

*Night Figures (Unloading)*, 2009. Oil on Belgian linen, 140 x 180cm. Courtesy the artist.

# JON CATTAPAN

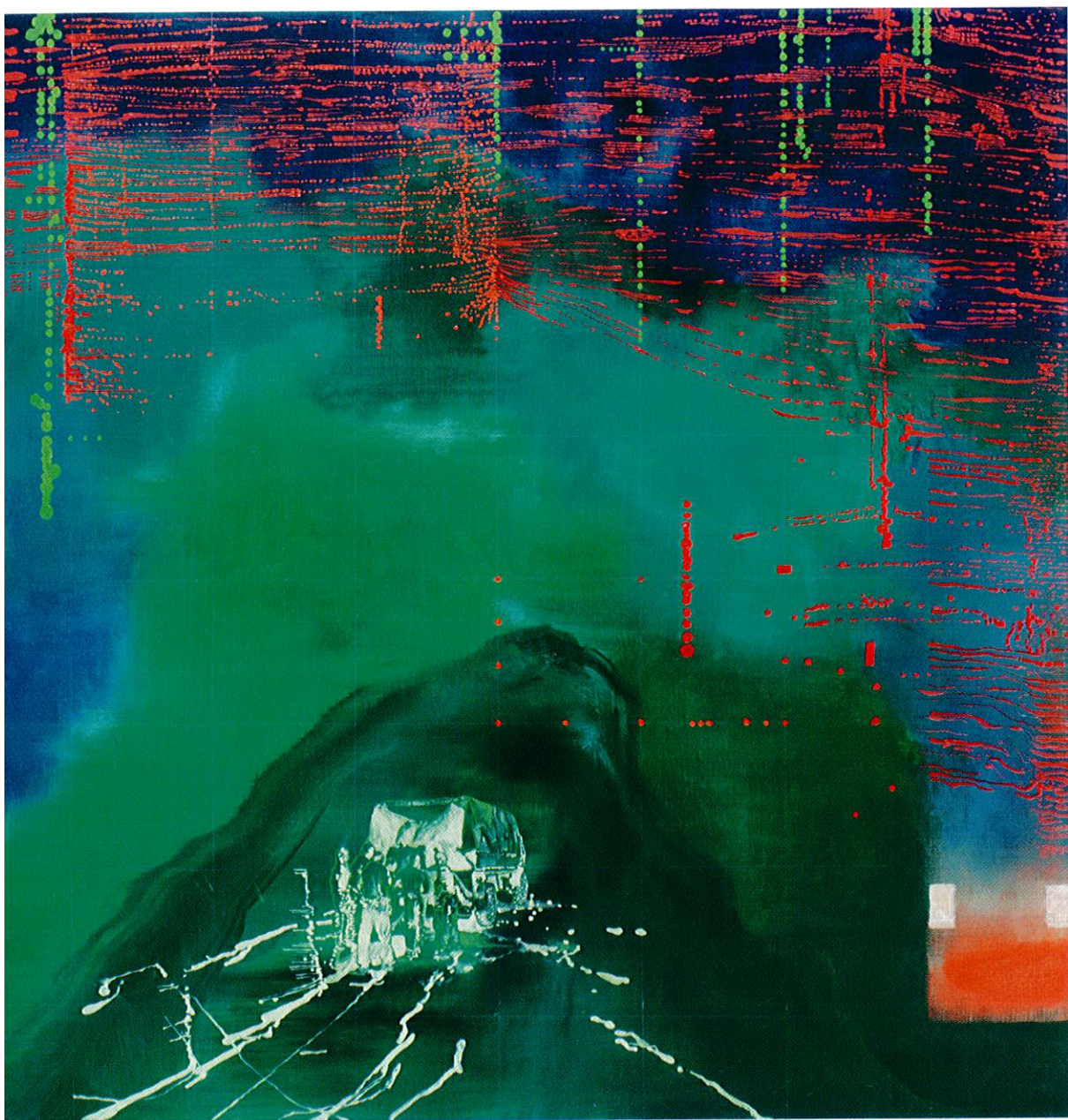
DATA-SCAPES | KYLE WEISE

In July 2008 Jon Cattapan travelled to a number of Australian military bases in Timor-Leste (East Timor), through a project organised by the Australian Defence Force. His exhibition, 'Viridian Eye' held at Sutton Gallery (Melbourne) in 2010, originated from this series, and work exhibited in 2011 at Milani Gallery (Brisbane) and the more recently opened KalimanRawlins Gallery (Melbourne) continues to explore particular styles and themes that emerged from this military engagement. These exhibitions provide an opportunity to reflect on

Cattapan's distinctive style, its contemporary relevance, and the implications of the subtle developments evident in his recent work.

Formally, the paintings that Cattapan has exhibited over recent years are immediately recognisable as products of the 'data-scape' style that has dominated his artistic practice for almost twenty-years. In such paintings, Cattapan uses various rhetorical strategies to construct a painterly and abstracted evocation of the networks of communication and media that dominate our landscape. The paintings are dripping (sometimes literally) with markers of coded data and are filled with streams of dots, hazy graphs, and luminescent green lines that call to mind radar screens and early monochrome computer monitors. Phosphor-like, the paintings seem composed partly of streams of light, as though the landscapes depicted were draped in bundles of transparent optical fibres. The world presented here is one dominated by information networks.





