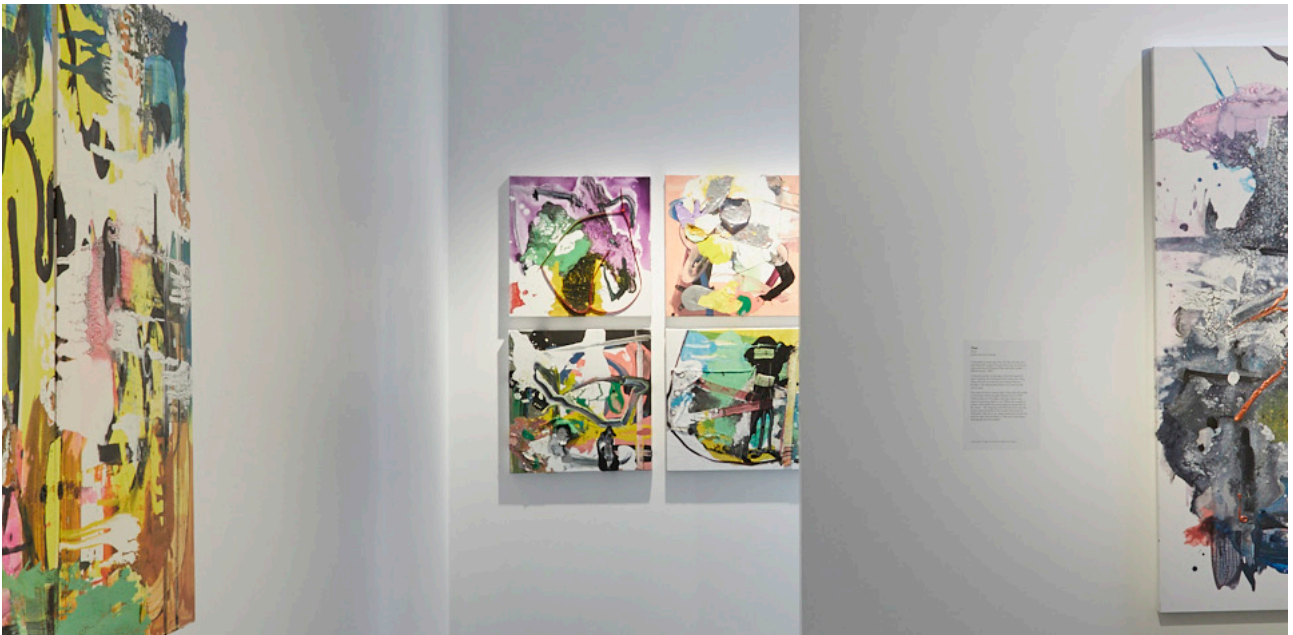
2020

acrylic and oil on canvas

Blair's mother Grace Mackenzie (1917-2014) was a pianist and mezzo soprano singer, and her father Dr ID Blair (1912-1989) was senior lecturer in microbiology at Lincoln University and author of *Micro-organisms and Human Affairs* (1943). Her father's life's work has influenced the way she prioritises experimentation and her geographical consciousness. Her mother's musicality encouraged discipline and gave her an awareness of the analogies between music and visual language.*

Working across multiple panels denotes an episodic sensibility, especially evident in *Of Music and Agriculture*. In three canvases, several narratives stretch and arc into one another to create a single, rhythmic organism brimming with language, spontaneity and balance.

* Philippa Blair, "Musicality" in *Femisphere 1* (2017), 34.



Horse Whisperer

2019

plastic, acrylic and oil on canvas

Untitled

2018

paint skin, paper, acrylic and oil on canvas

Untitled

2018

paint skin, acrylic and oil on canvas

Which Way

2019

fabric, acrylic and oil on canvas

"I am interested in idea and process using different media with drawing as a continuous thread."* — Blair

From a series of about fifty, these four small studies resemble painted drawings, and use an array of found objects including paint skins and discarded industrial materials from outside of her Henderson studio. As several processes converge — drawing, painting and collage — the immediacy of playfulness is preserved.

* Philippa Blair, Shippee Gallery NY artist notes, 1984.



