



**Above:** *This Day Is For Us* (detail), 2005  
Pen, gouache and pencil on paper and acetate  
231 x 55cm

Photo credit: Kiron Robinson  
All images courtesy the artist

# Viv Miller

Interviewed by Lily Hibberd  
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**Lily:** *I was compelled to do this interview after viewing your new video work at Studio 12 Gertrude CAS in December last year. The Power Part II intrigued me as a departure from your work as a painter. Were you anxious about taking such a big leap?*

**Viv:** I was. I have become technically quite proficient in painting and drawing yet in this medium it was like starting out afresh, although I was excited by it too.

**Prior to The Power Part II you mainly worked in painting and drawing, and even in the first work I saw of yours in the exhibition 'Nature is Thick' at West Space in 2003, a chronicle – similar to the animation – seemed to unfold because the sewage system construct led the viewer through the work. Is this use of sequencing in your painting and drawing a deliberate narrative device?**

Yes, especially with the *Sewage System*, I was quite aware of there being a narrative but that it was a narrative of shit.

**In your animations and paintings the characters are distinctive. Are they based on people in your imagination or are there identifiable sources for them?**

*If they are detailed, as in the recent drawings, they've come from magazine cut-outs. But when I do the cartoons on acetate I make them up because they don't require as much detail. For quite a while I've worked with a very idealised vision of life, although lately I've been trying to bring in a much broader vernacular, so to speak. I've wanted to capture things that are more mundane, instead of the sugary material that you see in The Power Part I and II.*

**One consistent area of your practice, in all its forms, is the introduction of abstract elements within naturalistic scenarios. Is this something you have always worked with? And are they purely playful and decorative, or symbolic?**

No, they are not symbolic because they're empty motifs; they seem to be offering some kind of symbolism but they are more like red herrings. And yeah, I've combined both approaches in the past. At my first exhibition I wanted to put abstract pieces next to straight, representational ones. At the time, people were quite resistant to it but it made sense to me. I used to imagine that the abstract paintings, in an indifferent way, administered visual delights and for some time I've been interested in situating that vision against a lush romantic visualisation, one which might be sentimental and also more connected to popular culture.





**Left:** *The Power Part II*  
Viv Miller & Gareth Durant  
DVD  
4 min 27 sec  
Production still

**Below:** *Sewage System* (detail),  
2003  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable  
Photo credit: Stephen Gray



**Clinging to the earth with all  
the stuff and the dirt and  
the carpet.**

**Above:** Viv Miller & Gareth Durant  
*The Power Part II*, 2005  
DVD still  
4 min 27 sec

***Your foray into animation has allowed you to explore these visual constructs more candidly, except something new has surfaced and the motifs are no longer empty. The Power Part II is a charged work, loaded in a sense; I'd even use the word 'romantic' though you might not. Yet it also has this other side to it that is very awkward. It's awkward in terms of a teenage, young love awkward thing [laughs]. And it's intense, which is something I like to see in art because so much art is too 'cool'.***

No, I'd use the word romantic; I think it suits the piece. I've wanted to work with text for ages, only it is difficult in a two dimensional work. But when something is moving through time, as with film and video, a narrative automatically builds and this is conducive to the use of language. I was also thinking about the problem of 'cool' art and I felt that I needed to do something fairly open and direct.

***So in The Power Part II you've included still frames with passages of text. Where did they come from?***

I was trying to create an artificial narrative with the sense of overcoming a struggle. I wanted to be clear that it was an existential struggle, although this was rather embarrassing. It's a subject that is avoided by art, even though it is what art

often purports to be about. I built the narrative up slowly. I'd be walking down the street and a few lines would come into my head. My favourite phrase in the piece is, 'Throw down your bag of chips, wipe the grease from your fingers and put your hand in mine'. It's such a generous thing to say. It's so funny and corny, yet it expresses a disdain for the materiality of life.

***With potato chips being the lowest common denominator. In fact the piece is not that filmic at all.***

I almost thought of it as a film bite. I was looking at the structure of a film, the structure of a pop song, or any sort of narrative convention, and then stripping it away.

***Yet in terms of style, taste and content it refers to popular Japanese anime from the 60s, shown here on TV in the 80s, with programs like G-Force, Starblazers and Battle of the Planets. In a way these cartoons ask similar questions to The Power, because they are about some kind of existential crisis. Again, like your piece, the characters are highly charged in terms of extremes of emotions. Do you think that those cartoons have had an influence on your work?***





**Above:** *The Power Part II*  
Viv Miller and Gareth Durant  
DVD  
4 min 27 sec  
Production still

I never saw *G-Force*, but I liked *Voltron*. Yeah, I think they have influenced me. I grew up with that stuff, although it's not something I've been back to look at.

***I think there is a clear correlation between your work and the pure emotion of Japanese anime. They also share the idea that beauty is a valuable substance in the world; because you're not satirical about beauty, are you?***

No, I think that's clear enough.

***After seeing The Power Part II I heard mixed responses, indicating that it provided an experience that wasn't entirely perfect. Even in the open-ended narratives there is a sense of the work being irresolute. Was this an intentional aspect of the work?***

Or was it just my weakness? I was aware of my inability in the medium, and we are all quite well acquainted with cartooning and expect high cinematic standards, so I made a work that was more appropriate to someone in my situation: a person sitting at a computer having a shot. The first time I tried to anamorph a sequence I realised that I did not have enough time or expertise, so I used the Flash animation software in a simple way by just scanning in images.