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*The Seven Ghosts of Timor Leste*, 2010. Oil on linen, 185 x 250cm. Courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

Cattapan's visual rhetoric also brings to mind technologies that form the pre-history of the datascape that they allude to, and his use of streams of dots is reminiscent of older machine-readable technologies. Indeed, their reference back to the technology of the punch-card is novelly inscribed into the material production of Chris McAuliffe's insightful monograph on his work, *Jon Cattapan: Possible Histories*.<sup>1</sup> Here, Cattapan's signature pixel-style dots are converted into actual holes punched into the cover of the book. These holes blend almost seamlessly into the reproduction of Cattapan's painting that sits inside the cover and is revealed in full as the cover folds out. To talk about a book cover may seem incidental, or even trivial, but such elements of materiality are central to Cattapan's current work, and the method of its engagement with the ephemerality and intangibility of the digital realm. The production of this book emphasises its value as a physical object. Cattapan's paintings share this feature, and use their physicality to define themselves against, and differentiate themselves from, the digital technologies that inspire their visual language. In the recent exhibitions this material object-status of the paintings has been emphasised by the imposing size of many of them.

The power and memorability of Cattapan's works come from their sometimes uneasy place at the intersection of digital technology and painting. This intersection is both the content and method: Cattapan uses Photoshop as part of his production process, and in the recent work his use of night-vision technology has been an important mediator. The resulting paintings present a stillness and physicality that both mimics and sits in opposition to the world of global information flows that are the apparent subject of the work. McAuliffe argues, via Fredric Jameson, that Cattapan's datascape

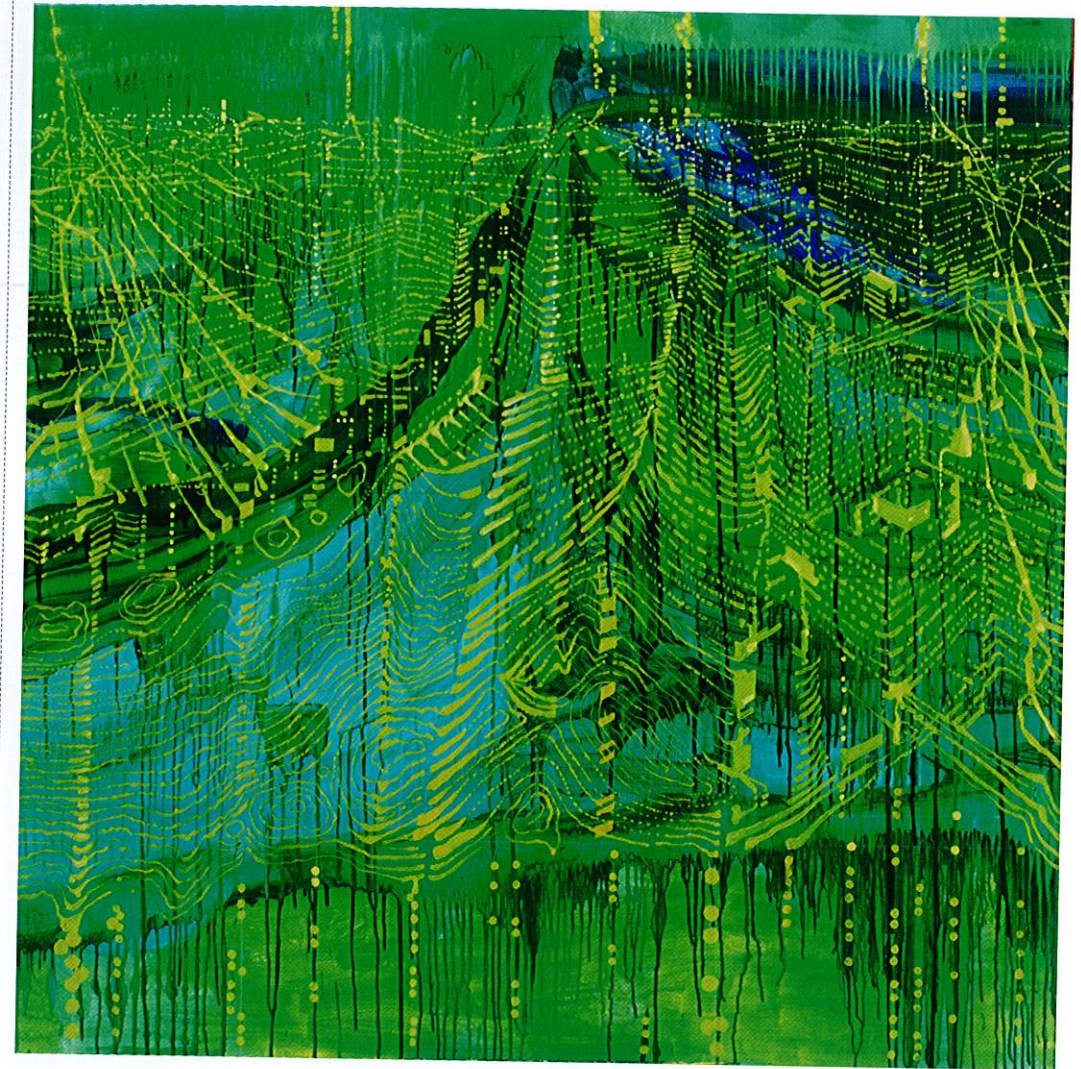
paintings attempt a figurative 'mapping' of the flows of data in which we are immersed. McAuliffe asserts that the slow and deliberate process of Cattapan's painting practice allows reflection on the networks and relationships that entangle us, presenting an anchor amongst tides of data.<sup>2</sup> As such, his work presents an interesting cross-over with the expanding field of data-visualisation, the ubiquity of which has progressed apace with the proliferation of screens of all shapes and sizes across our visual landscape.

