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PIERRE COUPEY  
DREAMTIME

## DreamTime: The Paintings of Pierre Coupey

Mackenzie Perras

The Dreaming, or DreamTime, comes to us as a concept from the Indigenous cultures of Australia. It is an 'everywhen' that is both the remote and mythic past when the world was forged, but is also the very real world of now that we must live in and work through. Lévi-Strauss said of it that "Myths think in men, unbeknownst to them...The Dreaming is the eternal matrix from which all cultural forms emerge."

I'd agree with that last bit, but I think Pierre Coupey is one of those rare specimens who is acutely aware of the myths thinking in and through him. This exhibition selects from the last two years of Coupey's roving output, and reveals the range of fascinations and inquiries that structure his particular methodology.

Built up progressively using multiple techniques of taping, stencilling and overpainting, the paintings are sedimentary and loaded relics. Colour becomes a physical material, light and shadow pulsate with tangible rhythm. Take the time to peel back the edges, and a whole bramble of roads open up before you into the paintings.

A student of diverse and sometimes frankly surprising subjects, Coupey's way of looking reaches out towards the world relentlessly. Take the vertigo-inducing thrill of *Shinjuku*, a stacked and invigorating take on the dizzying hum of downtown Tokyo's vertiginous towers. Or *Liar's Dice I & II*, with their radiant pigments and simmering contrasts, paintings so full of motion and tension they seem to be wrenching themselves apart. Isn't that curious? Named for a game of psychological deception and bluffing, we feel their strange tension winding up our bodies.

And Coupey, like all dreamers, knows the body—it's the aperture through which the light of the DreamTime enters his mind. It's his tuning fork. *Trigger Point I & II* are prime examples of this embodied, haptic way of translating intuitive understanding into paint. Their intense, violet- and vermilion-driven contrasts and razor-sharp lines are full of an unrelenting tautness and charged with voltage. I'm almost sure they're meant to be felt as pangs in the body, and they don't disappoint. This way of thinking through muscle culminates for me in *Shift*, whose machinery wraps around us at warp speed. Here the internal tension of the *Trigger Points* is inverted and turned outwards, and we're left barreling forwards at breakneck speed, colours blurring beside us as we enter into tunnel vision.

As Coupey dances between these subjects and ideas, we come to know him all the better for it. Erudite, referential and wonderfully open-ended, seeing this show is like wandering through a good library. Each painting you look at offers countless lessons, if you're willing to spend the time with it. At first glance, though, it's an inscrutable depth of insight.

You can watch Coupey riff Canadiana and interpret the art historical canon in pieces like *Canoe Lake I - IV*—the famous Algonquin site of Tom Thomson's oft-mythologized drowning. Their weeping colours speak to me of rain-worn rock faces and far-off horizons; but also of loss, of regrowth, and a dash of that woeful sense of smallness that permeates the Group of Seven pathos. They're a tour de force in how legible and readable references need not bash you over the head with their subject matter. Subtlety is a hallmark of Coupey's work—and a reminder of the nuance that can bless a painter still working full-tilt in his 80s.

You can watch him delight in the devotional music of the Sufis with *Maqam*, a lilting and highly emotional composition that blurs prayer and song. Blazing heat, shimmering mirage and cool pools of shadow come through in a way that incites the eye to rove across broad swathes of desert, mimicking the longing and mystery typical to the musical genre.

Most of all, I think these are works about time's strange shape. *Choros* and *Neither Beginning nor End*, when viewed together, approach animation; seeming to illustrate the same subject in different moments of activity. Uncannily, they remind me of Muybridge's pioneering 1878 high-speed photos of horses racing. These famous pictures break down, millisecond by millisecond, what a horse's legs actually do while running—all four leave the ground at once, with the animal seeming to fly midair. Until that moment of discovery, few believed this could be possible. This kind of micro-perception, and the almost scientific sense of curiosity and rigour that allow them, is to me the great thrust of this body of work. These are the detailed and idiosyncratic observations of a master at the height of his powers.

Coupey once read me one of his favourite lines from Yeats: "In dreams begin responsibilities." That obligation to meet, understand and ultimately improve the world is palpable in these paintings. I'd also humbly propose the insights of Galarrwuy Yunupingu, the Indigenous Yolngu activist and artist, who said "The law is the Dreaming...It tells us how to behave, how to live, how to look after [our] country, how to sing, how to paint." Separated as they are by time and culture, I cannot help but feel he would have felt a great kinship for Coupey and his work. Both urge us to stop, reflect, and feel our way forward—that is, they incite us not just to dream of a better world, but to get to work building one.

Mackenzie Perras is an interdisciplinary contemporary artist, writer and critic. His painting practice is centered around materials research, field-work and paint-making, with his work exhibited around Canada and the world including with Pendulum Gallery (Canada), The London Paint Club (UK), and Pilotenkeuche (Germany). He founded the online platform *Art Review Vancouver* in 2025, where he regularly reviews exhibitions and performances happening around the city. He most recently authored *Rotting Colours Volume I*.



Front: *Choros*, oil on canvas, 78.75 x 67 inches.

Left flap: *Shinjuku*, oil on canvas, 64 x 44 inches.

