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Painting the Object
Recent Formal Australian Painting

2003 [2003]
Contents

List of illustrations III
Acknowledgements VII
Abstract VIII

Introduction 9

Part 1 Orientation: Informing Legacy and Discourse 21
1. Regionalism and Cosmopolitanism 22
2. The Modulation of Abstraction in Australian Painting 52
3. Aspects of Recent Australian Formal Painting 81

Part 2 An Active Field: Four Case studies 116
4. Ian Burn: The Minimal Conceptual Nexus 117
5. Alan Oldfield: Neo-Modernism and The Impure Code 137
6. Robert MacPherson: An Abstract Style of Painting 149

Part 3 Conclusion: Painting the Object 190
8. Various Practices: The Curation of Formal Australian Painting in the 1990s 191
9. Post 20th Century Formal Painting 224

Bibliography 229
Appendix A Sphere Post-Graduate Group Exhibition Research Project 1997-2002 239
Appendix B CD File: Colour and B/W Illustrations in Figure Number Order 240
List of Illustrations

Introduction

1  Yurek Wybraniek      Untitled (Target), 1998
2  Eva Hesse            The Washer Table, 1967

Part 1  Chapter 1

3  Jenny Watson         A Painted Page: Twiggy (by Paul Avedon) (for Paul Taylor), 1979
4  Michael Johnson      Window One, 1969
5  Emanuel Phillips-Fox The Art Students, 1895
6  George Lambert       Across the Black Plains, 1899
7  Burgoyne Diller      Untitled No. 8, 1942
8  Peter Halley         Blue Cell with Triple Conduit, 1986
9  Burgoyne Diller      Composition No 33, 1943
10  John Olsen           Spanish Encounter, 1960
11  Roger Kemp           Revolving Forms, 1960-5
12  Harry Holtzman       Square Volume with Yellow and Blue, 1938
13  Russell Drysdale     Sunday Evening, 1941
14  Vic O'Connor         The Dispossessed, 1942
15  Sydney Nolan         Luna Park, 1941
16  Peter Booth          Untitled, 1967
17  David Aspden         Field 1, 1968
18  Alan Oldfield        Ship of Fools, 1970
19  Richard Larter       Sliding Easy, 1970
20  Joseph Szabo         Within-Without 6, 1968
21  Paul Partos          Orpheus, 1968
22  Gunter Christmann    Big Black, 1969
23  Peter Booth          Painting, 1977
24  Wendy Paramor       Libra, 1967
25  Robert Jacks         Rubber, 1969
26  Dick Watkins         Moscow, 1963
27  Tony McGillick       Safari, 1971
28  Al Reinhardt         Red Painting, 1952
29  Sol LeWitt           Cubic Modular No. 3, 1968
30  Col Jordan           Daedalus Series 6, 1968
31  Sydney Nolan         The Myth Rider, 1960
32  Colin Lanceley       Temple of Earthly Delights, 1963
33  Nigel Lendon         Untitled Floor Structure, 1969
34  Mel Bochner          Theory of Painting, 1969
35  Tony McGillick       Polaris, 1968
36  Mel Ramsden          No Title, 1966
37  Tony McGillick       National, 1968
38  Frank Stella         Sangra de Cristo, 1967
39  Robert Hunter        Untitled, 1966
40  Sydney Ball          Pawnee Summer, 1973

Chapter 2

41  Roy De Maistre       Rhythmic Composition in Yellow Green Minor, 1919
42  Harald Nortils       Corre Away, 1968
43  Claudia Damichi      Tongue-Tied, 2002
44  Claude Monet          Antibes, 1915
45  Robert Irwin         Varese Portal, 1973
46  Theo Van Doesburg    Simultaneous Counter Composition, 1929
47  Piet Mondrian        The Red Cloud, 1907
48  Piet Mondrian        Pier and Ocean, 1914
49  Piet Mondrian        Composition in Colour A, 1917
Chapter 3

96 William Delafield-Cook
Two Chairs, 1972

97 Janet Dawson
Balgaia Diptych, 1975

98 Sydney Ball
Zarzan, 1968

99 Elizabeth Newman
'Pictures' Installation, City Gallery Melbourne, 1988

100 Pablo Picasso
Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, 1907

101 Grace Crowley
Abstract Painting, 1930

102 Ralph Balson
Constructive Painting, 1951

103 John Nixon
Art Projects, 1983

104 Mike Parr
Experimental Arts Foundation, Adelaide, 1972

105 Donald Judd
Untitled, 1963

106 Ian Burn
'10' Exhibition, Dwan Galleries, New York, 1966

107 Alexander Knox
Sconce and Phantasmagorical Looking Glass, 1998

108 Michelangelo Pistoletto
Lo Specchio, 1974

109 Dick Watkins
Untitled, 1967

110 Ian Burn
Value Added Landscape No. 1, 1991

111 Brad Buckley
Those Unspoken Tragedies, and that Slashed Eye, 1995

112 Robert MacPherson
Opening of the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1975

113 Angela Brennan
Being and Jasper Johns, 2000

114 Emily Karne-Kngwarreye
Untitled, 1995

115 Francis Budden
Soft Aggression Centre Fold, 1976

116 Susan Landau-O’Neill
Various vases, 1997

117 Clare Beckett
Beaumaris Foreshore, 1925

118 Robert MacPherson
Scale to Rule, and Black and White Vertical Strokes, 1976

119 Gail Hastings
To Make a Work of Thoughtful Art, 1995
110 Kyle Jenkins Red Constructive Painting, 2001
111 Joseph Marioni Blue Painting, 2000
112 John M. Armleder Ohne Title, 1986

Part 2  Chapter 4

113 Robert MacPherson Scale to Tool, 1977
114 Ian Burn Yellow Premiss, 1966
115 Anonymous ‘Group Otto’ (collaboration), Brisbane, 1994
116 Ian Burn Re-ordered Painting, 1965
118 Tony Clark Jasperware Painting, 1993
119 Ian Burn Blue Premiss No.2. (instruction sheet) 1967
120 Rose Nolan Hessian Piece, 1984
121 Piero Manzoni Process Painting, Herning, 1961
122 David Aspden Green Glow, 1968
123 Paul Klee Blooming, 1934
124 Ian Burn Painting, (destroyed), 1965
125 Ian Burn Yellow Blue Equivalence, 1965-66
126 Ross Crothall La petite Fleur Avec les Ham Sandwiches, 1961
127 Robert Jacks Transitions, 1975
128 Ian Burn Re-ordered Painting No.3, 1965
129 Jasper Johns Zero Through to Nine, 1960
130 Ian Burn Re-ordered Painting No.2, 1965
131 Ian Burn The Idiot Figure, 1964
132 Ian Burn Blue, Yellow Equivalence, 1965
133 Ian Burn Blue Reflex, 1967 (R), Mel Ramsden’s No Title (L), 1966
134 Ian Burn Blue Variable No. 1, 1966
135 Ian Burn Two Glass/Mirror Piece, 1968
136 Ian Burn Glass/Mirror Piece, 1968