As the iconic status of Harry Beck's map of the London Underground illustrates, data-visualisation techniques produce aesthetic appeal beyond functionalism. The capacity for this appeal is accelerated by the addition of animation and interactivity. Taking its name from the London underground's 'mind the gap' phrase, the not-for-profit organisation Gapminder proposes that the appeal of animated data visualisation techniques can help to



ensure nothing less than the future of the planet. Following the organisation's slogan, 'no more boring data', Gapminder's founder, Hans Rosling, has gained massive audiences for his entertaining and purportedly myth-busting presentations of socio-economic data. For Rosling, this circulation of facts, regarding, for example, the historical and geographical relationships between population and income, will allow decision-making that could alter the fate of the environment and the future of humanity. Typical of Rosling's presentations is the use of animated scatter-plot graphs, in which multicoloured dots and circles expand, contract and dance across the screen in ways that allow for the rapid comprehension of expansive historical data trends.<sup>3</sup> Here the apparent functionality of data-visualisation is entirely reliant on its aesthetic appeal, as its purpose in this context is to use the visual dynamism of the software to build new audiences for data that is already freely available elsewhere in more static forms. Another notable example of data visualisation in this context is Barrett Lyon's *Opte Project* which maps internet traffic at a single point in time. Here, sets of glowing lines arranged in tree diagrams attempt to make visible the abstract structures of the internet and its immense flows of data operating outside of paradigms of human visibility.<sup>4</sup>

While Lyon's work is a relatively unsophisticated and uncomplicated celebration of data-visualisation techniques, the addition of several of his images to the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, indicates that such visual styles have significance beyond narrow functionalism. Unsurprisingly, artists are developing their own software that repurposes the aesthetics and design of such data-visualisation projects for subversive or critical projects, as found in the *i-SEE* program produced by the Institute for Applied Autonomy. This project allows users to plot paths of 'least surveillance' through Manhattan via a data-visualisation and mapping program.<sup>5</sup> Rather than engaging with such software within its own form, Cattapan's 'data-scapes', with their abstract dots and lines, use painting to remediate the digital techniques of data-visualisation. Cattapan shares this process with a number of other important artists, such as Julie Mehretu, and produces works on canvas that allude to this technology but freeze it, removing its legibility and functionality. Such work, also incorporating elements of architectural technical drawing, has an intense detail that resists reproduction. Reproduced images of the work turn detailed lines and connections, and stylistic embellishments, into amorphous blurs of shape and colour.<sup>6</sup> Physical presence is essential to Cattapan's works: they demand the presence of the viewer, and the fidelity of the human eye, to experience their layers and textures, and with their brush marks and dripping paint, the hand of the artist is



from top: *Topography Slides No. 5*, 2010. Oil and acrylic on linen, 140 x 140cm. Courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane; *Setting Up (Taxis)*, 2010. Courtesy the artist.

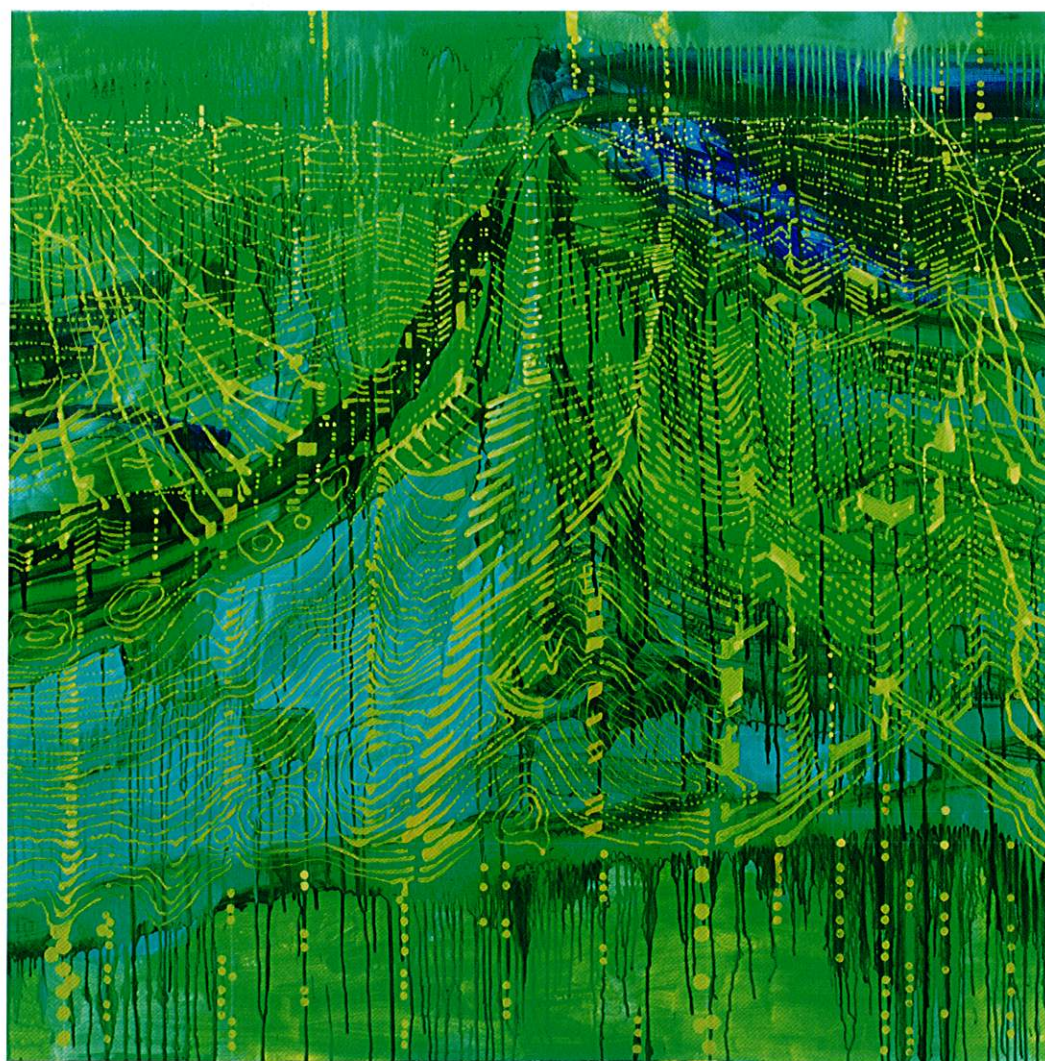
patently visible. Of course, the resulting images, while rooted in the physical form of painting and accentuating their materiality, bring us no closer to a perceptual intelligibility of the networks to which they allude: just as the physical appearance of the computer hard-drive provides no insight into the concepts that determine its functionality.<sup>7</sup>

