

Squaring the Circle

David Fenoglio

25 July - 12 August 2023

Transcending Materiality in David Fenoglio's *Squaring the Circle*

By Melissa Clements, BPhil (Hons)

The act of human selection, where stones, wood or paper are chosen for their symbolic significance, consciously arranged on a table for artistic contemplation, holds its origins in the Dutch and Flemish tradition of *stilleven*.¹ Directly translating to “still life,” *stilleven* evokes feelings of silence and neutral reflection of objects quite different to the French term that replaced it, *nature morte*. A still life painting is more than a mere representation of objects, whether living or inanimate, as it carries traces of the artist’s inner world. Consciously or subconsciously, meaning is embedded within the arrangement, allowing the physical to transcend pure materiality. It is this contemplation of the material and mystical quality of objects that characterises David Fenoglio’s oeuvre in *Squaring the Circle*, at Jan Manton Gallery. The exhibition builds on Fenoglio’s meditative practice of painting from life, a skill he has cultivated throughout his artistic career. A graduate of Queensland College of Art, Fenoglio has honed his practice in classical painting through self-directed study in Europe and training at the Grand Central Atelier in New York. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. In 2020, Fenoglio was selected to exhibit in *STILL*, a still life exhibition at Sugarlift Gallery, New York. Fenoglio is a two-time Archibald Prize (2022, 2023) and Doug Moran National Portrait Prize (2022, 2021) Finalist, he won the Rick Amor Drawing Prize in 2021. *Squaring the Circle* marks Fenoglio’s third solo exhibition.

Golden (2022) is one of the eleven new paintings presented in *Squaring the Circle*. A collection of objects – stone, wood, paper – is arranged in a rhythmic stillness upon a tabletop. Our gaze is immediately captured by a trinity of rectangles; the crumpled, metallic sheen of gold leaf, suspended above and behind a slip of tracing paper that conceals a sliver of timber block, upturned. On either side, two stones rest. The stone on the left casts a delicate shadow that extends beyond the picture plane, akin to a ruler’s form sneaking into the scene from the right. Balancing on the angled edge of a wooden block, a smooth pebble seems weightless. In the upper corners, against a velvety, navy chalkboard, faint marks of two circles are drawn, a subtle nod to the exhibition’s title.

¹ Tim Batchelor ed, *Dead Standing Things Still Life Painting in Britain 1660 –1740* (London: Tate Britain, 2012), 13–14.

Squaring the Circle speaks to an ancient mathematical problem of the same name, employing the genre of still life to consider its symbolic associations. The problem of squaring the circle involves constructing a square and circle of equal area, using only the tools of a compass and a ruler as a single straight edge, all within a finite number of steps. The problem was proven to be a mathematical impossibility in 1882 with the discovery that Pi is a transcendental number. This realisation has left room for writers, philosophers and mystics to engage in various metaphoric implications, where solving the problem is akin to attaining knowledge of inner connectedness, the unfathomable nature of the transcendent, and the alchemical internal practice of self-improvement. This is true for Dante, for whom the circle signified *God in Paradise*.² Similarly, Paracelsus referred to the microcosm of individual minds and Macrocosm of the Universal Mind as spheres capable of unification.³ Circles appear alongside squares and ovals repeatedly in Fenoglio's paintings, whether as drawings, spheres or looking glasses; in *Golden*, the viewer might recognise the compositional reference to Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* (c. 1665-69) which derives its title from the same shadowy draftsmanship in the background. The symbolism of the drawn circle is undoubtedly a reference to Giotto's act of gifting a perfectly hand-drawn circle to the Pope.⁴

The process of painting from life demands prolonged consideration of the physical object, giving room for periods of meditation during which Fenoglio directs focussed attention to the objects being painted. Through a meditative act of repeatedly painting circles and spheres, Fenoglio consciously and subconsciously considers ideas of eternity and interconnectedness. The resulting images, although depicting objects that are deliberately arranged and tangible, evoke a sense of ephemerality, as if the surreal scene has been projected directly from the artist's mind. This is seen in *Drift* (2023), where the twisted wooden arm exhibits such tactile intensity in its splintered edges that the materiality of the object is immediately sensed, before transcending into an ethereal realm, where its bulk becomes weightless, seemingly floating within the picture plane. In *Trinity* (2023), the upward lift of gold leaf upon timber feels simultaneously solid and ephemeral, while the objects in *Scorched* (2023) behave as flat marks on canvas while still evoking their physicality. Fenoglio's acute understanding of history, mysticism and meditation makes *Squaring the Circle* an endlessly intriguing display of painting. In exploring the tradition of *stilleven* and an ancient mathematical problem within his contemporary context, Fenoglio reminds us that while it is impossible to square the circle, the pursuit itself is worthwhile.