Chapter 5

137 Alan Oldfield Mezzanine, 1968
138 Eric Shirley Encore, 1968
139 Trevor Vickers Untitled, 1968
140 Rolini Schich Twentieth Century Note, 1968
141 Gemma Smith Untitled (collaboration with Oscar Yanez), 2002
142 Viviene Binns Vag Dens, 1967
143 Olivier Mosset Untitled, 1966
144 Olivier Mosset Double Reverse, 1987
145 Ruark Lewis Silhouette (Transcription Drawing) P.53-1953 AGNSW, 1988
146 Marco Fusinato TM and MF #3 (collaboration with Thurston Moore), 2000

Chapter 6

147 Robert MacPherson Group 9, (Scale To The Tool), 1976
148 Robert MacPherson Paintbrush with Written Text, 1981
149 Robert MacPherson Six Flags Frog Poems, 1991
150 Robert MacPherson Relics of Boredom Red Tape Ball and Rubber Ball, 1977
151 Nixon/MacPherson Society for Young Artists Vkhutemas 1920, Q-Space, 1980
152 Robert MacPherson Two Blacks (Norden) for MM, 1975
153 Robert MacPherson Popov and the Lost Constructivists, 1982
154 Robert MacPherson Artist-Artisian, 1977
155 Robert MacPherson Two Blacks (Norden) for MM, 1975
156 Aleksandr Rodchenko Pure Red, Pure Yellow, and Pure Blue, 1921
157 Tony McGillick Republic, 1967
158 Frank Stella Coloured Chevron Series, 1966
159 Ian Burn ‘No Object’ Mirror Piece, 1967
160 Robert MacPherson  Strokes Over Black, 1974
161 Robert MacPherson  Untitled Paintings, 1981
162 Robert MacPherson  Mayfair 56 Paintings for GW and Rano Castelli, 1993
163 Robert MacPherson  Mayfair June (Blue-hay Morning) For GB, 1994
164 Robert MacPherson  14 Paintings (Naming) Arthur and Martha In Memory of DP, 1993

Chapter 7

165 John Nixon  Twenty Years of Monochrome Painting, 1988
166 John Nixon  EPW, 1994
168 Vladimir Tatlin  Monument to the Third International, (Marquette), 1919
169 John Nixon  Monochrome with Piano, Installation, 1992
170 John Nixon  EPW: 1993, Mark Muller Gallery, Zurich, 1993
171 John Nixon  EPW: Oil, 1998
172 John Nixon  EPW: Oll (Hessian Paintings), 1998
173 John Nixon  (Hope, Supremacist Cross, Timber), Art Gallery of NSW, 1991
174 John Nixon  Studio, 1990
175 John Nixon  Block Painting, 1968
176 John Nixon  Orange Monochrome Construction with Five Colours, 2001
177 John Nixon  Self Portrait (History Painting), 1988
178 John Nixon  Potato Room, 1988
179 John Nixon  Orange EPW Monochromes, 1998
180 John Nixon  EPW: Orange Monochrome (For Emma), 1999

Part 3  Chapter 8

181 Jacky Redgate  Untitled, 1991
182 Rose Nolan  Banners, 2002
183 Julian Dashper  Untitled (1992), 1992
184 A.D.S. Donaldson  Untitled, 2002
185 Julian Dashper  Installation (Abstract Rugs), Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, 1999
186 Richard Dunn  Line, 1969
187 Richard Dunn  Untitled (The Name), 1998
188 Debra Dawes  Between Certitude and Flux, 1994
189 Debra Dawes  Afterthought, 2001
190 Hany Armanious  Untitled, 2000
191 Matthys Gerber  Untitled, 2000
192 John Nixon  Self-Portrait Non-Objective Painting in Red Black and White, 1983
193 A.D.S. Donaldson  Balen Painting (Grey) No.4, 1990
194 A.D.S. Donaldson  Untitled Abstract, 1999
195 A.D.S. Donaldson  Installation, Sarah Cottier Gallery, 1995
196 A.D.S. Donaldson  ‘Monster Field’ Exhibition, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 1993
197 Kerrie Poliness  Untitled (Pavilions), 1993
198 Jasper Johns  Target, 1970
199 Imants Tillers  Counting (0-9) II, 1987
200 Christopher Dean  Las Vegas (Neveda Series), 1994
201 Stephen Bram  Someone Else’s Studio, 1997
202 Stephen Bram  Untitled, 1993
203 Marco Fusinato  Painting 10/1, 2000
204 Gary Wilson  Untitled, 2000
205 Elizabeth Gower  Genera, 1998-99

Chapter 9

206 Blue Lotus Group  ‘Blue Lotus - Section 4’ Exhibition. Firstdraft, 2002
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Abstract

The subject of the thesis is the regional development of formal painting styles in the domain of recent Australian art. I propose that a range of approaches dating from the 1960s, converged in the 1980s, and matured in the 1990s into an associated genre of critical practices. I claim this influential aspect of recent Australian art represents a positive paradigm in the current field. I argue, a regional growth in formal styles of painting, characterised by the abstract, conceptual, and theoretical language used, is not to be considered the aberrant phenomenon of a critically diminished field. That is a claim that has been variously asserted since the mid-1940s and directly concerns how the continuity of a regional abstractionist legacy is perceived.

‘Painting the Object: Recent Formal Australian Painting’, denotes a significant shift from a model of dependency to interdependent practice. The study questions how formal styles of painting and associated object making and installation practices have been interpreted in a particular history. Further, that a recent legacy of Australian art makers have conceptually engaged a ‘generic aesthetic’ in response to remaindered aspects of Modernist painting and sculpture. By tracking critical forms of expression, and theoretic concerns informing select painting-based practices since the 1960s, a discourse is presented on interdependent practices technically identified as: Critical Post-Conceptual.

This investigation substantiates the convergence of abstraction, painting, sculpture, and installation art regionally. Subsequently, I argue that a broadly based milieu engaged with post-minimalist processes is under-acknowledged despite certain participants having been heralded as leading practitioners. That claim is qualified by an examination of a regional legacy prefiguring a recent convergence. After a hiatus in formalist painting occurring in the 1970s, this legacy was identified in the 1980s by Terry Smith in Australian Painting 1788-1990, and followed by the investigative curatorial activities of David Pestorius from the University of Queensland Museum in the 1990s. As a result, the field is understood as having been institutionally ratified by acknowledged contemporary Australian artists, curators and critics. Moreover, the thesis establishes important links to Australian criticism, such as Rex Butler’s 1993 essay ‘To Express the Object’ where a distinction was established between ‘found’ and ‘made objects’. The significance of this clarification for the authorial role of the art maker has been profound.