Cattapan's paintings accentuate the lack of legibility in digital processes, and repurpose elements of the style of data-visualisation in ways that obscure their use value as tools of legibility. Such a process can be usefully interpreted via a classic work on early twentieth-century painting: Edward Rothchild's *The Meaning of Unintelligibility in Modern Art*, first published in 1934.<sup>8</sup> The basis of Rothchild's thesis is that the 'unintelligibility' of modern painting (as found in its processes of abstraction, subjectification, expressionism, Dadaist nonsense, and so on) is perfectly suited to the modern world in which dematerialisation and unintelligibility have becoming defining features. The dematerialisa-



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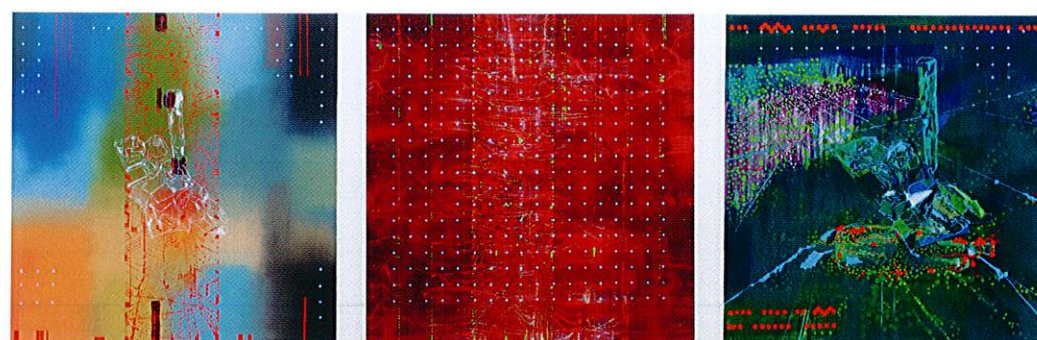
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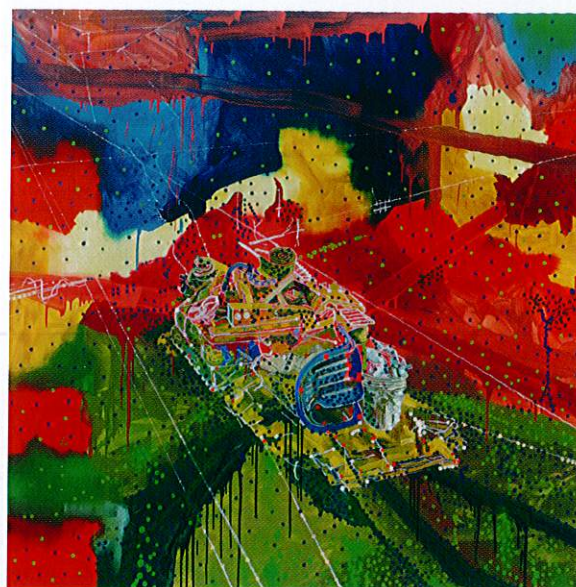
from top: *Imagine a Raft 4 + 5*, 2012. Oil on linen, 3 parts, 140 x 140cm each; *Figures/Hard Rubbish Study*, 2012. Oil on linen, 50 x 50cm.  
Images courtesy KalimanRawlins, Melbourne.

tion that Rothchild identifies is exemplified by scientific theories, where matter is now understood as energy, the dynamic replaces the static, and human observation is increasingly irrelevant: 'the senses are practically extinct as far as science is concerned'.<sup>9</sup> Rothchild notes that money is increasingly abstract, defined by financial instruments that float free from physical commodities,<sup>10</sup> and like many of the processes that he identifies this dematerialisation has accelerated in the intervening years. Significantly, Rothchild emphasises the centrality of 'the machine' to capitalism, in which the logic of the machine permeates society and leads to intense specialisation and ever-multiplying divisions of labour, emblematised by assembly line production.<sup>11</sup> In the contemporary era of information technology these processes have been both accelerated and modified. A particularly interesting example of this is what Rob Kitchen and Martin Dodge have labelled 'code/space': 'Code/Space occurs when software and the spatiality of everyday life become mutually constituted, that is, produced through one

another'.<sup>12</sup> In our era, one of code/space, the logic of software, rather than the machine, permeates the world, and this furthers the processes of dematerialisation pointed to by Rothchild. Abstraction is central in this context, as software code 'enacts millions of algorithmic operations to derive an outcome at a scale of operation so small and fast as to be beyond direct human sensing'.<sup>13</sup> Cattapan's use of abstraction in his recent work continues the process that Rothchild identified in painterly responses to the rise of the machine age, as its very unintelligibility, its obfuscation of the function, context or genesis of its 'codes', captures an essential aspect of the software age.

