

A U S T R A L I A N C E N T R E F O R C O N T E M P O R A R Y A R T

**GEOMETRIC
ABSTRACTION**

SEPTEMBER 11 - OCTOBER 12, 1986

A C C A

INTRODUCTION

There was a time, early this century, when geometry in art signalled the rise of an avant-garde, and the belief that an art of 'pure abstraction', by divesting itself of all representational elements, could serve as a model for a new and utopian world.

At that precious and now lost moment of vision, so significant within the history of modernism, abstraction embodied what its advocates saw as a radical break with the past and an entry into the future.

Rather than being a bearer of the new, geometric abstraction is today a tradition that within western, modern culture spans a full seventy years or more. The cross and the grid, once emblematic of a new and radical beginning, have now the capacity to recall for us the visions and aspirations of the modernist avant-garde, its legacy and its passing.

The art in this exhibition continues to find its strength through the pursuit of formal and conceptual concerns and a spirit of questioning and enquiry that has always been a touchstone of abstraction. The histories of mainstream modernism, constructivism, minimalism and conceptual art inform the paintings presented here. In many of the works content reaches beyond pure form, encompassing poetic, metaphysical, linguistic, symbolic and decorative elements.

There is work in this exhibition, by artists who began painting in the sixties, which still travels upon the path of modernist abstraction, re-working and refining within that tradition. Leslie Dumbrell and Robert Jacks still involve themselves with a surface/support aesthetic whilst extending and modifying the modernist grid to allow the infiltration of abstracted elements drawn from the natural and architectural environment.

Jacks ruptures the grid of his painting with diagonals, simultaneously reinstating in the true tradition of modernist art the integrity and solidity of the surface through the neat alignment of geometric forms with the edges of the painting. Dumbrell creates a tension between surface and depth through her use of colour and line.

As the history of minimalism shows with its mute and strangely alien forms, geometric abstraction in the late sixties and seventies paradoxically spawned an anti-aesthetic which signalled a halt to the avant-garde and made doubtful the notion of progress in art. Certain of the artists in this exhibition whose work finds its source in this paradox (Tyndall, Nixon, Cripps, MacPherson) might accurately be described as post-minimal in their concerns.

Robert Hunter plays out the endgame of his art with implied repetition and minimal variation or development between paintings. The suggestion of lyricism (faint hints of colour and light) in Hunter's most recent paintings serves not to affirm the expressiveness of his art, but rather to ornament and adorn its voiceless inexpressivity and sameness.

A painter of a younger generation, Tim Burns avoids hard edged clarity. Choosing muted tonal relationships and building texture

into his surfaces, he invests his minimalist vocabulary with a sense of the artist's touch.

Peter Tyndall and John Nixon respectively take the modernist icons of the grid and the cross and build from them the syntax of their own art. The grid is the conceptual model upon which Tyndall hinges the inquiry of his art, building into its mesh his own layers of meaning. The grid is a structure extending in all directions at once with neither a beginning nor an end, no inside nor outside, and no point of origin. Here taking its form from Tyndall's logo (a painting in situ with two strings attached), the grid (unlike in modernism) underlines a continuity between art, its context, and the experience of looking at pictures.

With his constructivist's cross of pure gold on calico (like a sacred cloth), Nixon recalls that moment of faith in art with which modernism began. His is a simple and emphatic geometry infused with poetry and feeling, an expressive objectification of 'self', poised on a principle of beauty.

A spirit of anti-utopia runs throughout Robert MacPherson's art in its self-reflexive search for a minimal definition of what constitutes a painting. The means (or tools) of constructing a work become an essential part of its content. Using pages of text (a story describing the manner of the artwork's making), MacPherson brings a note of ironic humour (or is it despair?) to bear upon the fate of the avant-garde, and the art it so passionately championed. So where does it all end up? The artist cautions against undue idealism: 'the gap between the gallery wall and the junk shop is not that great.'