Overall, the study identifies regional formal approaches to painting-based practices characterised by the evolution of specialised languages or, meta-discourse: in critical response to challenges issued during the closing and revisionist stage of the 20th century. By questioning Greenbergian Formalism, the negation implicit in representational expression and formal styles of painting, the ongoing critical engagement of Australian art makers is shown to have shifted ground from its origin in oppositional Modernist camps of the 1960s finding contemporaneous expression by the 1990s.

In the orienting account of Part 1 art-historical issues, influences, and prefiguring legacy are examined in a series of related discursive accounts. These preliminary passages assist in clarifying claims made in the later stages of the thesis. Part 2 provides four specific case studies, and elaborates recent methodological interests such as the modulation of the iconic language of abstraction found in works made by select Australian artists, from the 1960s to the 1990s. Part 3 is a consideration of current Critical Post-Conceptual practices and related curatorial activity occurring during the 1990s. A conclusion on the implications and ramifications is provided.

Introduction

Initially the title of the thesis was 'Critical Post-Conceptual Painting: A Positive Paradigm in Australian Art'. This located the argument by naming a central concern but lacked the inclusiveness and sense of practicality I later required. So I changed it to 'Painting the Object: Recent Formal Australian Painting'. However, the descriptor “critical, post-conceptualism”¹ has been retained as a central thematic of the study, and for that reason the modification of the title needs to be explained.

I first situated my argument by examining painting-based practices that had been influenced by ‘Modem’ art-historical concerns I found to be still ‘contemporary’ in style.² In particular, while focusing on the formal aspects of John Nixon’s self-defined Radical-Modemist and critical post-conceptual art, I discovered a separate annotation of related practices Terry Smith had also defined as “Post-conceptual”.³ That art-historical reference to a specific field of activity found in Bernard Smith’s 3rd Edition of Australian Painting⁴ pointed to a gap in Australian visual art discourse, and suggested a way for a study on current practices to be developed. Terry Smith’s published commentary on a periodic divergence in Australian art in the 1960s, and the reappearance of related practices in the 1980s, caused me

³ Op cit.
to realise a wider investigation of a regional legacy was appropriate in a study originally concerned with revisionist styles of art making apparent in the 1990s. Further, John Nixon and Terry Smith’s concurrent annotations grounded the research; in particular, it is their express concern for legacy and tradition that I have developed for various reasons.

First, the regional practices Terry Smith sketched out were similar to those I located as coming after the conceptual art movement and/or expressed an appraisal of recent formal styles of painting. Second, Terry Smith’s descriptor, ‘Post Conceptual’ painting, equated with an affirmative perspective and was less focused on what the historian Bernard Smith classified as symptoms in his influential comparative analysis of earlier regional phases of abstraction in Australian art. Briefly, Bernard Smith had asserted in the 1940s that a second phase of ‘Modern’ Australian Formalist painting and sculpture was representative of a regional dysfunction, chiefly because Australian ‘Modern’ painting had dependent relations with international influences and criticism. Subsequently, this aspect failed to comply with his regionalist theory of an indigenous Modernism. He stressed that the credible ‘contemporary’ tendency in Australian painting was based on a ‘realist enterprise’, and that had reacted to abstraction. Third, the relative isolation of Terry Smith’s later descriptor, openly suggested that the ongoing subject of formal painting was fundamentally a disregarded art-historical matter. Fourth, Terry Smith’s clarifying terminology “Post-conceptual” provided a means to argue for the practical innovation and critical convergence occurring in formal Australian painting practices of the 1990s, when reconsidered as having an interdependent art-historical base.

In summary, Terry Smith’s research in the 1970s and 1980s indicated that my later investigation of a contemporary expression of Conceptual Abstractionism and later formalist styles was associated with a legacy of integrated regional concerns. By acknowledging the critical interests of Bernard Smith and Terry Smith, and a gap in discourse they pointed to, post-minimal/conceptual activity could be productively analysed via an investigation of a specific history characterised by convergent forms of expression, art-historical revisionism, and association with the critically disregarded meta-language of abstraction.

Generally speaking, what links the select formal Australian painting-based practices in this study is the acknowledgement of a range of concerns within regional milieux. For instance, many of the artists I discuss were regional Formalists, but research indicates they developed responsive or interdependent engagements as Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether and Ann Stephen note in the 1988 essay The Necessity of Australian Art: An Essay About Interpretation. As such, earlier criticism illustrates that a legacy of formalist practices have been acknowledged as discursive styles of painting (and related practices), and that these represent a key and undervalued aspect of an overall regional expression. Importantly, differences in critical interpretation have served to

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6 Ibid. ‘The Reaction from Abstraction’. P 271.
7 Ibid.
highlight the critical distance sought by responsive formalist styles of practice occurring in an Australian regional context to 'Indigenous' Modernism and a Greenbergian Formalist model, or, alternatively, the Formalism of the 'New York School' of Abstract Expressionism.6

The thesis is to define a model of revisionist or post-formalist practices that manifested in the 1980s when certain art makers commenced synthesising styles and made reference to influences born out of the dominant Modernist academies that had polarised prior Australian discourses. The process of revision included a debate on what a 'Modern' versus 'Contemporary' art implied by the end of the 1960s, and how stylistic preferences were crucially informed by legacy. For instance, the established regional academy was characterised by the antipodean push for ratification of 'indigenous' or 'exotic' versions of Modernism in Australian 'realist' painting, which stemmed from a consensus Bernard Smith and associates had based on an 'appraisal or rejection' of influences and/or longstanding tendencies. That movement had developed by the 1940s as the rightful heir of a supposedly truly 'contemporary' Australian style. This 'ab-originality' was comparatively sanctioned by Bernard Smith's critical publications as it was by the influence of professional art dealers such as Rudy Komon during the 1950s, a factor that should not be underestimated.10 However, by the 1960s this amounted to a divided and contentious field of formal painting engagements with Modernism, generally. The indigenous modernist movement broke up into camps of Realist, Abstractionist, Tachist, Post-Impressionist, Neo-Romanticist and Lyrical Abstract Expressionist's, and in some cases many of these put together.11

