

Matthew Couper in Conversation with Marcus Civin

I lived in Las Vegas until the end of 2020. I masked up and visited Matthew Couper's studio right before I left town. His exhibition *Matthew Couper: Isolation Paintings* was on view at Tauranga Art Gallery. The work in the exhibition marks a definitive direction that continues to inform Matthew's decisions and enthusiasm in his studio in Las Vegas.

Anchor (2020, oil on paper, 14.75 x 11 inches), included in the exhibition, is characteristic of the body of work as a whole. Four long, white, sharp nails mostly seem to hold together three large pieces of scrap wood. Eyes hang off the pointy ends of two of the nails; one cries blue tears. Also emerging from this peculiar conglomeration, an orange-red pipe, a stick with five orderly smoke-producing flames, and a step-stair series of grape-like spheres that look almost like one leg of a camera tripod and rests on a pale grassy green island below. A ship's anchor sits on the surface of the painting without disturbing the pinkish waters that surround the island or necessarily holding or hindering the wood-eyeball-pipe mass, which hovers mysteriously, or perhaps supernaturally, above the island in a brushy blue, pink, and yellow sky.

Online, in person, and through email, Matthew and I went back and forth discussing his expressive, suggestive, and imaginative *Isolation Paintings* and how they came about. What follows is a record of that conversation.

Marcus Civin January 2021

Marcus Civin: Islands are literal and figurative. To say that someone is an island implies they're antisocial. To say that a place is an island might mean, on the one hand, that you can feel marooned there, or, on the other hand, that the place has inimitable traditions and its own flora and fauna. Islands also have a special relationship with water. For your part, Matt, can you describe what islands mean to you?

Matthew Couper: That's really what I was thinking about when I started these paintings—the contemporary idea of social isolation. How social media has changed our brains and now how we exist in relation to one another. We're living in the most populated time in history, and people are feeling totally isolated. What a phenomenon! You're right; it's like that Simon and Garfunkel song, *I Am A Rock*, about protection and isolation, a great signifier of that time. But I feel my paintings are more about starting over, finding myself in a new situation, much like how I'm feeling in my current mode of painting. It's new but also familiar as the works feel like the work I was doing just out of art school in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Being born there and growing up there, the sense of isolation defined by the seas surrounding the Islands. There's a literary journal in Aotearoa/New Zealand called *Landfall*, which I like as an idea. "Landfall" means sighting land after a long journey. So, it's not so much about the physical island, but the concept of one and how you relate to it.

Marcus: When you're painting an *Isolation Painting*, do you think about what it would be like to be on an island?

Matthew: Yeah, I think 'what would you need?' You'd need action, relaxation, and shelter for survival. So, you've got wood and nails to make some kind of structure, you've got a pipe to smoke and relax, and then you've got a bow drill to make fire. I don't know what these tears are in the paintings. The tears come down, and it's kind of like they're part of cycle systems of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation. I think the tears are related to that, but I'm not 100% sure.

Marcus: I hope my read is not over determined, but I'm thinking about the isolation COVID-19 has brought on.

Matthew: Not at all. It was definitely unanticipated, but it makes sense. I rarely go out of the studio now. I like the possibilities with these paintings. The islands could be places of solitude.

Marcus: There's a comedy to them too, in part, I think, because the objects are acting on their own. There aren't any visible human figures.

Matthew: No, there are only gestures that maybe relate to the human form. Like a pipe. A pipe doesn't expel smoke out of the bowl. You suck it in and then blow it out. Pipes need to be activated. Because there's no physical human presence, there has to be some kind of attribute there. But there's only a hint of it.

Marcus: I'm thinking of Rube Goldberg machines. I get the sense that machines have taken over these islands.

Matthew: Yeah. I like that. What are the mechanisms involved in this happening?

Marcus: I don't know. Were you a swimmer?

Matthew: Oh yeah, I grew up surfing.

Marcus: The paintings have that quality, where if you're in the water long enough, gravity doesn't make sense anymore in the same way.

Matthew: They do have an order to them, though.

Marcus: That's true. The island is pretty much always in the middle of the painting. The nails hold almost everything together.

Matthew: I never design the island. I think about New Zealand; some areas are just sheer cliffs—meters and meters down to the sea. The sensation of looking down those cliffs is amazing! And then you get the strange scale proportions in the paintings. How big is this island? Is it like the small ones in Lake Mead near Las Vegas, or is it vast?

Marcus: I don't know. It feels like maybe I'm on a helicopter about 30 minutes out.

Matthew: Right. You just see the island appearing.

Marcus: Then, the pipes make me think maybe there's a creator narrative operating here. These

islands are the productions of a mad scientist.

Matthew: Like on the seventh day, he rested and smoked his pipe. [Laughs] In the large-scale paintings, you can get into them more. In one, titled *The Source*, it's an abstracted island, but it has a bronze water pump right in the front and piping going all over the island.

Marcus: The imagery is so specific. Do you use any models for these?

Matthew: No. It's always made up, except that the compositions are all loosely based on paintings by Kazimir Malevich.

Marcus: That's interesting. Can you walk me through how that works in the studio? How do you go from a Kazimir Malevich composition to one of your paintings?

