



Wellington

Ruby Wilkinson *Forward Song*

Jhana Millers, 26 October–18 November

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The phrase *Forward Song* conjures a lyrical sense of momentum, a sound that pulses ever onwards with dynamic energy. It is an apt title for Ruby Wilkinson's recent exhibition at Jhana Millers, which evocatively explores the spectrum of visual language that can be produced when working within a limited gestural palette. Much as a song is framed within technical parameters—a key, a tempo, a repeated lyrical motif—*Forward Song* works within a set of limitations, effectively exploring the breadth of painterly sensation that can be achieved within them.

Where Wilkinson's 2022 exhibition *Sun Room*—her first solo exhibition at this gallery—explored the burnished bronzes and golds of the sun, here she has restricted her palette almost entirely to various shades of blue. However, to describe the exhibition as monochromatic would be to deny the rich polyphonic hum carried in this body of work. There is something akin to a musical score, too, in the placement of works. The gallery is dominated by the three largest paintings—*Forerunner*, *Runtime (Eddy)* and *Applaud*—which have been spaced apart from each other, their potential cohesion punctured by the insertion of the smaller works between them.

In addition to giving a syncopated pulse to the exhibition, the incorporation of these differing scales allows Wilkinson to explore the fluctuating relationship between frame and painterly gesture. In *Applaud*, for instance, the inky pigment seems to wash expansively beyond the narrow timber frame, the loose flow of paint

dissipating beyond its confines. In contrast, *Beat Chat*—one of the smallest works on show at 420 x 520 mm.—is densely layered with an almost aggressive swirl of condensed colour, as if an external force is compressing energy into the painting's centre.

For all the forward momentum, the energy and the dynamism of these paintings, there is also a continual reminder of an underlying structure, of the rhythm formed by a framework of repetition. This is perhaps most evident in the three largest paintings where the latticed structure of the canvas stretchers shows through in the painted surface, a geometric grid haunting the gestural overlay.

The grid is evident, too, in *Post Mas*, but here it has been painted by hand onto the canvas where it acts as a scaffold for a repeated sequence of

curved lines. Convention might dictate the erasure or concealment of this underlying grid, leaving the surface pattern to sit in apparently organic symmetry. However, much like the emphasis of the stretchers beneath the canvas, Wilkinson has let this grid remain.

This wilful embrace of the mechanics of her medium is reflected in the artist's obvious joy in the manipulation of the process of mark-making—the vigorous scrub of erasure over the surface of *Runtime (Eddy)*, the dense scumbled impasto of *Curtain Calling*, or the fleck of white paint splatter hardened to a blistered bubble in *Applaud*. In *Forward Song* Wilkinson propels her painterly experimentation onwards as she joyfully sets, explores and manipulates material and formal limits.



(above) Ruby Wilkinson's *Forward Song* at Jhana Millers, October 2023 with, from left, *Beat Chat*, *Post Mas*, *Applaud* & *Starter* (all 2023)

(right) RUBY WILKINSON *Runtime (Eddy)* 2023 Oil on canvas, 1520 x 1420 mm. (Photographs: Cheska Brown)