² "As the geometer his mind applies/ To square the circle, nor for all his wit/ Finds the right formula, howe'er he tries." In Dante Alighieri, *The Paradiso of Dante Alighieri* (London: J.M. Dent, 1921), canto XXXIII, lines 133–135.

³ Franz Hartmann, *The Life of Philippus Theophrastus Bombast of Hohenheim Paracelsus - Scholar's Choice Edition* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trübner, & Co. Ltd, 1896), 212-213.

⁴ Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. Gaston Du C. De Vere (London: Macmillan And Co. LD. & The Medici Society, LD, 1912-14), 78-79.



Scorched, 2023
Oil on linen (framed)
41 x 46 cm

\$4,500



Penumbra, 2023
Oil on linen (framed)
41 x 41 cm

\$4,500



Emerald Stone, 2023
Oil on linen (framed)
46 x 61 cm

\$5,200



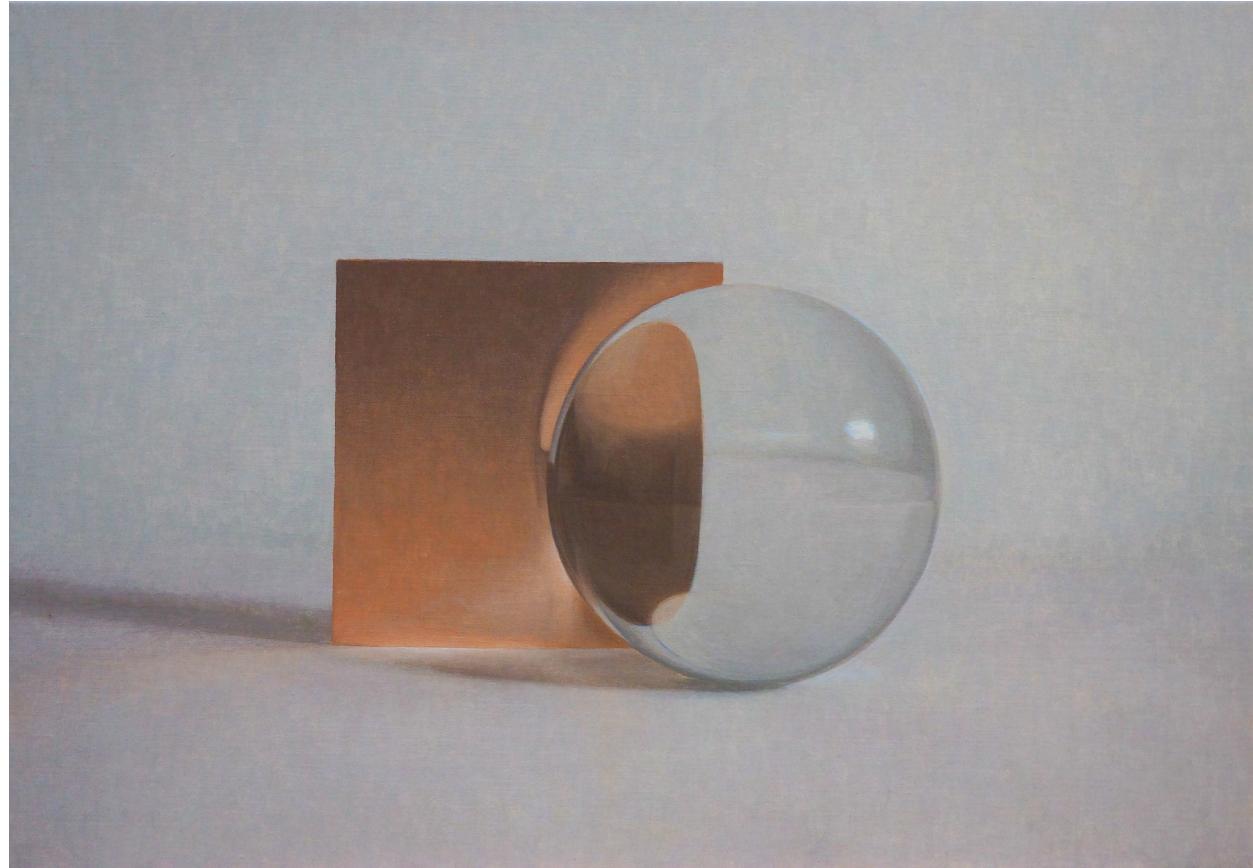
Golden, 2022
Oil on linen (framed)
41 x 61 cm