Making their early works of art in a period when the ascendant star was that of figurative expressionism, and too young to recall with clarity the heyday of the sixties and The Field, the younger artists in this exhibition (one minimalist and three constructivists) have been drawn towards pure formal and conceptual concerns which, up until now, have not been closely associated with their generation. These youthful constructivists, Melinda Harper, Gary Wilson and Rosemary Nolan, reach back beyond the recent past to traditions which never really had any firm roots in Australian soil. Their heroes are those of the Russian avant-garde, suprematism and folk art whose forms and icons they rediscover and experience anew.

No longer the vehicle for a modernist avant-garde, recent post-conceptual abstraction has variously found its orientation and chartered its direction in relationship to its tradition, at times referring directly to its past or sometimes seeking to circumnavigate altogether its place within modern Western culture¹. A rich and diverse tapestry of art has here been brought together under the banner of abstraction indicating some of the paths down which it has travelled both within and beyond modernism.

Sue Cramer, 1986

1. See *tableaux abstraits*, a recent international exhibition of post-minimal abstraction held at Villa Arson, Nice, July-September 1986 organized by Centre National des Arts Plastiques.

LIST OF WORKS

- 1. Robert MacPherson**
Born 1937, Brisbane
"*Where are you now Sylvia Holmes?*" 1982 - 1983
2 units
Oil on canvas 124 x 93 cm
Acrylic on canvas 93 x 93 cm
and Text.
Collection Malcolm Enright, Brisbane.
- 2. Robert Owen**
Born 1937, Sydney
Transitions of Night 1984
Mixed media on canvas
259 x 167.5 cm
Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney.
- 3. Leslie Dumbrell**
Born 1941, Melbourne
Fan Tan 1984
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 244 cm
Monash University Collection.
- 4. Robert Jacks**
Born 1943, Melbourne
Metropolis No.15 1985
Oil on canvas
183 x 153 cm
Courtesy the artist.
- 5. Robert Hunter**
Born 1947, Melbourne
Untitled 1986
Acrylic on wood
220 x 440 cm
Courtesy the artist.
- 6. Peter Cripps**
Born 1948, Melbourne
Syncretic Structure
Analytical Model (Tools) 1986
Paint on glass
4 units composed of 2 parts each
19 x 32.5 cm and 19 x 22.5 cm
Courtesy Watters Gallery, Sydney.
- 7. John Nixon**
Born 1949, Sydney
Self Portrait (Non-Objective Composition) 1986
Enamel and acrylic on calico
Courtesy United Artists Gallery, Melbourne.
- 8. Peter Tyndall**
Born 1950, Melbourne
detail:
*A Person Looks At A Work of Art /
Someone Looks at Something . . .* 1984

A Person Looks At A Work of Art /
Someone Looks At Something . . .
CULTURAL CONSUMPTION PRODUCTION
Courtesy Yuill Crowley Gallery, Sydney.
- 9. Peter Tyndall**
detail:
*A Person Looks At A Work of Art /
Someone Looks at Something . . .* 1984

A Person Looks At A Work of Art /
Someone Looks At Something . . .
CULTURAL CONSUMPTION PRODUCTION
Courtesy Yuill Crowley Gallery, Sydney.
- 10. Rosemary Nolan**
Born 1959, Melbourne
Hessian Piece #1-4 1986
Enamel on hessian
96 x 62 cm each
Courtesy the artist.
- 11. Tim Burns**
Born 1960, Sydney
Painting 1986
Oil and wax on canvas
130 x 153cm
Courtesy Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne.
- 12. Gary Wilson**
Born 1962, Melbourne
Counter Composition 1986
Enamel on plastic
270 x 200 cm each
Courtesy the artist.
- 13. Melinda Harper**
Born 1965, Darwin
Untitled 1986
Oil and enamel on chipboard
64 x 32 cm each
Courtesy the artist.
- 14. Melinda Harper**
Untitled 1986
Oil and enamel on chipboard
64 x 32 cm each
Courtesy the artist.
- 15. Melinda Harper**
Untitled 1986
Oil and enamel on chipboard
72 x 32 cm each
Courtesy the artist.

**This exhibition has been jointly curated by
Sue Cramer and John Nixon.**

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