

INTERVIEW

This text is based on a series of conversations between David Homewood and Luke Sands, conducted June and July 2020, on the topic of Sands' rat poison paintings, a series of monochromatic works in which rat poisons are used as colourants. In October 2020, Sands will present Blue Paintings, an exhibition of new rat poison works at Guzzler, a gallery in Rosanna, Victoria, Australia.

DH

When did you start making paintings with rat poison?

LS

The first time I made a painting with rat poison was in late 2012. I saw some Ratsak under the sink in my studio in Abbotsford. This was the first time I thought to use rat poison as a painting material. Although I don't think that I'd handled rat poison before, I was already familiar with it. I'd seen open packets of rat poison in domestic settings, like laundry cupboards and backyard sheds. The packet that I saw in my studio had a yellow and black design; it contained green rodenticide pellets.

DH

What is your interest in using rat poison?

LS

It's a common product, which you often see in supermarkets and hardware shops. I don't think I'm for or against the use of poisons. I'm not about to say that I understand the 'waste issue' in my neighborhood, or that I haven't poured Drano down the sink. Rat poison is a product that is bought and used by many. It's a consumable. It's a toxic material which is consumed, I guess,

twice: first, by the person who buys it; second, by the rat.

DH

Why use rat poison as an artistic material? What is it about this material that you find attractive?

LS

The material possesses a certain kind of chromatic intensity. This intensity, I think, is inseparable from its toxicity. Aside from its appearance, the potency of rat poison comes from its poisonousness. But, rat poison is meant to be consumed by rats—not by humans. We are not meant to ingest it. Eating rat poison is the opposite of what you should be doing.

DH

Yes, you are using a substance that shouldn't be touched or ingested. But artworks aren't meant to be licked or touched. Greenberg claimed that paintings are 'for eyesight alone'.

LS

Paintings hang on the wall; you're not supposed to touch them, or get too close to them. Yet they are made to be attractive, to draw us in, to be savoured.

DH

The optical primacy of painting guides the viewer's attention to the toxicity of the picture surface.

LS

Yes, that optical mode of address is complicated. In one sense, to look at the work is to inspect its toxic materiality. But viewing a rat poison painting not only creates an optical sensation: it also suggests an ingestive, or digestive sense. Visual perception may anticipate ingestive and digestive experience. That expe-

rience will either be one of acceptance or refusal, taste or distaste. What I mean is that the viewer's attention to these works seems very bound to the gut.

DH

The rat poison paintings look modernist, but they contaminate its idea of pure opticality.

LS

Historically, painting has always been pretty toxic. In Old Masters paintings, those old pigments... tin-yellow and white were lead-based. Vermillion contained mercury. Rembrandt, for example, is said to have used a pigment containing arsenic to depict gold embroidery.

DH

Chardin was forced to quit oil painting due to the effects of prolonged exposure to lead paint fumes. Goya, who sometimes applied paint to the canvas with his fingers, suffered from lead poisoning. For Chardin and Goya, lead poisoning was an occupational hazard. Van Gogh, on the other hand, tried to poison himself by eating yellow oil paint and drinking turpentine.

LS

The protagonist of Rembrandt's etching *The Rat Catcher* (1632) would have used a poison like arsenic to ply his trade. Oddly, Rembrandt was using this same material in his paintings.

DH

That's an interesting idea that brings us back to what we were saying before about modernist mediums specificity. Rembrandt's work could be seen as commenting on, or thematising, the material conventions of his main medium: painting. Maybe the ultimate message of *The Rat Catcher* is that painting is an unsavoury form.

LS

There is a possible analogy, also, between the rat catcher peddling his wares and the business-minded Dutch Master pushing the product. Rembrandt's paintings were in high demand for most of his life, although I think he died poor. There has never been quite the same demand for my rat poison paintings.

DH

Maybe we should sidestep discussing the current state of your art career for now, and your market value. But since you brought it up, I'm wondering whether you have palmed off any of the rat poison paintings?

LS

I've sold a few of these works, around 2013 and 2014. But one more thing about this issue of the material toxicity of painting: It relates not only to the process of production, but also to the artwork in its finished state. In the case of Rembrandt, unless you're an art conservator or restorer, you are probably not looking at the poisonousness of the materials as a central concern of the artwork. A Rembrandt is not generally regarded as a panel of arsenic on the wall. Whereas in the rat poison paintings, colour seems inseparable from poison. It is difficult to experience the painting and forget about its toxicity.

DH

It's true; the rat poison paintings show—or show off—their toxic materiality. But we haven't really discussed how this is achieved pictorially. How do these paintings force the spectator to contemplate their toxic constitution? Presumably, it has something to do with the fact that they are uniformly coated monochrome paintings.

LS

The sparseness of the composition directs our

attention to three primary properties of the work: colour, shape and surface.