A newer formalist academy or 'tendency' materialised in the mid-1960s, and was considered by many arts aficionados as a third and unwarranted Modern (abstractionist) phase. This latest movement was comprised of regional and visiting avant-garde art makers unsympathetic to the 'realist' enterprise and cultural hegemony of the 'Australian School'. It was an opposing movement established by "New Abstractionists"12 painters and sculptors generally associated with Central Street Gallery in Sydney, and Pinotheca and the Gallery A Workshop in Melbourne. These "Colour form"13 or 'colour-field' artists as Patrick McCaughey and Terry Smith defined them, sought a broader interpretation of what contemporaneousness regionally implied. This movement championed purism, cosmopolitanism, and in particular, engaged with a minimal Hard-edge style of abstraction. However, what is discussed in this argument is that there were members like Alan Oldfield, Dick Watkins, Harald Nortis, Rollin Schlicht, and Wendy Paramore, who further complicated matters by developing lyrical and 'impure' representational approaches, differences that also characterised them as Neo-Pop artists and aligning with aspects of the former academy.14 In dramatically over simplifying these two tendencies (Indigenous Modernism and New Abstractionism),

12 Patrick McCaughey. 'The Significance of the Field', Art in Australia, December, 1968.
and despite exhibiting similar interests in international formalist influences and overlapping stylistic characteristics, they were to all intents and purposes diametrically opposed on formal grounds.

It is argued in this study that during the late 1960s and early 1970s a dialectical model of Australian formal art making was synthesised by a range of art makers responsive to a variety of Modernist conventions, within a new template of multi-culturalism and pluralism. Terry Smith's commentary in the early 1980s notes the appearance of conceptual and minimalist painters engaging with the post-conditions of Modernism, generally. However, Terry Smith's immediate regional legacy of formal painting was not as autonomously motivated as he initially suggested. For instance, the artists Terry Smith identified behaved in a similar fashion to American and British sculptors who Rosalind Krauss defined when discussing the appearance of an "expanded field". Also, Lucy Lippard and Michael Fried had made similar deliberations on the "aberrant", "eccentric" and/or "theatrical objectness" of painting and sculpture in the North American continent. Figure 2, is an example of Eva Hesse's non-literalist minimal work, and the kind of responsive and inclusive practice described by these various international critics of the day.

Despite anomalies, in this study a symbiotic relationship between international developments and an active and polarised field of regional discourses is considered. And a consideration of that issue brought the early realisation in my research that there was currency in what Terry Smith described as a "conceptual-minimal nexus" occurring in Australian 'Colour Form' painting, and in other object and installation-style works made between 1965 and the mid 1970s by artists such as Ian Mills, Nigel Lendon and Tony McGillick. Terry Smith's seminal reading of the appearance of the "Problematic Practice" as he put it, opened a view onto a unique field of convergent types of formal painting manifest in regional discourses by the late 1960s and early 1970s. In short, differences can be observed between an emergent model and that of the academy of the 'New Abstractionists' and the 'Indigenous Modernist' Post-Impressionists, Expressionists, Realists, etc such as Drysdale, Dobell, Nolan, Bergner, Boyd, Tucker and later Olsen. I concluded that Terry Smith's descriptor "Post-Conceptual Painting" involved a meaningful characterisation of a convergence of forms and styles as a 'contemporary' form or, significant art practice of its time and place.

A critical revision and subsequent dissimulation (the act of becoming by rendering dissimilar) of conventional practices and approaches to formalist styles of painting and sculpture opened up a new regional art-historical concern; where the 'impure' codification of regional traditions that had been outlined by Neo-Modernist painters such as Alan Oldfield, Rollin Schlicht, and Dick Watkins, evolved.

15 Op cit.
17 ibid.
18 ibid.
19 Op cit.
21 Op cit.
In revising Terry Smith's terminology and the origin of the "problematic practice" as he put it, an area of investigation was located that prefigured later responsive and innovative expressions of formal painting. From that platform, this research has proceeded by examining later interdependent (relational but not absolutely dependent) forms of formal painting-based practices emergent in an extended context. For that central reason, I associate John Nixon and Terry Smith's concurrent 1980s annotations with an acknowledgement of a divergence from traditions and a convergence of styles, influences, and tendencies, in recent Australian painting. This formalised convergence is a significant contributing aspect of recent Australian art that I have associated with innovative practices developed out of what has been hastily defined, a critically diminished field.

Since I commenced the thesis, 'Painting the Object: Recent Formal Australian Painting' related texts have been published that tend to justify the expansion of my initial proposal. For instance, while editing 'Painting the Object', Rex Butler issued A Secret History of Australian Painting in November 2002. That consists of a set of public lectures given on the field during the 1990s, and covers similar terrain. Like other significant texts he has produced Butler's compilation of lectures theoretically focused upon the limits of particular artists and styles by posing rigorous theoretical demands. However, it is not intended to be a comprehensive art-historical genealogy of recent formal Australian painting, in the manner of Bernard Smith and Terry Smith's compendium Australian Painting. The curator David Pestorius has also provided an excellent set of critical essays since 1997, and those documents have continued to practically map out key issues and figures in the field of formal Australian art that critics such as Butler have considered.

Apart from those specific acknowledgements, there are various critiques, forwards, introductions and short essays written for Australian exhibition catalogues by writers and curators such as Victoria Lynn, Ingrid Periz, Terry Smith, Ian Burn, Sue Cramer, Christopher Dean, Richard Dunn, John Nixon, Trevor Smith, Paola Anselmi, Carolyn Barnes, Chris McAuliffe, Ben Cumow, Nick Tsoutas, Keith Broadfoot and again Rex Butler. However, despite a considerable range of credible writing made available since the mid 1980s, the field of recent formal Australian painting can appear to be a disjunctive area of critical enquiry. Whilst making a small contribution to what I consider to be an ongoing discourse on Australian painting, this study is not an exhaustive genealogy. For that reason, I apologise to those who may have been overlooked, who deserve to be accredited, and were not.