Thaw (right)

2019

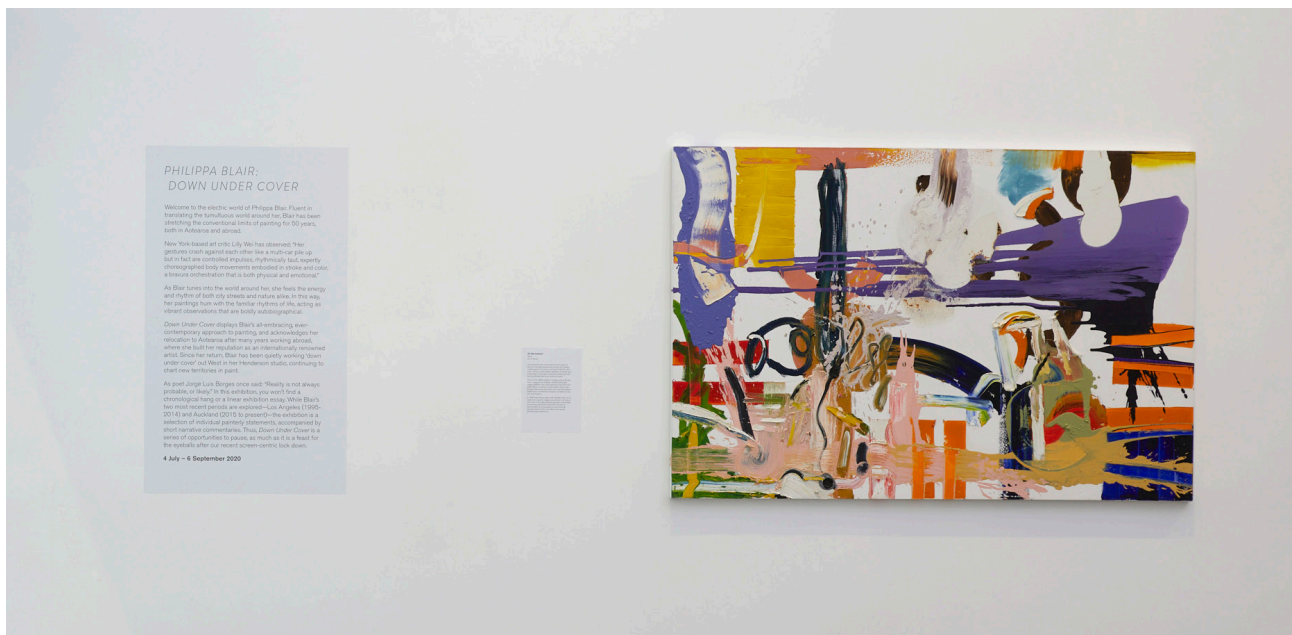
acrylic and oil on canvas

"I remember a winter day when the sky was blue and drenched with sunlight; though there was no wind, one was conscious of flowing air like cold clear crystal." — Rachel Carson, 1955.*

In the ecologically surreal age of the Anthropocene, when icebergs are melting and the oceans are rising, *Thaw* reminds us of the flux and change that can be seen in all natural phenomena, monumental and microscopic.

The pools of colour circling within *Thaw* echo the poetry of American marine biologist Rachel Carson (1907-1964). Author of *The Edge of the Sea*, Carson was aware of warming waters in the 1950s, and sought to create a field-guide that encouraged an awareness of the shore — the marginal world that links land and sea. Carson was interested in the constant and rhythmic obliteration that occurs as waves erode and smooth the sand, an idea that manifests in *Thaw* as oil and acrylic disintegrate into one another.

* Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (London: Staples Press, 1955), 6.



On the Lookout

2003

oil on canvas

As the earliest work in the show, *On the Lookout* is also the most light-hearted and comical. As a painter, creating space for humour in art can be difficult within such a serious medium. Blair's splotches of orange and purple reject conservatism, and pump relaxed, go with the flow attitude that no art school can teach.

Shown in the 2004 exhibition *Cutting Loose* at Double Vision Gallery in Los Angeles, *On the Lookout* also relates to Blair's more recent paintings from 2019 and 2020. There is a pattern of improvisation that moves through these works and across time, one that keeps a rhythm but is not definitive and does not adhere to any one kind of genre.

In 1992, Kate Darrow aptly wrote that Blair does not fit neatly into a specific category as outlined in art history: "Her work is not solely abstract, figurative or landscape. It has strong expressionist elements; however, to describe Blair as an expressionist would exclude important facets of her work. Blair's work moves between these definitions."



Nascondino (hide and seek)

2005

oil on canvas

Nascondino (hide and seek) holds within it an ambiguous energy. Cool blue, pink and yellow strokes suggest movement in all directions, noisy and fast. Hiding among this cool action is perhaps a helmeted figure — starting up and weaving through busy Italian streets on a Vespa.