A recent article in *Artforum*, by Sean Keller, has argued that contemporary architecture often loses sight of human scale because its design processes are dominated by the digital realm and its abstractions. Keller suggests that this architecture could benefit from looking back towards post-war abstraction in painting, which similarly dealt with the relationship between the abstract conception of the work and its material realisation at a bodily scale.<sup>14</sup> Cattapan's work has little in common with the conceptual concerns of post-war abstraction, but the potential linkages between his painting and specific strategies of contemporary architecture are worth pursuing, particularly in terms of the relationship between the intangible and the tangible. A notable example of recent architectural practice for working through these connections is the Blur building, designed by Diller and Scofidio. This building, a contribution to the 2002 Swiss World Expo, had its exterior 'form' produced via an elaborate computer controlled network of water nozzles that created a fog through which visitors would wander while wearing (computer-monitored) raincoats. Diller and Scofidio are known for an architectural practice that incorporates new media, particularly screens, cameras and so on. The Blur building, however, rather than literally incorporating media technology uses this fog as an architectural translation of the immaterial and temporal qualities of new media.<sup>15</sup> The Blur building has no utilitarian purpose, but rather it constructs relationships with its inhabitants that metaphorically convey the unintelligibility of media. Central to this process are the 'low definition' visual qualities created by the building. While a complex 'skeletal' structure of electronically-controlled pumps and nozzles surround the visitor, the key experience for the visitor is the blurring of vision, as these mechanisms are obscured by fog. There are almost no visual points of reference in Blur, drawing attention to our reliance on vision, and also to the irrelevance of vision to computer-mediated environments and their networks, the 'code/space' that surrounds us.<sup>16</sup> Cattapan's strategy, his blurring of vision through the non-representational elements of his painting, is markedly similar to the strategies of Diller and Scofidio. For both, the goal is not





clockwise from top left: *Imagine a Raft: Hard Rubbish No. 12, 2012*. Oil on linen, 180 x 180cm. Courtesy KalimanRawlins, Melbourne; *Imagine a Raft: Father Son Reunion, 2012*. Oil on linen, 195 x 168cm. Courtesy KalimanRawlins, Melbourne; *Night Vision Study, 2009*. Oil on linen, 50 x 50cm. Courtesy the artist.

to return tangibility to the intangible, but instead to engage the physicality of human presence and human vision in ways that accentuate its inadequacy for making 'intelligible' the flows in which we are immersed.

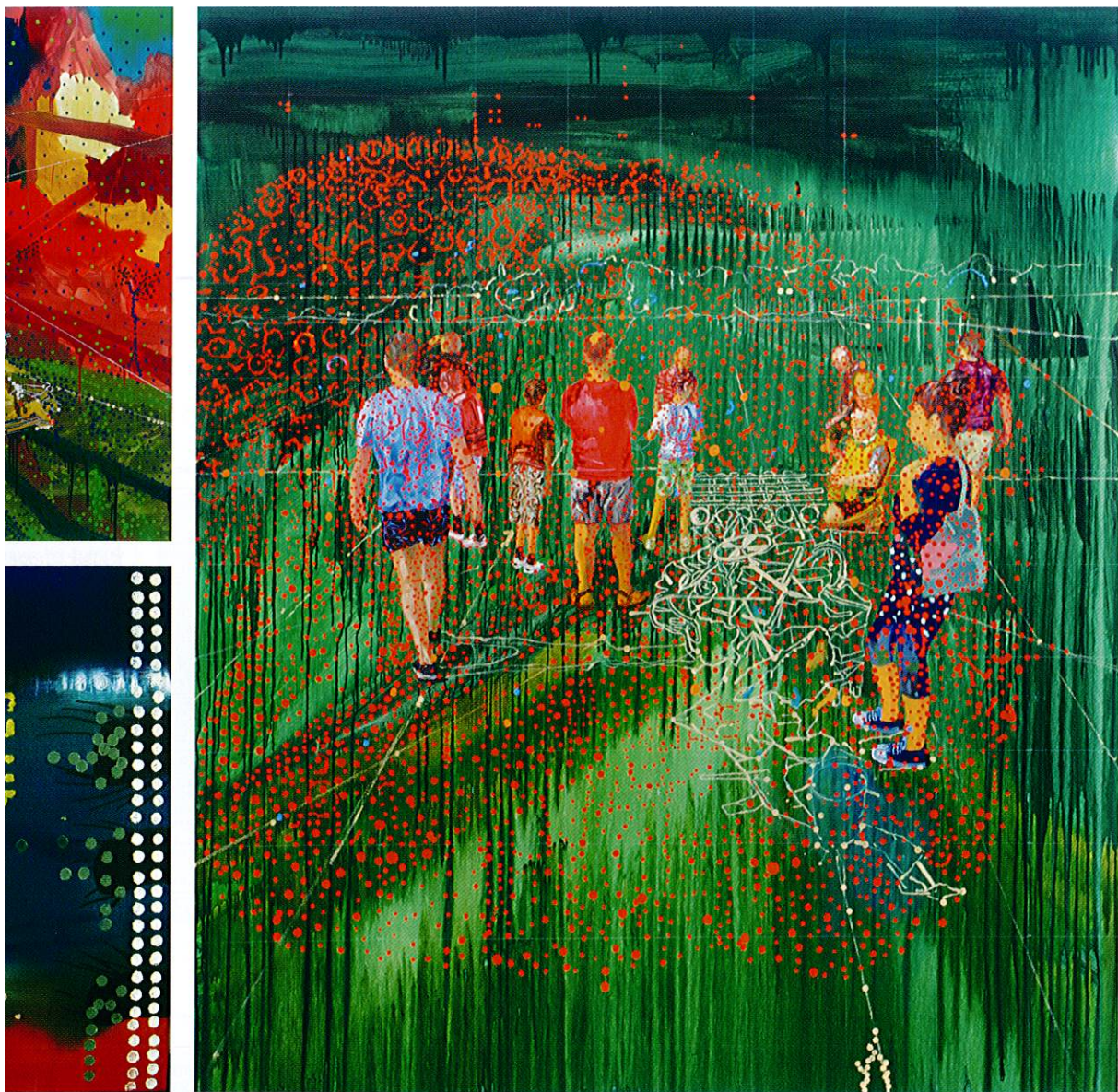
Abstraction, while dominant, is clearly not the only component of Cattapan's work. His paintings often present small scenes of pictorial clarity adrift amongst his characteristic assemblages of lines, dots, and graphs, layered upon a painterly abstract ground. This process is exemplified by *Imagine a Raft (No.2)* (2011), Cattapan's first work to be exhibited at his new Melbourne gallery KalimanRawlins, in which an office chair and some piles of garbage provide a small plane of perspective and human scale amongst the more abstract elements. The choice of objects here clearly points to the inevitable material consequences of a supposedly 'dematerialised' age that is based on the enormous consumption of energy and environ-