Matthew: Initially, I'd done a lot of the processing of Malevich's early twentieth-century compositions in 2015 when I did a series of more graphic, hard-edged versions of his *Suprematism* paintings as images of slats of wood with nails in them. 2015 was the centenary of the original paintings, so I wanted to do an homage. I looked at them in books and turned them into new works. Now I do small studies in my sketchbook of Malevich's compositions. It was only recently that I discovered that he did small sketches of his paintings on graph paper. They're really beautiful, and you can see the corrections and erasures in the drawings, much like the paintings, where he kept refining them as he went along. His paintings are raw, rough, and full of discovery. You can see that in person; you don't get to see it as much in reproductions.

Marcus: Ultimately, for you, the *Isolation Paintings* seem to be so much about composition.

Matthew: The permutations of composition are so interesting to me. I'm trying to get them right but trying not to think about it too much either. I put down the color and see what it does. That doesn't work, so I paint over it, and then I try to do it again. You can see how these start out, how rough they are. It's a peeled back set of factors that I can manipulate. It does very much become about formal attributes and how I work with them as plastic forms. A viewer can make up their own story like we've been doing. Together, the group of paintings acts like links in a chain.

Marcus: If Malevich saw these, I think he'd be flattered, but maybe he'd be mad too.

Matthew: It's hard to know, but he had a lot of pupils following his various manifestos of Cubo-Futurism and Alogical Fevralism.

Marcus: He wouldn't have liked the real elements here.

Matthew: The figuration and the fact that you can kind of tell the scale. He wanted scale to be totally ambiguous but he did hint that the forms were celestial. These also have this kind of expressionist Philip Guston feel.

Marcus: Back to islands and artists. There's something here about the distance and single-mindedness that artists might need. Guston was so much about that.

Matthew: Yeah, you get to the point where you do need to be alone, or you can be alone. When I got out of art school, a lot of my friends had studios together. That lasted a couple of years. Friends will still come around to the studio, but I don't really feel I need that kind of support anymore.

Marcus: Art is always solitary to a certain extent. I guess if you're a public artist. Even then, that still involves a lot of introspection.

Matthew: Yeah, artists tend to be solitary.

Marcus: Guston's paintings, to me, are also about brushwork, choice of color... Can you talk some about your choices in relation to Guston?

Matthew: Yeah, I guess that's what he developed in his New York School period. All the tools of the trade allowed him to get on with figurative painting later in his career. I see Guston's paintwork as stripped down to a real rawness, especially in the late works. They are Clydesdales compared to his earlier more abstract dressage horses. With my stuff, I feel it's instinctual. It's hard to describe except that I know—especially after painting in a quite refined style for 15 years—that I wanted to be freer in my paint use. While starting these new paintings, I discovered I was quite hemmed in, or previously I'd set myself too many rules for painting. I guess that's why I felt I needed to move on from my older work.

Marcus: You mentioned New Zealand, or Aotearoa. That's where you grew up and where a big group of the *Isolation Paintings* is currently on view until March 2021. Can you talk some about the culture and history of Aotearoa, as you see it? I imagine a lot of the island's history might form a sort of subtext for these paintings.

Matthew: Oh, for sure. Of course, you don't notice it when you're there because it's inherent. You're so familiar with it. So when I came to the States, I got to understand the differences of place, surroundings, how people operate, and all the other day-to-day things you take for granted. Scale is a big thing too. I guess something I hadn't thought about is the "island paradise" aspect of the works. I don't know, perhaps something like Gauguin going to Tahiti or something. All the negative colonial aspects. Even though I'm a sixth-generation New Zealander—my ancestors migrated to Aotearoa before the Treaty of Waitangi, which established British rule—I'm still Occidental, still part of the colonizing stock. I'm not sure how much of a paradise it was for my family as they broke-in land in remote parts of the country for grazing animals. It's probably similar to what they were doing before that in the highlands of Scotland. Cattle drovers. There's a film by Vincent Ward called *Vigil*, and I can imagine their life being a lot like that. History, subtext. Yeah, there's a lot there. I try not to crowbar in too much stuff into the paintings. I want to keep them fresh and focused on the action implied, but being from colonial stock, I'm very aware of the difference between a desert island and a deserted island!

Marcus: Before we wrap up, I feel compelled to try to defend your previous retablo-inspired paintings to you. The freedom in these new looser paintings is thrilling. I feel lucky we have been able to have this dialogue during such a vital time of discovery for you, even as the world has

simultaneously been in crisis and continues to be. In your previous works, though, I still love the detail, the humor, the Catholic drama, the confusion between the historical and the contemporary, and the relationship between text and image. I can see how you had to break out. Any style can become a yoke. Yet, I hope you don't disavow that work and its tendencies. Maybe you can return to it from time to time, while also doing other things?

Matthew: Oh, of course! I might be hard on them now, but that's only because of the thrill for me of the new work. I don't want to disavow my prior work. I've worked in many different modes, and I see them informing the next thing and the next thing. It's like, my mindset is 'you're only as good as your next work!' I'm aware of the rich veins of material in my previous work. For instance, I already see and feel specific brush moves or compositional devices from the Spanish Colonial-type work informing decisions of the new work. I'm aware that these new paintings don't have the pointed narratives or other aspects you just stated, but I'm sure they will work their way in. It's bound to happen. But at this point, the experimentation of instilling inanimate objects with personality and activity in paint is riveting!

Marcus Civin is an artist, writer, and arts educator. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, where he is Assistant Dean in the School of Art at Pratt Institute. He has worked in Las Vegas, Nevada, where he was a Professor and Chair of the Department of Art. Civin writes for *Artforum*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Southwest Contemporary*, *Damn Magazine*, *Art Papers* and *Maake Magazine*.

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