DH

If I can interrupt for a minute... It is difficult to think of colour and shape as separate entities in the rat poison paintings. This is shown, I think, in the way that these untitled works are casually identified in conversation. I almost always refer to them by both their colour and shape, as well as (I suppose) their size: the 'small pink rectangle', the 'circular green painting', etc.

LS

I agree with what you say about the indistinguishability of colour and shape. I would add that the uniformity of the picture surface shows, in a plain way, the material constitution of the colour, pigment and texture. These aspects are also difficult to separate. The texture of these works varies considerably between series, but in all cases the chalky, or meally, texture evokes their source: rat bait pellets. If for whatever reason the spectator doesn't detect the rat poison ingredients, it could be stated on a room sheet.

DH

The texture of some paintings is coarse and granular, even crater-like; others have a smoother finish. We have already spoken about the association of the colour of Ratsak with poison. The texture of the rat poison paintings, I think you were saying, is like an index of their toxicity. The object declares that it is poisonous! There is nothing to hide!

LS

Yes, basically. But I'm not sticking readymade rat poison pellets to a picture surface. The process of production transforms the source material. There are multiple stages involved in the making of these works. First, the rat poison is crushed into smaller, indistinguishable particles. Initially, in 2012 in the Abbotsford studio, I wrapped a cloth around the pellets, crushing them with a hammer; in 2014 in Rozelle, I mashed the pellets in a bucket with a piece of timber. Recently, I ground the pellets with an electric coffee grinder. The broken-down pellets are always mixed with binding agents: PVA glue, white acrylic paint and water. These four ingredients are combined into a mixture, which is then applied evenly to the picture panel. The mixture is applied to the panel on a flat, horizontal surface. The goal is to achieve a uniform distribution of material.

DH

Why do you add white paint to the mixture? Doesn't it dilute, or subdue the potency—to use your word—of the poisonous colour that you want to emphasise? Also, doesn't breaking down the rat poison obscure or de-emphasise your source material?

LS

The white paint slightly alters the tint, but it also adds an opacity to the mixtures. It keeps the hue of the poison, which remains identifiable. The white paint seems to 'back' the colour and make it very visible. Crushing and grinding is necessary in order to arrive at a mixture that spreads evenly across the picture surface. The paint and glue are fixatives which ensure that the work, once dried, is materially stable. The categories of 'painting' and 'artwork' are important. This is partly

because an artwork—and especially a painting—solicits a mode of contemplative engagement.

DH

Your reference to the contemplative properties of painting, although it doesn't come as a surprise to me, might confuse some readers. Doesn't your appeal to the contemplativeness of painting contradict your chatter about the literalness of your works? Earlier, you seemed to be framing the rat poison paintings as materialist experiments in the vein of, say Stella. 'It is what it is.' I was also thinking of Rodchenko. 'I reduced painting to its logical conclusion... It's all over.' Are your toxic monochromes a pun on historical pronouncements of the death of the medium?

LS

I read or heard somewhere that Ryman said: 'Painting is new. Painting is a new thing.' Something like that. I think that he was mostly talking about the idea that in modernism, the medium focuses on its material and technical basis for the first time. I think he meant that painting had only recently (in the last century) tried to analyse itself. He said that whenever he makes a painting he feels like it's a new thing. He seems unconcerned with the preconception that there is nothing new anymore. For him, painting is a different way of communicating. It's not obsolete. I like this outlook.

DH

But you haven't addressed the contradiction. Doesn't contemplation imply a state of heightened perception? And doesn't this clash with the banality and literalness of your work?

LS

Yes you're right about the contradiction. The rat poison paintings are obvious and maybe mundane, and they cancel illusion and interiority. Yet they are still guided by the idea of painting as a portal, vehicle, or window that the spectator loses themselves in.

DH

Do you really think it is possible for spectators to 'lose themselves' in the work?

LS

The rat poison paintings are contemplative in more than one way. There is no focal point in a monochrome; a spectator looking for a focal point may contemplate the inability to find one. The temporal experience of looking and knowing, the perceptual and the cognitive, is one of continual deferral.

DH

The viewer maps and remaps the surface, but there is nothing to see.

LS

Nothing to see—nothing to notice, maybe? Another aspect of the rat poison paintings is their immersive chromatic effects. Green, for example, is used in hospital rooms; it is relaxing, passive and pacifying, calming... colours evoke different emotions... green is not void-like, like black... colour is a vehicle for emotion. Also related to a rat poison painting's contemplativeness is its appeal to mortality. We think about how we kill animals, how we relate to animals. The monochrome is a contemplative device: it forces the spectator to confront death, like in Damien Hirst or something.







DH

I want to return to consider how the rat poison paintings relate to the material history of painting. There is the art historical precedent of painters using egg tempera as a binding agent. The same ingredient, egg, is commonly used for cooking: baking, biscuits, cakes, etc.