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Cattapan's datascape-style has generally stemmed from works exploring the cityscape. In such works Cattapan uses the visual, symbolic and metonymic force of the image of city-lights-at-night to evoke the global networks of communication, energy and power of which the city is a part. The force of this analogy is captured by Jean Baudrillard: 'There is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles at night. A sort of luminous incandescent immensity, stretching as far as the eye can see... This [city] condenses by night the entire future geometry of the networks of human relations, gleaming in their abstraction, luminous in their extension, astral in their reproduction to infinity'.<sup>17</sup> Cattapan has in the past been interested in contrasting the potential of human relations against this 'incandescent immensity'. This is particularly apparent in *The Group Discusses* (2002) in which a





*Hard Rubbish No. 12*, 2012. Oil on linen, 180 x 180cm. Courtesy KalimanRawlins, Melbourne; *Imagine a Raft: Father Son Reunion*, 2012. Oil on linen, 195 x 168cm. Courtesy KalimanRawlins, Melbourne; *Night Vision Study*, 2009. Oil on linen, 50 x 50cm. Courtesy the artist.

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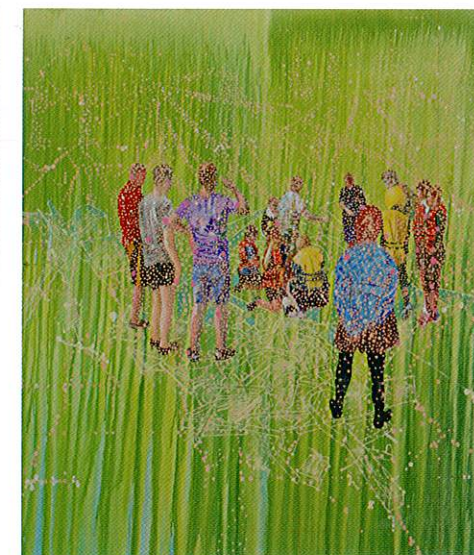
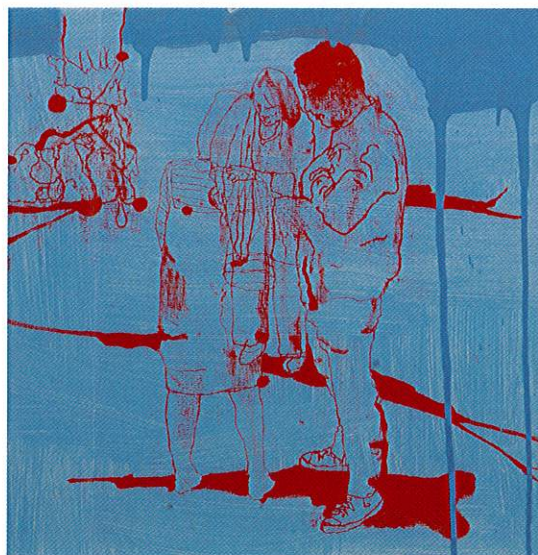
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THE WORK ... PRESENTS A RECONFIGURATION OF PAINTING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF A CONTEMPORARY VISUALITY DOMINATED BY MILITARISED MODES OF PERCEPTION.



clockwise from top: *Friendship Group (Albury)*, 2012. Oil on linen, 180 x 250cm; *Imagine a Raft: Father Son Reunion 2*, 2012. Oil on linen, 195 x 168cm; *Study Group No. 4*, 2012. Oil on linen, 50 x 50cm. Courtesy KalimanRawlins, Melbourne.

small group of people, standing and talking, are painted in solid forms that contrast markedly with the city/data-scape that is layered over their forms.<sup>18</sup> Recent works continue to explore these formal and conceptual themes, but also move in some important new and contrasting directions. Most obviously, Cattapan's source landscapes have moved from the cityscape to the rural peacekeeping zones in which the Australian Defence Force operates. *Topography Slides No.5* (2010), for example, is dominated by what appears to be a mountain, its immense form holding forth beneath the layers of receding points of light and topographical contour lines typical of Cattapan's cityscape works.

Amidst this change of context is a transformation of the rendering of the figures when they appear: these small groups of people are now integrated into the digital schema and painted in the style of the data-scape (as in *Setting Up (Tabisi)*), for example. Particularly evident in the larger paintings in the Viridian Eye series, the figures themselves are composed of streams of lights, instead of being formally and ontologically separated from this. This stylistic change reflects the military context from which the work emanates, a context where the imbrication of the body of the soldier as one component of a cybernetic system is an operational principle.

In the Viridian Eye series most overtly, and often in works since, Cattapan's own vision is partly integrated into the military gaze, as the green hue from his use of night-vision technology dominates the work. This emphasis on night-vision and the accretion of various data elements layered over the image is an appropriation of militarised modes of perception and has much in common with the work of the video artist, Jordan Crandall. Crandall, in his artwork and writing, puts forward the idea that we are moving from representation to processing. In this scenario, the image is overtaken by the data-image, an image not dictated by perspective but instead by the database, by codes and access protocols.<sup>19</sup> For Crandall, the soldier is increasingly defined as a component within a network of communications: 'the soldier as integrated weapons platform'.<sup>20</sup> As such, the soldier is an important aesthetic and conceptual reference for Crandall; a locus for exploring this movement into the era of the 'data-image', and for Cattapan the soldier adopts a similar route into exploring new dimensions of the datascape.