'Painting the Object: Recent Formal Australian Painting' is then a practical study produced by an artist examining a regional divergence of formal painting-based forms of expression over the last 40 years, and the term 'recent Australian painting' is specified to cover the period from 1960 to the present day. It is claimed that aspects of formal Australian painting dating from the later 1960s, characterised by a specialised use of art-languages, emerged

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22 Op cit.
26 Op cit.
as a meaningful genre of practices in the 1980s and 1990s. At issue is the claim that associated activity in the field produced a range of innovative and inclusive practices that inform current discourse. Subsequently, the question is raised, were these associated practices inappropriately considered when specifically defined in the early 1990s as the aberrant phenomena of a critically diminished field, as claimed by Victoria Lynn locally, or, when theorists such as Yve-Alain Bois more generally discussed the subject of formal painting on the international stage.29

It is my intention to illustrate that significant aspects of recent formal Australian painting are under-acknowledged, despite the successes of leading practitioners in the field. This point is arguable because practical experience and research shows that the existence of a specific contemporary genre, and a wider legacy of formal practices and its criticism provides a meaningful discourse for art makers, writers, curators, arts administrators or any layperson to engage in post-20th century terms. Therefore, it is claimed, aspects of recent formal Australian painting tend to confound comparative views such as those expressed by Bernard Smith,30 and other signatories in the influential ‘Antipodean Manifesto’ for instance.31

Overall, ‘Painting the Object’ is focused upon an endeavour to illustrate a significant legacy and subsequent concerns that led to a change in attitudes about what is currently implied by the term ‘contemporary painter’.32 In illustrating how a shift in perceptions has registered regionally, out of a polarised and comparative critique of prior Modernist narrations that commenced in the 1940s, a complex of matters is discussed. However, it is acknowledged that certain forms of painting practice may appear to be different in kind from prior cultural or historical understandings. For instance, the forms of painting practice described under the umbrella Critical Post-Conceptual are characterised in this argument by a generic (familial) bias, and by a conceptual/minimal or formally developmental underpinning that merges known or traditional two-dimensional painting styles with object making and installation. These are understood as norms within a regional art-historical context of criticism.33

It is argued that many present-day practices are more readily characterised by their participation in the “Subject of Painting”34 as Paul McGillick put this in 1985, rather than simply replaying traditional forms of expression. Figure 1 is an example of Yurek Wybraniek’s work from 1998, which pertains to an area of Australian painting-based practice that may produce artefacts that appear mostly sculptural or belong to a kind of stylistic category other than painting. However, Wybraniek’s work can be understood in a stylistically complicit sense, as a painting-based work. The artworks presented for examination, and examples that do not appear to be paintings, have been selected because of a level of informing content, and/or the radical origin of the expression. This approach ambiguously

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30 Op cit. Place Taste and Tradition.
positions such works in meta-traditional terms, as responsive, post, or revisionist painting-based works of art. In short they are about the development of what painting now inclusively means to contemporary art makers in a vastly expanded context.

A number of technical aspects concerning formal styles of painting, terminologies and theoretical ideas are examined in the thesis. Some are self-explanatory, whilst others are considered in this introduction to avoid opacity in the main text. There are also significant manuscripts written by regional artists, theorists, and critics informing this discourse to be acknowledged. Inclusively, a number of international artists and their works figure in this regional study. For instance, the German artist Eva Hesse provided a personal and non-literalist reading of Modern painting and sculptural concerns in a responsive minimalist work made in 1967, The Washer Table (Fig.2). This work has been discussed in the argument as a way of comparatively gauging the specialised discourse in a range of associated Australian practices.

As such, Terry Smith's technical descriptor "Post Conceptual"\textsuperscript{35} theoretically ascribes meaning to an active field of engagements occurring within formal Australian painting during and after Conceptualism. And John Nixon's more specific use of the term "critical post-conceptualism"\textsuperscript{36} likewise, acknowledges that this is a crucial matter that recent art makers have taken up in Post-Minimalist styles of practice. Nevertheless, it is important to note that all the artists considered in this argument have self-defining interests. These include stylistic and theoretical preferences that extend beyond artificial frames, a fact that separates each from the other as post-formalist art makers. In short, the aim of the argument is to provide a clarification of an associated genre of practices, not to label a movement.

The phrase 'formal painting' is another term I have generally used as a means of defining an expansive range of associated and dissimilar painting-based practices in Australian art since the later 1960s. Again, this does not imply that all formal Australian painters are defined as Critical Post-Conceptual. For instance, John Olsen and Roger Kemp are discussed as formalist painters, but not as obvious participants of Critical Post-Conceptualism. Indeed, those described as seminal to the appearance of Critical Post-Conceptual painting in the 1980s, such as Ian Burn, Alan Oldfield, Wendy Paramor, Janet Dawson, and Dick Watkins, had classic formalist practices, and others coming later, such as John Nixon and Robert MacPherson, have responsive post-formalist styles of practice. One definition does not necessitate the other. Therefore, each artist discussed must be negotiated individually. This is a specific condition of the argument.

A second point of clarification for the argument concerns the specific use I make of the term 'formal'. Currently it assists in characterising the notion that a meta-stylisation or system is used. Or, for instance, that a combination of known abstractionist styles of painting may have been carefully considered by a particular practitioner. However, deliberation must be given to what having a 'formal' style now suggests, especially when considered in relation to what a 'Formalist' approach has art-historically implied. In brief, 'formal' in the argument generally denotes

\textsuperscript{35} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{36} Op cit.
an extended, considered, discursive approach to a subject (painting), in a 'meta-stylistic' sense. Note, meta-conventions affecting the field are likely to have been engaged irrespective of whether I define them as Critical Post-Conceptual or not. Likewise, when the term 'formal' is used, it should not be assumed that I am only discussing abstract or minimal styles of art making, nor should it be presumed that an art maker placed under discussion is considered an advocate of Clement Greenberg's formalist theorisations by extension, or, by proxy. 57 Likewise the descriptor 'Formalist' is not intended as a pejorative in the thesis, for the reasons outlined.

A particular methodology used in the study involves a technique for locating inherent meaning within specific or resistant artworks. For instance, a type of personal yet formal expression of difference, found in an otherwise generic minimal presentation by Eva Hesse (Fig.2) in 1967, amounted to a non-literalist 'contemporary' style of art making responsive to Modernist discourse. This manner of defining the specific character of a work, besides engaging its physical qualities, involves a process of rationalising non-specific characteristics useful in identifying the critical cogency of the work. In certain instances, that process may involve the recognition of an unusual procedure used by an artist. For instance, a level of dissimulation is observable in both Hesse's and Wybraniek's post-formalist styles. The notion of 'dissimulation' is a process that has led to a specific area of interest for these art makers. 36 Therefore, by considering the often 'divergent' and iconoclastic ideas inherent within resistant artworks (works that are not easily defined), a productive method for deriving a particular meaning for the argument is responsibly developed case by case.

This methodology is also consistent with the way in which Chris McAuliffe proposed that a non-syntagmatic approach could be further developed in Australian art-historical terms, generally. 56 The term 'non-syntagmatic' implies that various approaches and alternative procedures are not only available, but also valid, and that non-sequential associations are significant investigative tools in contemporary research where limits conditions abound.