Blair first travelled to Italy in 1988 and has returned many times to teach at the Santa Reparata International School of Art in Florence, immersing herself in the history of painting and classical architecture.

Not long after this painting was created in Blair's Venice Beach studio, Julian Dashper (1960-2009) was looking at *Cass (1936)* by Rita Angus. Wondering who the blank-faced figure on the platform could be, he suggested it is symbolic of all his artist colleagues who had ever waited to go somewhere else: "Be it Barbara Strathdee or Dane Mitchell, Philippa Blair or Neil Dawson."*

For years, Blair has captured the imagination of New Zealanders as a traveller, an artist who, as Dashper imagined, felt that "collective weight of the severely stuffed suitcase." Blair's paintings reference movement through hints of aerial maps and memorised routes. They capture the very experience of moving through an unfamiliar place: the size and scale of international cities, and the overwhelming yet exhilarating feeling of being among new landscapes and languages.

* Julian Dashper, *To the Unknown New Zealander* (10 August – 14 October 2007), Christchurch Art Gallery.



Bushi (spiritual warrior)

2008

graphite, spray enamel, acrylic and oil on canvas

Blair first visited Los Angeles in 1980 to visit her brother Douglas in Hollywood. In 1990, she was included in *Three From New Zealand* with Ralph Hotere and Christine Hellyar at the Long Beach Museum of Art, California.

In 1995, Blair and her husband settled in Los Angeles where they built a life in Venice Beach and later in San Pedro. While Blair may have been familiar with Californian living already, re-establishing her painting practice in a dramatically different context required a new kind of courage to be summoned.

Painted in Venice Beach, *Bushi (spiritual warrior)* is also an example of the way Blair combines movement and material on the floor of her studio to build a contrasting experience for the viewer. In his 1899 book *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, Inazo Nitobe describes how the bushi (warrior) code is made up of control and action. For Blair, contrasting virtues are part of a sculptural way of approaching the practice of painting. It allows for primary shapes and figures to form and blitz across the canvas in all directions without being held down, but it also tempers the work with moments of calm.

In his introduction for the *Three From New Zealand* exhibition catalogue, Long Beach Museum of Art Director Harold B. Nelson described the way Blair's work: "summons a metaphorical world in which art plays an evocative, transformative role." The fluency and energy bursting from *Bushi (spiritual warrior)* many years later in 2008 is no doubt thanks to the presence of Blair's own inner warrior.



Escapement

2008

graphite, spray enamel, acrylic and oil on canvas

“Blair’s work, always energetic and gutsy, is a barometer channelling energy from various sources — cultural, political, geological, meteorological.”
— Tessa Laird.*

Throughout the 1970s, Blair made paintings that were more like installations. Canvas skirts, shelters, cloaks, books and windows were slashed, sewn and folded, expanding the field of painting. These works were fed by her environment, for example, *Finding my way to Canberra* (1984) or *South Island Mountain Cloak* (1985).

In 1995, when Blair set up her Los Angeles studio, she returned to working with stretched canvas. The drama that was once outside was condensed within a four cornered arena, possessing what Tessa Laird (b. 1971) has called a new formal toughness. *Escapement* (titled after the control mechanism in a watch or clock) could be an urban mindscape, or a plan for a theatrical stage set, or a measure of change in the air.

* Tessa Laird, *Philippa Blair and Joyce Weiss: NY/NZ/CA*, Palos Verdes ArtCenter, California, 2002.



Buscabulla (trouble maker)

2017

acrylic and oil on canvas

“*Buscabulla* is a slang word in Puerto Rico. I guess I’ve always been kind of attracted to slang words or the words that people in the street use. It kind of has a bad tone to it, but if you break the word apart — *busca* means ‘to look for’ and *bulla* means ‘cheer’ or ‘upheaval.’”

— Raquel Berrios, 2014.*

One half of the band *Buscabulla*, Raquel Berrios (b. 1981) explains the contrasting meaning of the term *buscabulla*, which can be seen in Blair’s painting of the same title. Like the music it’s titled after, *Buscabulla* is ghostlike and surreal. There are suggestions of nature and the over-arching vision of Blair’s practice as it moves in and around the geometry of its own environment.

* Alison Baitz, “Discovery: Buscabulla” in *Interview Magazine*, 2014.