***Yes, if it had been completely animated it would have easily become a quality, illustrated cartoon. Yet, although it was highly charged and romantically loaded, there were disparities that left you in doubt. Is there anything that turned out differently from how you envisaged it?***

I can recall that, originally, I had wanted to work with Gareth Durant on a soundtrack, because for me thinking about art goes hand-in-hand with reflecting on music. At first I thought that it would be too hard, although I also thought it might be able sit within various cultural realms; and *The Power Part II* was meant to be ambivalent about its status as an artwork. I'd told Gareth that there was a way that the narrative in the piece was going to work and I'd done a draft of the animation before he put the audio together. Then I edited the animation to suit the tune. There's three discreet parts to the refrain and it follows the narrative sequence in the images; without the lush and giddy orchestration the piece wouldn't have carried off.

***The plot in The Power Part II seems unconventional, since we don't really know what is happening to the guy. Where did the story come from?***





**Above:** *The Solid Earth*, 2005  
Oil, enamel and pencil on canvas  
180 x 150 cm  
Photo credit: Kiron Robinson



**Above:** *Soft Rock*, 2001  
Oil, enamel & charcoal on canvas  
160 x 170cm  
Photo credit: Stephen Gray

Oh, you think it's a guy!? I see it as an omnipresent, existential voice. And, yes, the story is very artificial; I can see why you would describe it as awkward. I began with a problem: I had three stages of a narrative that followed the model of a film but nothing actually happens. In terms of the story, it deals with the notion of 'power', which could be a romantic thing, found in nature. A lot of my work conveys a fascination for nature, which can also be a form of existential wonder. For me existentialism and those sorts of philosophical constructs are quite artificial and arbitrary, and I am interested in exploring this in a visual way.

***As for the actual images that comprise The Power Part II, were they taken from old drawings?***

I've always worked with abstract forms and it was fascinating to be able to do one of my works on paper, transfer it onto a sheet of acetate and then scan it into the computer to make an instant work in a large format. I've also been working on acetate for a while now and because they are often cartoon-like, it seemed logical to make them into an animation. It was also a way to archive them, because the paintings on acetate tend to be fragile and I frame them up to prevent them from deteriorating. That's the beauty of DVD, its immateriality. Maybe there's some kind of metaphor in that.

***Your work has another evident sensibility with its orientation toward the idea of 'magic realism', by way of abstraction clashing against reality. Are you keen on the Magic Realism genre or is it a load of rubbish?***

I think a lot of my work might be described as 'magical realism'. I'm not sure if I like the label though because it sounds kind of naff to speak about magic. I've always thought I might be able to use the notion of magic realism in an ironic or droll way. I used to talk about a lot of the stuff I do in terms of a 'limp mysticism' because, basically, I'm not into all that 'magic happens' stuff. I'm not sure how many people noticed it, but calling my DVD 'The Power' was an obvious pun on the fact that it is a plug-in power thing. As a painter you get used to being lo-fi and going hi-fi fascinated me. A lot of the language in the animation is directed towards the idea of technology and the way we take it for granted; it's really quite a magical. I mean, how many people actually know how these things work? It's like a modern-day alchemy.

***So you're trying to create a sense of awe around modern technology?***

Exactly, and that leads us back to the romantic urge.





*Above:* Viv Miller & Gareth Durant  
*The Power Part II*, 2005  
DVD still  
4 min 27 sec

***Speaking of romanticism, were the landscapes you made for *The Power Part I* (shown at *Bus* in 2004) affected by the fact that you feel close to nature?***

Nature is not something I feel close to, it is something I am fascinated by and it is something I can work with but I wouldn't say I had an attachment to it. I don't even have a garden.

***So, similar to *The Power Part II*, the feeling of being disconnected from something makes the fascination stronger?***

When I started working with the landscapes I realised that they were impossible to transcribe. That they were so vast and unknowable, and to represent them you'd have to fall back on tactics and styles, which is how paint becomes a self-contained world that is detached from its subject.

***The exaggerated perspective of the trees has a fairy-tale aspect, as if you are a very small child looking up a huge old tree trunk. And it's clear that the awe of nature in *The Power Part I* is related to the existential theme of *Part II*. It is also apparent that you planned your shift to animation, with the co-titling of the exhibitions as filmic sequels.***

The distorted perspective in *The Power Part I* was contrived as a way of instantly conveying a sense of awe. And my paintings are all about the fabrication of a self-contained imaginary realm, so *The Power Part II* was an attempt to create another, even more immersive world.

***The sense I had in *The Power* was that you were touching on some deeper, possibly personal subjects. For instance, the piece has a message of hope. Is this a serious message?***

No, probably not. Although it is a convenient message because it's nice to believe that things will work out well in the end.

Viv Miller works across painting, drawing and animation, and is a current recipient of a Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces studio residency. Her recent solo exhibitions in Melbourne include *The Power Part II* at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces and *The Power* at Bus Gallery both in 2005, and *Nature is Thick* at West Space in 2004. Viv is represented by Neon Parc, Melbourne and is due to exhibit in their new space later this year.