In this instance, the investigation pivots on an analysis of activity within a peripheral and post-Colonial "culture of repetition", as Nelly Richard put it in 1985. 40 This is considered representative of a form of active engagement existing within what remains for many, a critically diminished field or, what could also be defined as the post or limit-conditions of the subject of painting. It is shown in the thesis that it is possible to state that a legacy of critical formal engagements, once considered diminished, has come to represent a set of innovatively achieved practical diversifications from conventions. From a similarly revisional perspective, current formal styles are considered relevant and informing. From a post 20th century view, they appear in alignment with associated painting-based practices maintained by a range of critics, curators and historians interested in discussing the limits of innovation within the domain of recent Australian art.

An important theme of the thesis is the meaningful role that the language of abstraction has consistently provided art makers since the 1880's. As one available model, that topic concerns the evolution and modulation of a meta-discourse that has tended to be stylistically governed many formalist approaches to Australian painting. It is claimed, that in regional terms, the appearance of a 'contemporary' language of abstraction coincided with the emergence of a genre of developmental formal styles after the 1960's. I have concluded from research that the overall effect of this contemporised art-language highlights a positive and radical set of innovations in the field. I have defined this a 'generic aesthetic' response. This is a matter of academic interest because it provides a methodology useful in disseminating the vast array of information expressed during various phases of the Modernist period.

The descriptor 'generic aesthetic response' has been used in the study, implying that a familial discourse has been used in the assimilation and subsequent dispersal of available information on art, its criticism and/or its theorisation, as meta-discourse expressed within certain visual arts practices. The term 'invention' is generally preferred instead of 'creativity' because the former implies systematic innovation, and not necessarily an unmediated or expressive pouring. 'Radical' implies a focused (not always reductive) perspective, again not necessarily an expression of iconoclastic flamboyance. The term 'variegation' when associated with recent formal approaches to art making implies an association but difference from other practices, ideas, styles of expression etc, just as 'apparent difference' implies that this 'difference' has been expressed and made tangible to others as a discursive concern of an art maker. The term 'homogenate' when used to define various formal practices implies that the idea of variegation has occurred within a specific or related field of theoretical or practical concerns.

My recent curatorial activities associated with the Sphere Postgraduate Research Project (Appendix A) have further confirmed that commonplace semantic devices continue to register as useful tools in contemporary art making. This is a significant aspect when joined with the idea that contemporary art makers generally express a 'personal reading' of what a 'formal' approach contemporarily implies. In that regard, this research has found that formal art makers activate a meta-discursive convention, when such semantic devices are methodologically employed. This implies a 'co-ordinate' process; a terminology utilised in the thesis that is understood as a harmonious arrangement of seemingly conflicting codes or, informed modes of expression. That allows a form of art-historical neutrality to appear in specialised forms of contemporary art production. For instance, Oldfield's (Fig.137), Wybraniak's (Fig.1) and Hesse's (Fig.2) are relevant examples of 'co-ordinate' works made by art makers manipulating an interaction with sign systems. This implies that replay is not the sought after goal of the supposed revisionist maker, rather that a refreshed formalist language or meta-discourse appears in its stead.

The phrase 'art-historical neutrality' is associated with non-literal approaches to art and it's making, and that is an indicator of an art maker taking up a 'generic aesthetic' position as a responsive act. Likewise, the neutrality of 'formal' stylistic expression and a neutral approach to material applications I associate with Critical Post-Conceptual

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41 Op cit.
42 Appendix A.
painting-based practices implies an art maker may have no significant bias towards materials or semantic devices seen as available or known to them. For instance, the French critical theorist and anarchist Guy Debord argued that materials or influences can be “placed in any new ensemble.” Therefore, it reasonable to state that critical contemporary artists may also share a tendency to engage in ‘form-neutral’ and ‘art-historically neutral’ practices, because all these things have been equally available to them within revisionist discourses, where “anything goes”.

The semantics of art making is an extensive area of critical enquiry staked out by regional curators, theorists and historians alike. It is recognised as an important informing aspect of ‘formal’ painting-based practices in recent decades. A contempopised language of abstraction, when it is refugured as a contributing semantic device, like that of the personal expression of the formal art maker and the supportive text of the critic, are identified as a significant, affirmative, and informing aspects of recent critical activity in the field.

It is important to emphasise here that this argument is provided by a current formal art maker, as an extension of practice, and is fundamentally a discursive account based on a ‘personal reading’ of aspects of recent Australian painting. For that reason the argument was not planned to rely upon a reconstruction of a regional art-historical genealogy, or a strict chronology of specific characters or events. Rather, the importance of the thesis resides in its being an informing practical study of the complex production of recent formal painting styles from a particular perspective.

In order to work through the ideas set out above, a general orientation to regional and international legacies is provided. From that perspective, aspects of recent Australian art that prefigure contemporary formal styles of painting are investigated, with a focus provided on practices that illustrate a preference for a ‘systemic’ and citational production within what may also be defined as, personalised investigations of a field. Subsequently, these various aspects are considered in short sections in each of the Chapters of Part 1.

In Chapters 1, 2 and 3 the art-historical account begins around 1960, marking a point where Australian artists began to critique dominant narrations in Western art, and the established academy then associated with a regional development of Modernist conventions. Within the appraisal of that period, the idea of representation and its subsequent negation implicit in Modernisms’ central drive is worked through. For instance, the Modernist negation of representational values is a narrative inherent in a variety of reductive forms of Formalist painting; however, this is also inclusive of other conventions such as the traditions of landscape painting, portraiture, and

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sculpture. In short, Part 1 examines a regional nexus of concerns, a synthesis of issues amounting to an appreciable methodology of assessment, assimilation and criticism of the approach routes into the wider domain of recent formal Australian painting.

In Part 2, selected artworks and the methodological approaches of four formal Australian artists are examined in related case studies. In Chapter 4, the 'systemic' and the 'perceptual orders' of Ian Burn's conceptual/formalist paintings made in London between 1965 and 1967 are discussed. In Chapter 5, an analysis of the 'impure code' and an associated abstractionist work produced by Alan Oldfield in 1968 is undertaken. Oldfield's work is an example of a 'transitional model' of formalist painting, highlighting the appearance of what Sylvia Harrison defined as the 'interactive sign system' or 'impure coding'; a discursive and seminally revisionist abstract style of painting.

The studies in Chapters 6 and 7 transpose the argument into a present context. Robert MacPherson and John Nixon are recognised contemporary art makers, active since the mid-1970s and early 1980s. They are acknowledged because they have presented a range of relevant methodological concerns in current discourses, producing a massive body of work as evidence of their critical commitment. Specifically, their oeuvres assist in verifying the thesis claim of an emergence and maturation of a specific genre of formal painting in recent Australian art. For that reason, MacPherson and Nixon, amongst others, are nominated as figures that have prefigured a current tendency, and as exemplars of the subject. However, all the artists discussed in Part 2, are, in diverse ways, illustrative of the existence of a productive and meaningful formal genre of painting-based practices.