Dancing Bear Diptych

2009

graphite, spray enamel, acrylic and oil on canvas

The title *Dancing Bear Diptych* conjures themes of entertainment and performance. At the centre of the painting is an entity created from a series of figure-eight movements. From this talisman or mythological creature, light shoots out with a performative energy. These beams could be a series of roving Hollywood searchlights or luminous gestures conferring with the graffiti and street art of Los Angeles.

Blair's frequent use of spray painted directional lines sit within a broader dialogue around new aesthetic sensibilities in contemporary New Zealand art, one that arguably began with Ralph Hotere (1931-2013) and continues today in the work of artists such as Christina Pataialii (b. 1988). These methods are also very much a part of the New York School, which Blair was more aligned with when she moved to Los Angeles in 1995.



Intersection / Pacific Coast Highway

2004

oil on canvas

The Pacific Coast Highway is known as one of the most scenic drives in the world, taking 10 hours to drive from San Diego, through Los Angeles and San Francisco up to Seattle. Blair recalls driving from Malibu to Santa Barbara, a one hour trip north of Los Angeles through light and space, past iconic rows of palm trees within constant view of the moana.

Intersection / Pacific Coast Highway documents Blair getting her Californian drivers licence and driving on the freeway. A figurative U-turn dips into the right side of the diptych, the left side featuring a sharp right then left turn as it moves down the canvas. Among these movements, drips and swipes document the velocity of the experience.

While *Intersection* has not previously been shown in Aotearoa, it featured in a major 2005 group show at the Riverside Art Museum, *Flow*, curated by LA critic Peter Frank. The exhibition brought together iconic Californian painters such as Suzan Woodruff, Joe Goode and Ed Moses. After a decade of soaking up the tumultuous energy of LA, Blair was akin to her American contemporaries, but always painting towards the Pacific.



Figures of Speech (a question of language)

2004

oil on canvas

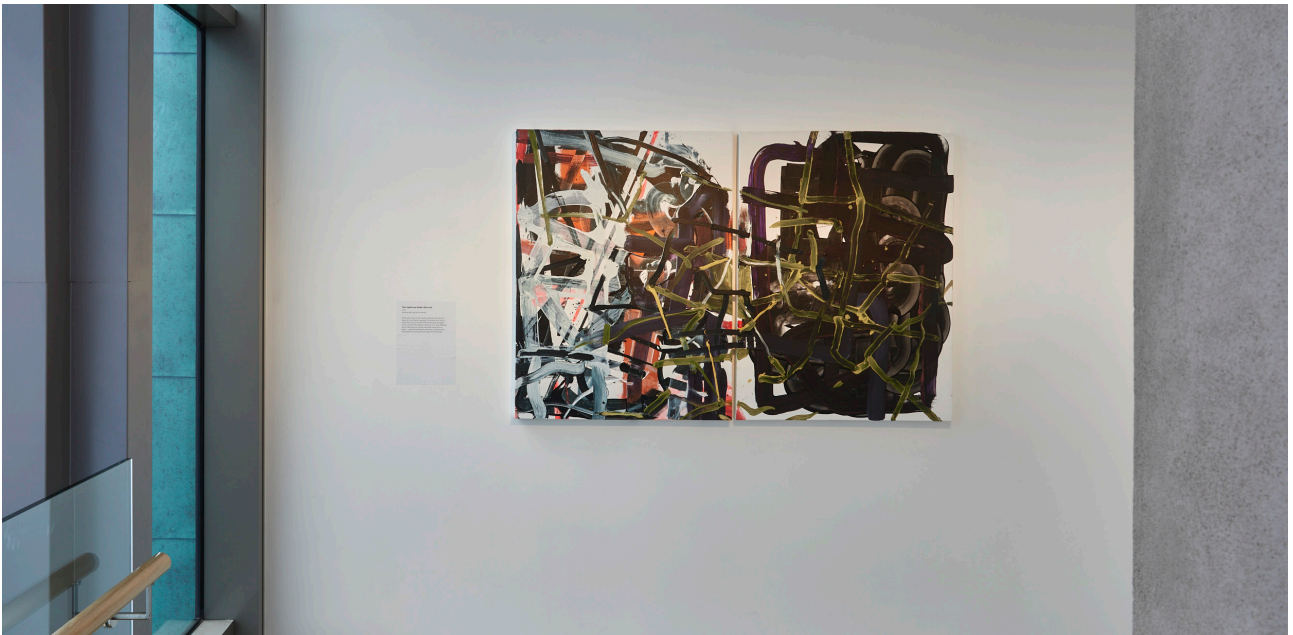
“[...] the ear hears the words shaped and molded by the tone of voice, its nuances and rhythms, pauses, inflections, volume and speed. It moves through time in a forward momentum. It cannot be retracted, only retraced in memory.”
— Jacki Apple, 2018.*

A minimal yet complex series of mostly vertical gestures kinaesthetically dance across *Figures of Speech (a question of language)*. Among these, a question mark and a tuning fork offer familiar shapes to grab onto within the complex, often subconscious visual language of painting.

