

**Darcey Bella Arnold:**  
**If a canvas is feeling and a page is thought**  
Tim Riley Walsh



I am greeted by the depiction of an orange; by the colour orange; by the word orange. My eye is drawn to the yellow-red orb and beneath it the phrase *ceci n'est pas une orange*. The typography adds a particular temporal grounding of some point in the 1970s. Despite my nonexistent French, the phrase translates. René Magritte's ghost has suddenly entered the room (in my mind's eye a spectral pipe hovers). That sense of friction when someone contradicts something that feels true also hangs in the air. *This is not an orange*. So, if it's not what my education tells me it is, then what is it? The thought sets off a semiotic death spiral.

To me, the phrase is a means to articulate the fallacy of a system of meaning-making, of language. It shows that this structure for understanding the world around us—one that is taken for granted—is also entrapping. It sets up various hierarchies and exclusions, predicated on an ability to comprehend and navigate its web. We are told we cannot 'know' without it and those whose engagement with it does not prescribe to its harsh logic fall outside of it and thus beyond 'us' – be that a family unit, a community, a culture, a species. Communication breaks down, or so it seems.



For the last few years, Naarm Melbourne based artist Darcey Bella Arnold has turned her predominantly painterly practice toward the subject of language and its attending systems. Underway in the artist's new work presented at Gertrude Glasshouse are two words in particular: entropy and atrophy. Across canvas, paper, and plaster, these words and the varying and telling associations derived from them play out. Arnold's language-filled works acknowledge art historical points of orientation in the art of Magritte, but also artists who have differing commitments to words, psychology, and gender (and their interrelationships) such as the late Louise Bourgeois. Closer to so-called Australia the linguistic references extend to Mutlu Çerkez and Mike Parr. For Arnold's chosen hue, she looks to the orange-arc abstractions of Ellsworth Kelly.

Entropy is the decline of order across time. The word's etymology *en tropē* or 'inside transformation' reflects this collapse as an internal undoing of substance and form, an innate and predetermined movement toward disorder. Echoing this process that he calls a "material fatigue", Boris Groys describes entropic processes as

permanently undermin[ing] every system, dissolving it into material chaos. The forces of entropy operate mostly underneath the surface of the world. Their workings remain unobserved and they sap energy from the system and render it unstable.

From order to disorder, a continual process of collapse. The entropic tells us that each physical thing will come apart, in fact it is always already coming apart. And that this waning of energy is irreversible. The entropic shows us that time's arrow flies relentlessly onward, undisturbed. Atrophy on the other hand is a withering or wasting away of matter, medically the aging of cells – often through underuse or neglect. Perhaps a limb or an organ. A general physiological process of the breakdown of tissue.

Like much of Arnold's recent art, her works are also a form of collaboration and communion with Jennifer, the artist's mother. Jennifer is living with an acquired brain injury. Both entropy and atrophy entered Arnold's artistic orbit through Jennifer's reiteration of them in everyday writing and speech. These words occupy significant property within Jennifer's unique lexicon. They are frequently inserted into found texts by hand as part of her practice of compulsive copy editing, as well as used in verbal conversation. The meaning of both for Jennifer is broad. Depending on context, they are placeholders for other words or relevant to the specific moment, but do not necessarily prescribe to 'typical' usage or meaning: it is idiosyncratic. Despite resisting linguistic conventions, Jennifer believes in language's authority, and it guides and grounds her as she navigates the impact of the acquired brain injury on her life. Signs around the family home reinforce that this is her house or the subject of family events such as birthdays. Language is important to Jennifer. Entropy and atrophy are important to Jennifer.

Arnold's new canvases are filled with obsessive, textual working through of atrophy and entropy. In *Entropy Painting* (2022), the picture plane is covered with equations to calculate and determine entropy's effects, dictionary definitions of the term, its etymological components. Thick ridges of paint are built up horizontally across the surface to become the lines of a workbook. Its overall result implies its author's pursuit of a solution to a problem, a 'working through' depicted as visualised thinking. The companion work *Atrophy Painting* (2022) reapplies this same processing. At times, Arnold's canvases look closer to exercise books. If a canvas is feeling and a page is thought, then Arnold's work brings these impulses together: even the fluffy white outlines of the artist's backgrounds hover above but also blend into raw canvas in a way that alludes to both page and plane as separate but one.

A WordPress article tells me that entropy and atrophy are frequently confused. A "former Engineer" on Quora says they are "completely unrelated". Jennifer's thinking says otherwise and I agree with her: on the page and through her careful edits, they frequently co-exist and sometimes commingle curiously as *entrophy*. This conflation is not without precedent. Medical studies describe the "entropy theory of aging," and have considered dementia and other age-related depletion as a "biological [manifestation] of increasing entropy [in the body], a measure of disorder." This sounds like both entropy and atrophy to me, maybe even *entrophy*? Both terms seem to speak about collapse as a natural process of existence. To my mind, which is ruled more by the poetic than the scientific, their deeper connection is via their shared demonstration of impermanence.