Part 3 is concerned with the ways in which a variety of current regional artists such Richard Dunn or Julian Dashper, and theorists, curators, and artists such as Victoria Lynn, Rex Butler and Ian Burn have developed their practice. In Chapter 8, I argue that the activities of local art makers from the 1990s support the overall thesis claim of a recognisable contemporary genre of Critical Post-Conceptual painting-based practices. In the last section, the art-critical notions of 'interdependence', 'apparent difference' and 'alternative character' are named as observable qualities, and redefined as indicators of a homogenate and continuous legacy of recent formal Australian painting-based practices; despite these often exhibiting problematic revisionist characteristics. These significant notions have been extrapolated from the 1968 essay, 'The Necessity of Australian Art: An Essay About Interpretation' by Ian Burn, Charles Merewether, Nigel Lendon and Ann Stephen. As mentioned, that essay was responsive to Bernard Smith's seminal Post-Colonial and 'comparative' envisioning of Australian art historical concerns. In my opinion, the factors that group of art-theorist/writers identified remain defining characteristics of the 'interdependent' tendency coursing through Australian art. For that, I owe a debt to the information provided in the late 1980s.

48 Christopher Allen. Art in Australia: From Colonisation to Post-Modernism. Thames and Hudson. Sydney, 1997. NB: Within this book important aspects of Australia's specific regional discourses have been discussed by Allen.
49 NB: the terms 'co-ordinate model' and 'transitional form' are personally developed terminologies qualified in the thesis.
50 Op cit.
In the second half of Chapter 8, a set of curated regional exhibitions from the early 1990s specifically engaging with formal painting-based practices has been acknowledged as culturally significant activity. Those curations provide relevance for the outcome of the thesis. The discussion centres on the importance of Ian Burn’s last curation of art in 1993, *Looking at Seeing and Reading* at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, in which a perceptual critique of contemporary painting was elaborated. It was an exhibition organised by the director Nick Waterlow, and held in response to other curations like A.D.S. Donaldson’s 1993 curation *Monster Field* at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery and Rex Butler’s significant *Banal Art* curation, shown at Artspace in Sydney in 1991. Butler’s *Banal Art* show followed on from Victoria Lynn’s earlier curation, *Abstraction*, held at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1990, where I feel a crucial public debate on Australian conceptual-abstractionism further developed. It is concluded that these interconnected high profile curations of recent formal Australian painting, and a subsequent evaluation of associated painting-based practices, amounts to an under-acknowledged subtext in the domain.

In short, Part 3 confirms that meaningful developments occurred within the maturation phase of the associated formal painting-based practices outlined in Parts 1 and 2. Moreover, this extended public engagement highlights the existence of what I define as an active field of critical formal styles of painting. In Chapter 9, the implications and ramifications of the thesis claims are concluded. That argument confirms the necessity of tradition or, a prefiguring legacy of regional formal art makers, and that the idea of Critical Post-Conceptual painting and associated object and installation practices is a defining regional art-historical subject.

It is further claimed, that a discursive reading of this field has been made available through a critical extension of what contemporary formal painting implies. The terms and conditions governing certain works have been negotiated through specific rhetoric produced elsewhere by theorists, journalists, catalogue writers, and most importantly critically engaged artists, themselves. The notion of dissimilation (the act of becoming through establishing difference) in the field is recognised as an informing aspect of an overall response made by artists and critics in practically engaging and critical refuting the supposed diminishment of formalist painting practices, since the Modernist enterprise was first critiqued.

NB: Colour images referenced in the thesis are filed in Figure Number Order in the CD supplied in Appendix B.

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Part 1  Orientation: Informing Legacy and Discourse

Fig. 3    Jenny Watson. *A Painted Page 1: Twiggy (by Paul Avedon) (for Paul Taylor)*, 1979.
The three chapters of Part 1 present background issues necessary to an understanding of a recent tendency in the domain of Australian painting. These orienting chapters determine how critical formalist practices emerged in Australian discourses on contemporary art making, from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. Chapter 1 begins by outlining the appearance in the mid 1960s of a minimal style of Australian painting-based practice, understood as a reductive and responsive form of expression. This key matter is discussed throughout Part 1, and is contingent upon the arrival of critical influences such as Greenbergian Formalism, the language styles of International Modernism, and a revision of a regional legacy critically responsive to the Centre's cultural demands on the Periphery.  

The opening of the National Gallery in Victoria in 1968 with the exhibition *The Field* heralded a new formal model of painting and sculpture into Australian discourse. That exhibition, because of the sudden advent of "international anonymity" in regional discourses, controversially introduced a debate on the dependency of formalist aspects of Australian art. However, as John Sinclair the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria importantly emphasised at the time, *The Field* exhibition marked a passage from regional to cosmopolitan approaches in art making and its criticism. In 1988, the historian Richard Haese in re-orienting that claim, further noted the critical significance of this crucial demarcation in Australian art-historical terms, stating, "there is a background of intellectual activity that preconditions the arrival of Internationalism in Australian art during the later 1960s." These 'conditions', affecting the influence of Internationalism, were manifest in an existing style of antipodean art making the Australian art historian Bernard Smith previously described in a 'comparative' analysis, as,

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"indigenous modernism". Likewise, Christopher Allen made subsequent commentary in Art in Australia: From Colonisation to Post-Modernism claiming the period under discussion was "dominated by a struggle between home grown and international styles, appearing as a rivalry between 'abstraction' and 'figuration', between Melbourne and Sydney, between acclimatised abstract or semi-abstract lyrical painters and the new purism of the Hard-edge". At stake in this discussion is whether or not an International style and other formalist influences provided a meaningful discourse for a growing legacy of Australian artists. This questioning is addressed in a series of orienting passages that follow. Importantly, these varied commentaries provide relevance for issues and concerns discussed in Parts 2 and 3 of the thesis.

Formalist Influence: Fry, Greenberg, Fried

The criticism of Formalist art practices has existed as a critique of Western art for nearly a century. Much of that criticism is based on how the notion of artistic or literary expression had been constructed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For instance, the formalist theorist Roger Fry asserted British art makers and critics had their heads buried in the sand by ignoring the critical importance of International discourse. In claiming this, Fry destabilised the orthodoxy of the Contemporary Arts Societies of England in the early decades of the 20th century, by pressing them into acknowledging that Impressionism and Post-Impressionism were, at the very least, matters worthy of discussion; hence its theorisation and criticism followed.