How to return 'processing' to the realm of the visual, in order to allow human interaction with the machinic, is a task explored by Cattapan, and one that has concerned the military itself for decades in the attempt to integrate the soldier into broader networks. The visual structure of military applications of augmented reality, such as the HUD (Head-up display) used by jet-fighter pilots, is one attempt to grapple with this. Such technology layers environmental, geographical, weapon-status and other data over the vision of the individual soldier, and is a technique increasingly translated to civilian applications and consumer-grade technology. Cattapan's own language shares much with such techniques, and the layout of his Viridian Eye exhibition, with the works divided between both of Sutton's galleries, presented alternate, though complimentary interpretations of this 'info-aesthetics'.<sup>21</sup> The large works, which were shown in the main gallery, present singular expansive vistas over which are painted complex and dispersed layers of information, from human figures to maps, schematics and various significations of coded

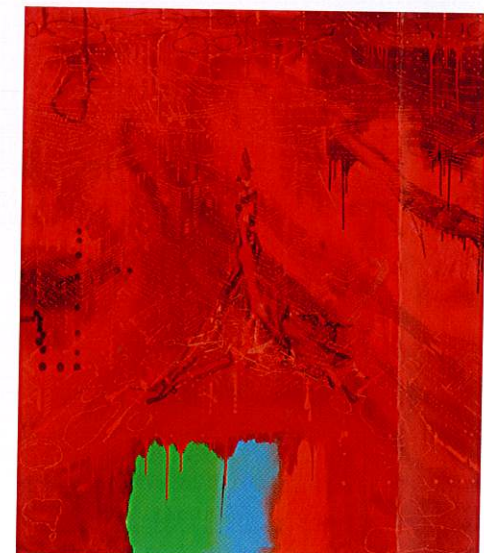


data. In the second gallery, eighteen smaller (50 x 50cm) paintings present a multi-screen aesthetic more reminiscent of a surveillance control room or bunkered military command centre. Some images offer interpretable visual information, the silhouette of a soldier for example (*Night Study 9*), while others are pure noise (*Night Study 5*). The work in both galleries presents a reconfiguration of painting within the context of a contemporary visuality dominated by militarised modes of perception.

Painting in Cattapan's work is a frozen shadow of the digital, it cannot be separated from this visual context, but is itself of a different material and temporal order. The stillness of the paintings invites contemplation of these emerging visual orders outside of their daily, often invisible, role in our lives. Crucially, however, the paintings do not illuminate the processes of digitisation that they connote. Rather, they accentuate their invisibility and untranslatability into visual realms. The work of Trevor Paglen follows a similar logic. Paglen produces photographs of covert satellites and military bases; however, constructed with zoom lenses and time-lapse photography of the night sky, the resulting images are often little more than abstract blurs and glowing lines.<sup>22</sup> In bringing these forces into vision and revealing nothing but further abstraction, Paglen's work, like Cattapan's, reinforces the increasing irrelevance of vision within these contexts. Cattapan's datascape paintings have always worked in this way, but the explicit connection of digital technology to military technology in recent works adds a new dimension. This connection functions to retrospectively invest Cattapan's previous work with a haunting and ominous recognition of the source of networked technologies and the driving force of digital interfaces: the theatre of global perpetual warfare. ■

#### Notes

1. Chris McAuliffe, *Jon Cattapan: Possible Histories*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2008.
2. *ibid.*
3. See 'Making Data Dance', *The Economist Technology Quarterly*, 11 December 2010, pp.25-26; and [www.gapminder.org](http://www.gapminder.org). The 'Google Motion Chart Gadget' is a version of Gapminder's software and is available to Google account holders via Google spreadsheet.
4. Bruce Mau, *Massive Change*, Phaidon, London, 2004, which argues that 'design' is crucial to solving the global problems that humanity is facing, uses one of Lyon's images on its cover. Lyon's images are enlisted by Mau to act as a symbol of emerging forms of knowledge, and to capture the book's theme of the condition of global interconnectedness brought about via expansive network infrastructures (see pp.45, 48-49). For some further discussion of Lyon's *Opte Project*, see Dirk Van Weelden, 'Possible Worlds', *Else/Where: Mapping: New Cartographies of Networks and Territories*, eds Janet Abrams and Peter Hall, University of Minnesota Design Institute, Minneapolis, 2006, pp.26-29. See also the project website <http://www.opte.org/>



clockwise from top: *Imagine a Raft: Red Group*, 2012. Oil on linen, 140 x 140cm; *Ghost Raft*, 2012. Oil on linen, 195 x 168cm; *Imagine a Raft (Ladder Piece)*, 2012. Oil on linen, 140 x 140cm. Images courtesy KalimanRawlins, Melbourne.