LS

Yes and egg white or glair is used for sealing and glazing. There is the display context too; think of olden day bakery presentations of bread that've been lacquered, for long-term use in bakery ensembles and things like that.

DH

The bread doesn't go stale, and remains appetising. But your rat poison paintings are not made as food for human consumption. If a work, or part of a work, is ingested, serious harm or death will result. That said, these works also strangely resemble some foods.

LS

Well, most of the rat poisons contain a food ingredient of some kind. This ingredient (like cracked wheat or some kind of grain) lures the animal; it is a medium for the poison. Insofar as these food ingredients are a carrier for the poison, they function similarly to the picture supports of the rat poison paintings. My paintings are supposed to be attractive, or appetising. Their shapes resemble crackers, biscuits, cakes. They also entice with their colours and textures.

DH

I remember Alex Vivian once describing the surface of one rat poison painting—a small, pink rectangular work—as 'cake-like'.

LS

Biscuity, cakey.

DH

Do you think of these works as decorative? Your palette makes me think of colours that are used to make foods more appealing. Like Wayne Thiebaud or something. His work probably doesn't have too much in common with yours. But I'm also thinking of a reference closer to home: Robert Rooney's hard-edge paintings of cereal boxes and cake tins circa 1967.

LS

The pink is the colour of cake icing. There is a taste-like, food-like attraction to these works.

DH

They seem edible. This brings us back to the oral opticality of your paintings. The toxic effects of these works if ingested or digested, makes them seem 'off limits', 'violent' and 'edgy'. There is, maybe, a teenage avant-gardism about the rat poison paintings. But they also look like bakery goods. Only to be enjoyed in moderation!

LS

The same anticoagulant that's in some rat poisons is in heart tablets.

DH

Images that are addressed to the mouth.

LS

Yes, like still-life paintings. But the mode of consumption in the rat poison paintings is different from a still-life. In the latter, you salivate over the block of cheese. You want to reach out and take the cheese, a slice, a piece of the painting. In a rat poison painting, the food object isn't located within an imagined scene. The painting as a whole is the food object.

DH

What about the rat poison paintings that you are working on for your Guzzler exhibition? They have been drying for over three weeks. Is there a food reference in these works too?

LS

The blue rat poison works have a different ingestive appeal to the wheat and pink paintings, maybe even the green ones. The blue forms are less obviously food-like than the other paintings, due to their colour and shape. The appeal of the blue rat poison paintings seems more associated with pharmaceuticals, drugs, etc. This is implied by the moulded shapes of the paintings.

DH

The circular form is like a pill, and the square is like a pill; the large work mirrors a Panadol shape. Their gritty surface is reminiscent of pressed ecstasy tablets. It is relevant to note here that traces of rat poison, as well as other things like crushed glass, are said to be a common ingredient in MDMA tablets. Indeed, Ratsak is a common trope in ecstasy horror stories that warn impressionable youths of the dangers of recreational drug use.

LS

Mmm... the other blue pill is Viagra. The paintings might be pills to reinvigorate the older artist, remaking his earlier work.

DH

You've spoken about the gallery as a mouth before. Does this analogy relate to your new works?

LS

These paintings might be for the gallery in that sense. But that analogy doesn't make the artworks. It's the other way around: the works generate a history, or trail, of circulations and attachments.

DH

There is Neo's choice in *The Matrix* between the blue and red pill. To take the red pill is to confront the void. Whereas the blue pill—your pill—signals a refusal of truth, a faith in the reality of appearances. Can this distinction be mapped onto your rat poison works?

LS

That narrative attachment is as relevant as the ecstasy or Viagra references. Ultimately, the viewer projects whatever they want onto these works.

DH

Why did you outsource the fabrication of the MDF and aluminium for your picture supports?

LS

The aluminium and MDF were laser-cut so that the completed panels would embody the generic forms of the square and the circle, and the obround or stadium (i.e., Panadol painting).

DH

Your shapes are Platonic. Things that are 'straight or round and the surfaces and solids which a lathe or carpenter's rule and square produces from the straight and round', Plato argued, 'are beautiful, not like, most things, in a relative sense; they are always beautiful in their very nature, and they offer pleasures peculiar to themselves and quite unlike others. They have that purity which makes for truth. They are philosophical.' I remem-

ber when you were ordering parts for these paintings—the aluminium panels and MDF frames, you said that the square and circle paintings add up, in a way, to the obround, which consists of two semi-circles adjoined to the left and right sides of the square. What is the significance of this complementary geometry?

LS

Together, the geometries form a sequence. But I'm not really sure. In a sense, the three shapes reflect each other, and dissect each other.

DH

Did you ever consider painting onto a triangle?

LS

No, a triangle would be hard to ingest.