\$5,200



Trinity, 2023
Oil on linen (framed)
41 x 56 cm

\$4,600



Waiting, 2023
Oil on linen (framed)
36 x 51 cm

\$4,200



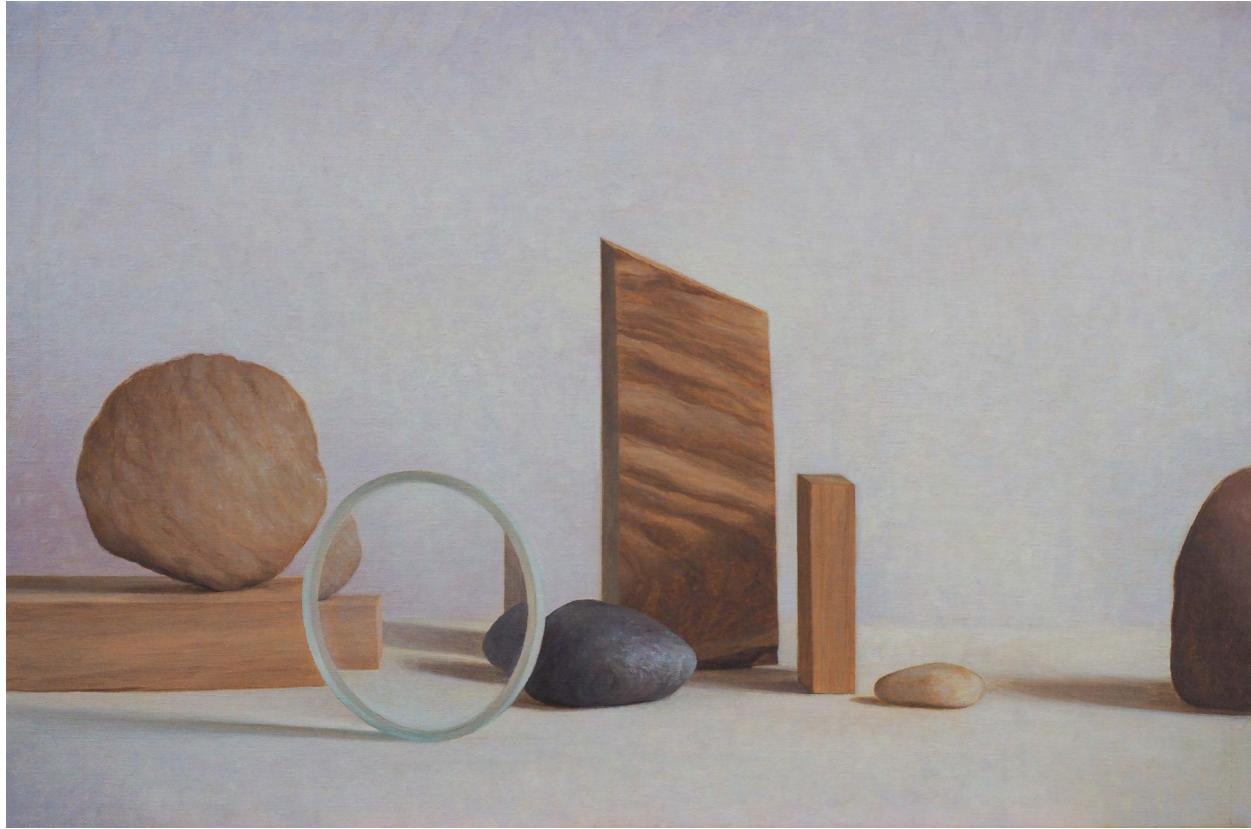
Pillar, 2023
Oil on linen (framed)
41 x 41 cm