5. The project is accompanied by an instructional video that itself parodies the form of the instructional corporate video. See <http://www.appliedautonomy.com/isee.html>
6. The reproductions of Mehretu's work in *Julie Mehretu: Black City*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2006, make this difficulty particularly clear.
7. The lack of emblematic power found in information and communication technologies is a crucial component of Jameson's argument regarding the difficulty of mapping the flows and forces of

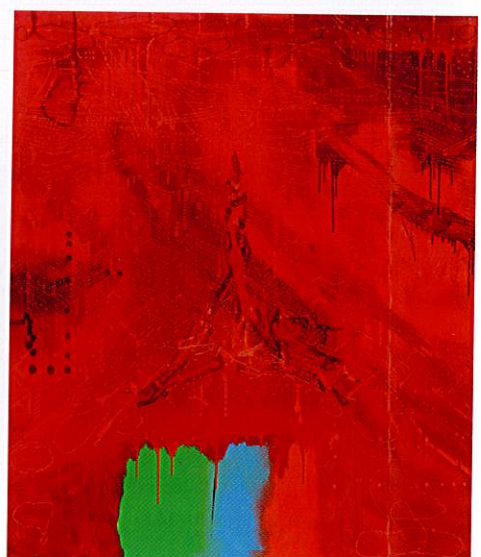


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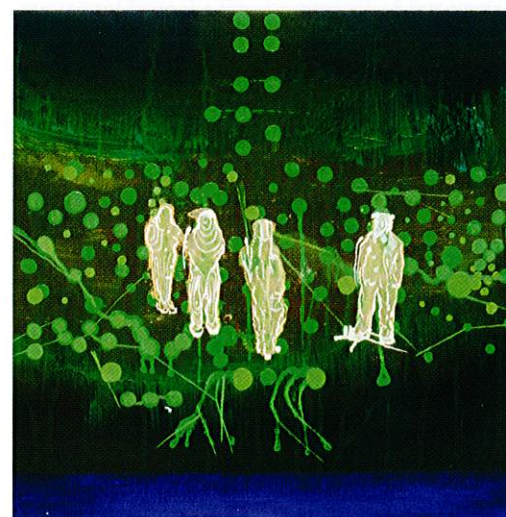
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clockwise from top: *Imagine a Raft: Red Group*, 2012. Oil on linen, 140 x 140cm; *Ghost Raft*, 2012. Oil on linen, 195 x 168cm; *Imagine a Raft (Ladder Piece)*, 2012. Oil on linen, 140 x 140cm. Images courtesy KalimanRawlins, Melbourne.

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7. The lack of emblematic power found in information and communication technologies is a crucial component of Jameson's argument regarding the difficult of mapping the flows and forces of

... THE GOAL IS ... TO ENGAGE THE PHYSICALITY OF HUMAN PRESENCE AND HUMAN VISION IN WAYS THAT ACCENTUATE ITS INADEQUACY FOR MAKING 'INTELLIGIBLE' THE FLOWS IN WHICH WE ARE IMMersed.



clockwise from top: *Setting Out (Maliana)*, 2010. Oil and acrylic on linen, 185 x 250cm. Courtesy the artist; *Imagine a Raft (Ladder Piece)*, 2012. Oil on linen, 180 x 180cm. Courtesy KalimanRawlins, Melbourne; *Night Vision Study*, 2010. Oil on linen, 50 x 50cm. Courtesy the artist.

- the computer age. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Post-Contemporary Interventions, Duke UP, Durham, 1991, pp.36-37. It could be said that Cattapan's process of painting transfers the use-value of data-visualisation technology from the vast networks of globalisation into yet another un-mappable network: the economy of the art-object.
8. Edward F. Rothschild, *The Meaning of Unintelligibility in Art*, (1934), *Studies of Meaning in Art*, Arno Press, New York, 1972.

9. Rothschild, *ibid.*, pp.21-24, 95.
10. Rothschild, *ibid.*, p.94.
11. Rothschild, *ibid.*, p.25-26.
12. Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, *Code/Space: Software and Everyday Life*, Software Studies, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011, p.16. An example of code/space offered by Kitchin and Dodge is the airport check-in area, in which the entire social organisation and existence of the space being an 'airport check-in' is intertwined with (and dependent on) software: without software this space no longer functions as such, it becomes merely a waiting room. Significantly, in code/space any single space, via software, is imbricated in global network infrastructures and further layers of software, interacting with humans, spaces, things (via RFID, for example) and, of course, other software.
13. Kitchin and Dodge, *ibid.*, p.27. Software development itself, like the assembly line production that defined industrialisation, distances the programmer from the end product, as, due to the enormous complexity of software and its engagement with various hardware and other software, no single programmer could understand all of the elements (see Kitchin and Dodge p.33).
14. Sean Keller, 'Playing the Field', *Artforum*, Summer, 2011, pp.376-81.
15. Keith Mitnick, 'Introduction', *Diller and Scofidio: Eyebeam Museum of New Media: The 2002 Charles and Ray Eames Lecture*, Michigan Architecture Papers, by Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2004, pp.6-30. Throughout the production and reception of 'blur' Diller and Scofidio described it as a media pavilion. See, Diller + Scofidio, *Blur: The Making of Nothing*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 2002, pp.326-27.
16. Diller + Scofidio, *ibid.*, esp. pp.163, 192, 195, 209, 325; Ulrik Ekman, 'Irreducible Vagueness: Mixed Worlding in Diller & Scofidio's *Blur Building*, *Postmodern Culture*, Vol.19 No.2, 2009.
17. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, Verso, London, 1989 pp.51-52.
18. For discussion of this work, see McAuliffe, *op. cit.*, p.186; and John Conomos, 'Phantom Cities', *Jon Cattapan: Figure : Ground*, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney, 2002, pp.2-7.
19. Jordan Crandall, *Drive*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2002.
20. Jordan Crandall, *Trigger Project*, Edith-Russ Site for Media Art, Oldenburg, 2002, pp.18-19.
21. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Leonardo Books, (2001) MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002.
22. Exemplary works by Paglen in this regard are: *Detachment 3, Air Force Flight Test Centre*, 2008; *Capricorn/Cobra Brass in the Early Evening Light (Satellite Data System; USA 137)*, 2009; *COSMOS 654 through an Ice-Encrusted Camera*, 2009; and *PAN (Unknown; USA-207)*, 2010.

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