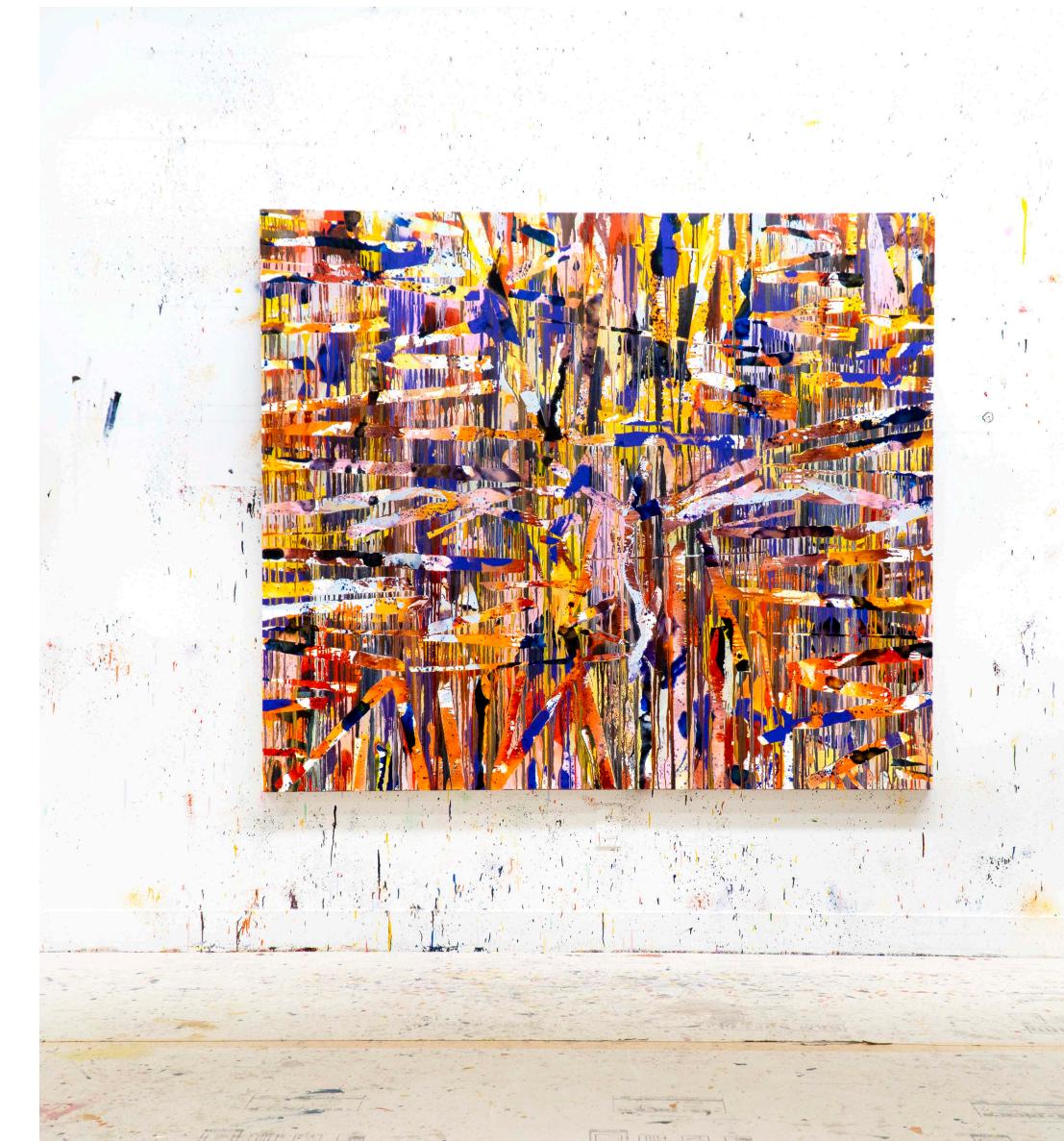
Right flap: *Night Flower for Pantera*, oil on Arches Aquarelle, 60 x 40 inches.

Back: *Shift*, oil on canvas, 60 x 70 inches.

Above right: *Hommage à Brâque*, oil on canvas, 60 x 70 inches.

Above: *Tiger's Eye*, oil on canvas, 70 x 60 inches.

Images: Rachel Topham Photography / Installation images, design: Shane O'Brien.



Pierre Coupey, founding editor of *The Capilano Review*, has been exhibiting nationally and internationally in solo and group shows since 1964. He has received awards for poetry and painting, private and public commissions, and grants from the Conseil des Arts du Québec, the Canada Council, and the BC Arts Council. In 2013 his work was the subject of a survey show, *Cutting Out the Tongue: Selected Work 1976-2012*, jointly curated by the West Vancouver Art Museum and the Art Gallery at Evergreen. The exhibition catalogue was supported by a grant from the Adrienne Foundation for the Arts. He is represented in private collections in Canada and abroad, and in corporate, university and public collections, including the Belkin Art Gallery, Burnaby Art Gallery, Canada Council Art Bank, Kamloops Art Gallery, Kelowna Art Gallery, Simon Fraser University Art Gallery, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery, and West Vancouver Art Museum.