These shapes also reference a psychological shift in Blair's work, as she began to consider the role of the artist as an interpreter of a moment. *Figures of Speech* is also an exercise in painting sound; as each gesture and shape move like notes across a sheet of music.

For Blair, creating a painting that almost stutters is a challenge to ideas of visual language and articulation in art. It is also a challenge to language itself, as the painter attempts to fix and articulate rhythm and movement through illustration.

* Jacki Apple (b. 1941), 'Performing Language: From Stage to Page' in *Fabrik Magazine*, 2018.

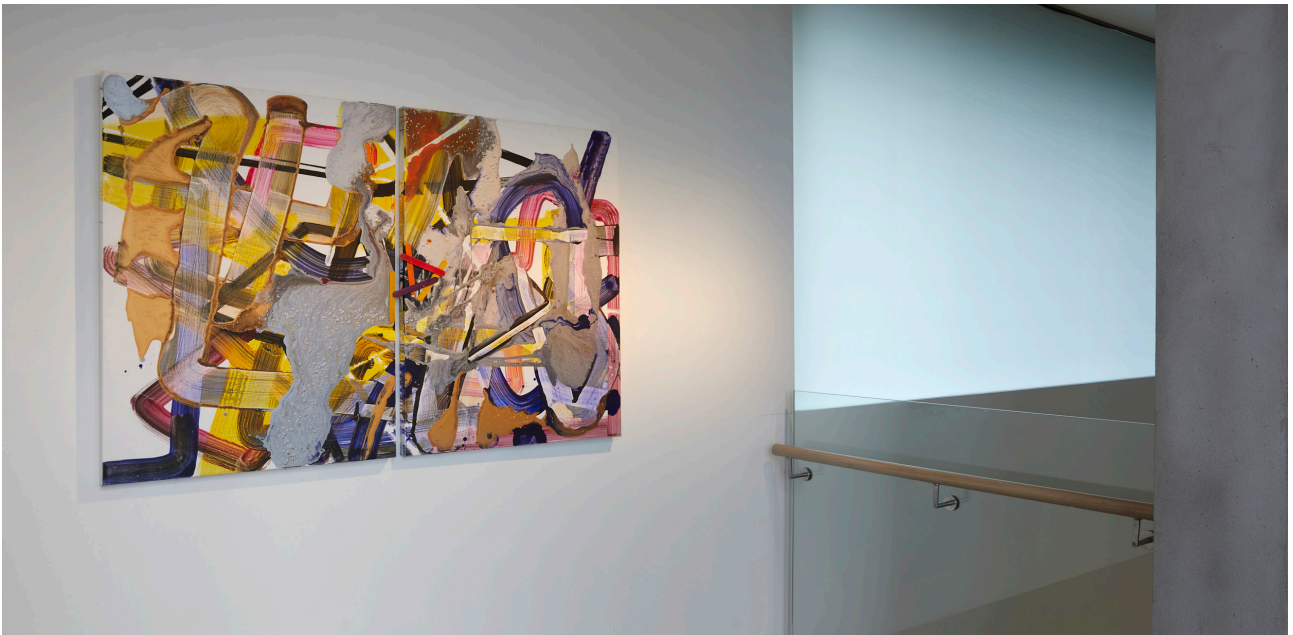


Two heads are better than one

2017

wood, acrylic and oil on canvas

At the very heart of *Two heads are better than one* is a labyrinth, one that sits squarely in the brain as it tries to recall the circuit of a walk. Different terrains and paths criss-cross like the irregular networks of a maze. Walking around and around, up and over, back home and out again — generating abstract memories, composed, de-composed and recomposed through the mind's eye.



Potion-Transmotion

2017

wood, acrylic and oil on canvas

Immediately visible atop this diptych is an iridescent alchemy, fluidly crossing between canvases, linked by small sticks that tentatively highlight the presence of two painted areas. The word 'transmotion' is how Blair's late husband understood her work; aptly describing the way Blair employs the two-panelled diptych format to create structure and ambiguity.



*This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of
my dear husband, the architect John Rolf Porter
(1941-2018) — Philippa Blair*