\$4,500



Disrupted Symbiosis, 2022
Oil on linen (framed)
71 x 41 cm

\$5,400



Reducing Glass, 2022
Oil on linen (framed)
41 x 61 cm

\$5,200



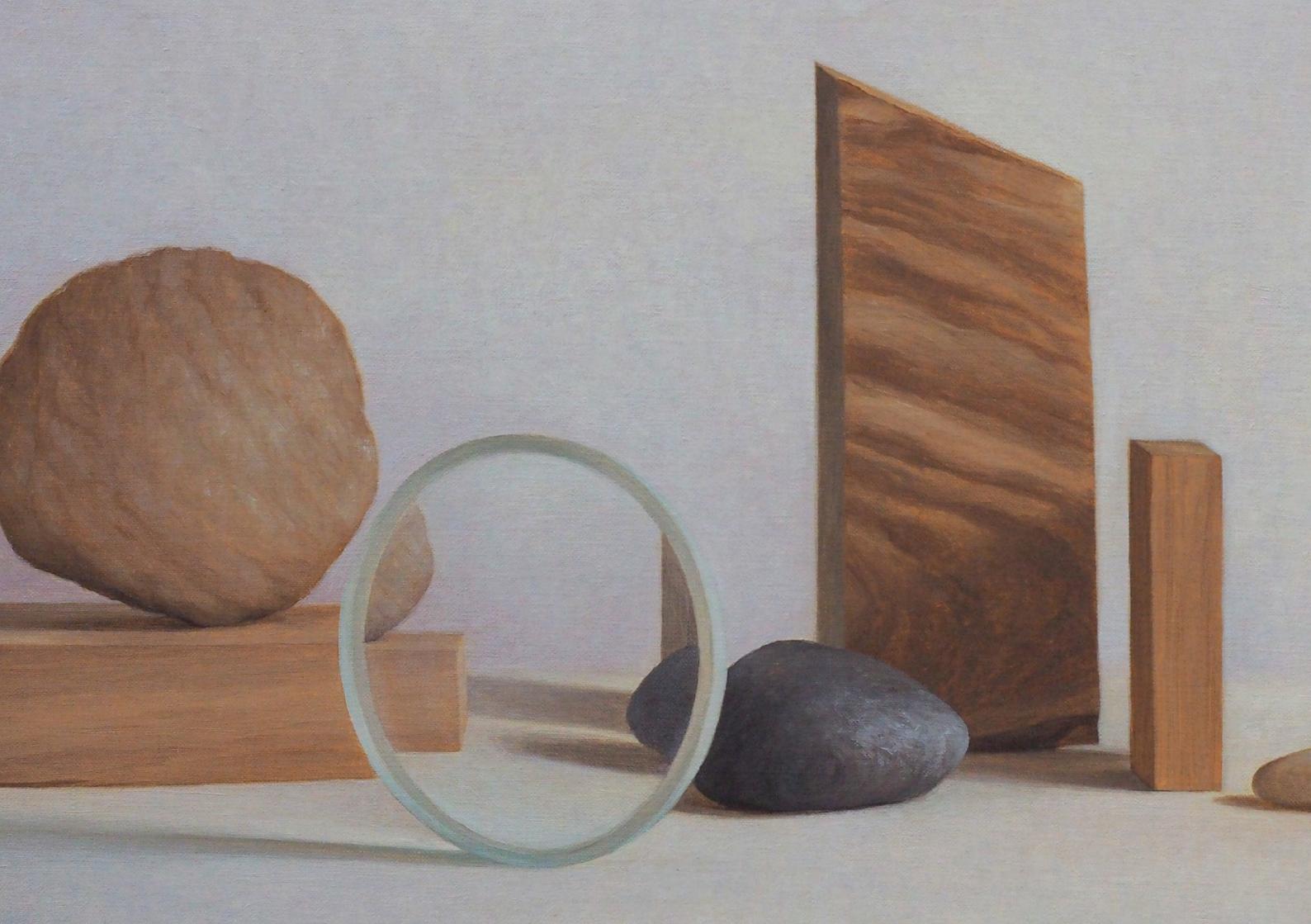
Trajectory, 2022
Oil on linen (framed)
41 x 51 cm

\$4,600



Drift, 2023
Oil on linen (framed)
36 x 66 cm

\$5,200



**Jan Manton Gallery**

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Front cover: David Fenoglio, *Scorched*, 2023, Oil on linen, 41 x 46 cm.
Back cover: David Fenoglio, *Penumbra*, 2023, Oil on linen, 41 x 41 cm.

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