Impermanence colours and frames this new body of work and its continuing engagement with Arnold's relationship with Jennifer, Jennifer's relationship with language, and how this relates to entropy and atrophy. A particular visual description of

entropy's process used in scientific texts has been a focus of studio experimentation and resolution for *A Measure of Disorder*: the image of a rigid structure of stacked bricks becoming a disordered pile over time. This image connects Arnold's earlier use of brick imagery in *I'll know my song well before I start singing* (2018) with her current attentiveness towards the *entropic*. *My Mother's Labour*, the exhibition that this work featured in at Sutton Projects, discussed the gendered experience of Australian domestic spaces, relationships between mothers and daughters, and when this relationship is reversed due to physiological changes beyond our control. The presence of Arnold's mother is felt obviously through the text on the canvas, but 'the mother' as a broader subject is considered too. In *Saffron* (2022), a large canvas is dominated by a field of orange paint with the form of a breast hovering beneath the layers of pigment. Dislocated from a body, its presence recalls the work of Bourgeois and the French artist's own relationship with her mother and its influence on her art.

In Bourgeois' *Sainte Sébastienne* (1992), the artist reimagines Saint Sebastian as a headless woman assailed by arrows. But unlike her male counterpart, Sébastienne is prodded and pierced instead by the arrows of schematics: information and diagrams assault her. As Jerry Gorovoy describes, Bourgeois is "interested in that state of where things are not going well, where one is under siege both physically and psychologically." For Arnold, who appropriates Bourgeois' Sébastienne in *Anti-Entropy (LB Sainte Sébastienne)* (2022), the ruptures and points of siege are entropic forces upon the woman's (mother's) body, of coming apart, enervating. Yet as its title suggests, also countering forces of energy and growth – Sébastienne's belly implies pregnancy, of creating and cultivating order, even amongst the states of co-existing disorder. In an accompanying work on paper *Untitled* (2022), the same bolts are accompanied by letters, labeling and identifying. Cumulatively they spell anti-entropy, a reemerging structure and form. I read Sébastienne's semi-*contrapposto* at first as more pained contortion – her atrophy perhaps – but now it becomes a stride. The curling lines at her neck and across her body are not stress, but the rings of a tree, suggestive of strength and a living body of greater, deeper time. Time's presence hangs throughout *A Measure of Disorder*: a ticking clock emblazoned with *tempus fugit*, time flies, is suspended and during quiet moments, its mechanism's demarcation is just audible.



A common feature of traumatic experience is the total failure of language. People speak or write variations of *I have no words* or exclaim *What can one say?* and tell you that they are *Speechless*. You yourself tend to not speak. Sometimes you lose the ability entirely. Often you want to be able to express how you feel but the words are never right. In the wake of this collapse, meaning is deeply desired but entirely absent. Communication fails you and it fails those around you. The structure that once supported you is now in utter disorder.

There are ways to work through this. Music helps, art helps, colour helps: for me it was blue. Going in the ocean really helps, I think because it feels like you are held but something also about its disorder resonates with your feeling of freefall. For Arnold it seems like orange is that colour. Wikipedia says orange is associated with quite a few

things, but the one that sticks out to me is energy. Orange is energetic, and entropy is deeply related to energy.

Entropy is a tricky thing to define. For Robert Smithson entropy was evoked by an experiment. A child stands in a sandbox, its contents split in half. One side is black sand and the other white. Running clockwise and with the child's energy and motion the grains mix to become grey. Turning and running counter-clockwise does not reverse the process: a little like rubbing the blackboard's eraser the other way does not bring back the words. The temptation might be to think that forms of record, be they documents or photographs or art, may hold promise of countering the entropic, capturing a thing in time or even reversing it. Smithson dispels this by returning to the sandbox analogy:

Of course, if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility. Somehow this suggests that the cinema offers an illusive or temporary escape from physical dissolution. The false immortality of the film gives the viewer an illusion of control over eternity.

Though their presence may be fleeting in the face of eternity, Arnold's artworks have valuable things to say about impermanence as natural, normal. These works look at and think and feel about language and through language and what falls out of language – they show the system as cold but open to the warmth of feeling. The persistence of language in Arnold's work is not because of its primacy or importance to an understanding of the work, but rather to reveal language's unsuitability for reflecting the world or our experience of it, as opposed to a way that feels right to the artist or hopefully more inclusive. In this process, words become pictures or letters are lines and strokes – they become gesture rather than code, emotion rather than information. Text is pulled to pieces: at first, they are like phonetics or syllables but then they seem to stutter or come apart entirely: *eeeeeeeeee*. This transformation recalls in a poetic sense forms of collapse embodied in the terms entropy and atrophy, felt within our bodies and across physical matter. Arnold explores both as a way to make sense of her, Jennifer, and their family's relationship to language, systems, and structures, but also more broadly changes to our bodies and faculties through aging and physiological change, and the collapse of the very matter that constructs the environments that enclose us.



*A Measure of Disorder* shows us that order is momentary and that is ok. Yes, things fall apart, and art falls apart too – collapse is inevitable, and language cannot fully sate or describe our experience of this. But communication is still possible. As Bourgeois once said, "colour is stronger than language".

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