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VISUAL ARTS
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Nedela's stunner

Janis Nedela's show at Galerie Düsseldorf is stunning to look at. Physically engaging, the work is also intelligent in what it reveals and what it references.

Wrasse: Metamorphosis is a beautiful body of work, sumptuous to involve yourself in and layered and driven by an overwhelming sensual energy. The subject matter and the two distinct depths of reference within the paintings also make charged viewing.

At first glance, painting may seem a shift to those who know Nedela's previous work.

Certainly, in its materiality, his work has moved on but, in its essence, this is still about the way we confine ourselves through language and the lifelong process of revealing the self.

The show at Düsseldorf is immediately dominated by the four-panel painting on the wall opposite the entry from which the exhibition takes its title. Lush in its swirling atmospheric brushstrokes, the work is a microcosm of the intent and technique of the show as a whole.

It is an abstraction of an image of a fish. It sounds simple enough but this is just the starting point.

The fish is a wrasse, a tropical reef fish. A master of camouflage, it's also characterised by an ability to change sex a male takes a harem and when it dies, the lead female changes sex and takes the role of the dominant male.

An intriguing subject and a wonderful metaphor for the inconsistent labels and boundaries we put on ourselves as individuals within the complexities of life. Within the world of the colourful wrasse all is indeed not black and white.

Beyond this subject matter, Nedela has created a split depth technique in his paintings, allowing two simultaneous art references to create further discussion on ownership, revelation and secrecy. Who owns us, how do we portray ourselves and how does society curtail what we choose to reveal emotionally?

The swirling atmospheric brushstrokes read, as stated in the catalogue essay, as a direct technical reference to Turner. These brushstrokes are used to great effect by Nedela as a depth gauge.

In all the works there is this emotional maelstrom that goes on underneath the surface of the paintings. They are homage to Turner's technical mastery of the romantic landscape but, in the context of the wrasse and the idea of sexual metamorphosis, they also appear to reference the secret side of J.M. W. Turner's life.

A few of his erotic drawings survive in notebooks but most were destroyed by the critic and dealer, John Ruskin a spontaneous ethical decision that has spurred never-ending debate.

On top of the beautifully adapted Turner brushwork, Nedela has covered each painting with a layer of dots. Set out in lines applied with a pinhead, they have the effect of raising the canvas.

Actually, they split the eye between the underneath and the surface, and the effect leaves the viewer's body literally swimming somewhere in between.

The dots, in their application, reminded me of scarification and, in this case and as a painting method, it is a wonderfully considered technique that works in reminding the viewer that this is about the body, their body.

I left Janis Nedela's Wrasse feeling like I had witnessed a seriously considered approach but Wrasse also feels rapturous like the artist has very much enjoyed this journey of discovery.