

Topography or typography.

Jon Campbell's recent paintings

by Chloé Wolifson 2015

There is a strange satisfaction to be had in writing the word fuck.

Although, fuck doesn't represent the same taboo it once did. Formerly employed proportionate to the speaker's current level of rage, sobriety, or both, its use is no longer quite as predictable. Fuck can now be heard peppering conversations in any number of contexts. However, beyond the relative informality of social media, there remains a degree of restraint that has prevented the so-called f-word from entering the broader written lexicon with a similar fervour to its spoken equivalent.

Jon Campbell knows this. The Melbourne based artist's practice celebrates the language of the everyday, and is grounded in the slang that Australians do so uniquely well. Whether spelled out in gloss enamel paint on canvas, on a banner suspended from on high, sung and strummed in his various music projects, or shaped from fluorescent neon tubing, Campbell has played with onomatopoeias, interpreted the motifs of advertising, and honoured the spirit of suburbia. Previously Campbell has paid tribute to the iconic pub combo of *Chicken Parma & Pot*, the positive affirmation *Pure Bewdy*, and the shrugular *Dunno*. He has captured the nicknames of legendary sportspeople, described classic Aussie takeaway food, and proclaimed that *It's a world full of lying bastards*.

This most recent series of paintings finds the artist delving further into his exploration of colour, form and tone, with the role of language moving from aesthetic focal point to subtle painterly device. Campbell has dissolved the borders of his letters and erased the spaces between them. With a nod to early modernism, he has removed the variable of the curve. The resulting angular font doesn't give itself up easily, with the works seeming closer to topography than typography. Some viewers might enjoy their geometric dynamism while never discovering the phrases hiding in plain sight.

While the occasional area of gradation hums amongst the solid shapes, the hard-edged composition and gloss enamel surfaces portray Campbell's classic upbeat slickness. The voids inside and around each letter are painted in stronger tones than the letters themselves. Cream, beige, grey and chartreuse give way to orange, turquoise, red and black. These bold, scattered triangles and trapeziums leap off the canvas towards the viewer, advancing in space to differing degrees like strings of bunting flapping in the breeze. Campbell has described this effect as the negative becoming positive, which also describes his treatment of his subject matter – capturing and celebrating the laconic intention behind phrases like *Up shit creek* and *Fuck wit*.

The artist has allowed the tall, skinny canvases to accommodate just two or three letters across, forcing each word to conclude on the following line. (Occasionally, when Campbell hasn't enough letters to evenly fill his support, a blank rectangle occupies the bottom right of the canvas like a blinking cursor.) This strategy encourages decoding of the message syllable by disjointed syllable, slyly drawing the viewer into the expression rather than belting them over the head with it. Bystanders become inadvertent art critics, mouthing *For fuck's sake* or blurting out *Fuck yeah!* as they consider the work. In the context of a contemporary art fair, paintings that whisper *What the fuck?* and *A bit average* elicit a particular potency.

These new paintings highlight the intersection of spoken, written and visual modes of communication, bringing experiential, lyrical and expressionistic narrative into the viewing experience.

No mean feat for what is, at its essence, the painted word.