In Melbourne during the 1930s and 1940s similar concerns for the significance of Impressionism led to an appraisal of regional concerns by teachers such as George Bell, and artists like Russell Drysdale (Fig.13). Bell and Drysdale are noteworthy because they read and understood Fry's deliberations as relating to an existing legacy of Impressionism in Australian works, such as Charles Condor's Departure of the S.S. Orient c.1888 (Fig.72), Emanuel Phillips-Fox's The Art Students

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61 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
c.1895 (Fig.5), and works like George Lambert’s nationalistic icon *Across the Black Plains* from 1899 (Fig.6). These and other early Australian Modernist figures and foreign influences established a complex comparative regional discourse before the arrival of Internationalism in the 1960s. Internationalism in painting was championed by Clement Greenberg who appeared on the world stage in the later 1950's, and is generally considered the main source of contentious formalist art criticism before, during, and long after, the collapse of the internationally recognised movement, Abstract Expressionism. It was that movement that brought him intellectual infamy, and as a consequence Greenberg had a considerable effect on Australian discourses in the later 1960s. Greenberg expressed his particular opinions on regional concerns in essays such as ‘Avant-Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties’.

In a lecture of the same title given at the opening of the Power Institute at Sydney University in May 1969, he opined on how contemporary art making should be formally enacted within tight governances, and yet somehow experienced by the viewer as an all-inclusive matter. For that, and a host of other reasons discussed at various points in Part 1, Greenberg’s formalist theorisation was found to be confusing in regional terms, especially for those who actually participated in a regional Hard-edged abstractionist formalist academy he declined to authorise. He did however continue to champion the sovereignty of ‘advanced’ painting and sculpture in universal terms, and the ability of selected forms to fulfil his absolutist claims of medium specificity. The condition was that his ideal would be best achieved in a regional environment through the expression of an indigenous or, *ab-origine* Modernist character. By 1969, he was not only upsetting the ‘New Abstractionist’ who responded to his discourse directly, but also others confounded by his contradictory claims for an appropriate reading of contemporary Australian art making.

In one paragraph alone in ‘Avant-garde Attitudes’ Greenberg was adamant, “Artistic value is one, not many”. A statement seemingly made in support of the established Modernist Antipodeans Bernard Smith favoured, yet, “the boundaries between the different arts are obliterated” was also proffered as a separate appeal to satisfy the expectations of a newer experimental avant-garde. Regardless of how this rhetoric remains to be interpreted, Greenberg’s rationale is useful when unravelling ongoing representational concerns faced by later formalist art makers. Long after his critical demise, Greenberg’s ‘Formalism’ functions as a platform to view a range of responsive critical positions that have been assumed on painting, object making, and installation practices since.

Neither Fry nor Greenberg invented the concept of formalist theorisation, and Greenberg did not in a single-handed fashion, generate a massive international debate over the collapse of meaning in the plastic arts during the late 20th century. What he did was set him self up as a spokesperson for the tastes and attitudes of a generation by instituting a continuing debate on representational values, and how those are accessed in the visual arts. For

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instance, in 1985 the Chilean curator Nelly Richard stated in an essay provided for the 5th Biennale of Sydney ‘Cultures of Repetition or Cultures of Difference’, that the assumed cultural authority of centrist discourses commonly lead to confusion in environments described as ‘peripheral’ to the ‘metropolitan’ centre. For example, for nearly a century Marxists have critically debated the validity of formalist art and literature, an argument revolving around what Tony Bennet recently claims was Modernism’s inherent failure to respond to the demands of ‘Reflection theory’. In a wider context that failure can be extended to include meaningful regional social and political issues.

Technically speaking, the demand requires an artist to mirror surrounding social conditions and cultural imperatives in some way, whereas, Modernist practice can appear to be more concerned with iconoclasism within expression, especially fond of concrete language forms. Importantly, Bennet noted that the Marxist imperative of ‘Reflection theory’, when applied to debunk formalism and the literary significance of concrete poetry for instance, it turned out to be a contentious matter for later critical Marxist theorists and was abandoned. Bennet illustrated his point by re-examining the social value of poetry, or concrete language, and concluded it was valid within critical discourse. That last claim can be clarified by a brief consideration of international and local formalist works that illustrate Bennet’s concern for unreasonable demands placed on the expression of art, poetry, or literature.

Burgoyne Diller is known as a North American ‘second wave’ geometric abstract style painter. Diller’s Untitled No. 8, c.1942 (Fig.7) and Composition No.33, 1943 (Fig.9) are representative of a style that has influenced Post-Modern abstractionist painters like Peter Halley (Fig.8). These works illustrate a faltering logic of Marxist critical theory in an attempt to correct longstanding methodological concerns. Halley’s developmental Blue Cell with Triple Conduit c.1986 (Fig.8), like Diller’s abstract-style of painting, offers a concern for personal expression within formalist art practice. Therein, the notion of a meaningful cultural reflection on painting is sustained through the envisioning of discursive content or, a common language, even though that is constructed within a highly reductive schematisation.

In works like these, an ongoing responsive process is revealed within a range of formal styles of painting that remains integral to a poetic or visual aesthetic, and a critical engagement with the subject or field of formalist painting historically. This dialectic, established between the language of abstraction and the ongoing demand for socially reflective discourse, shows how many formal or abstract art makers communicate a desired narrative effect, albeit in reductive pictorial terms. In short, these examples of developmental formal painted works provide a

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71 ibid.
communicable structuring of art-historical and contemporary concerns. As Bennet noted, that is a process that can inform the viewer, and reflect what has been understood art-historically as a culturally meaningful discourse.\(^7^4\)

Harry Holtzman’s *Square Volume with Yellow and Blue* c.1938 (Fig 12) is another early example of Hard-edge American painting where the figure/ground relationship has relevance, as it does in Piet Mondrian’s earlier *Composition in Red, Yellow and Blue* c.1921 (Fig.50) and the anti-aesthetic of Theo Van Doesburg’s *Simultaneous Counter Composition* c.1929 (Fig.46). What reappears in this variegated field of abstractionist discourse is a significant concern for communicability within formal styles of painting engaged with how the gaze of the viewer enigmatically operates. The inbuilt formalisation of logic\(^7^5\) present in this particularly reductive geometric legacy of Formalist painting flowing on from the stoic *Avant-gardism* of Mondrian’s pan-continental Neo-plasticism, is only one Modernist convention evident within Greenberg’s influential rhetoric that Australian artists have considered.\(^7^6\)

Greenberg’s updated formalist rhetoric was generally made known to art makers in Australia through the enthusiastic writings of Patrick McCaughey, whose concern for the necessary influence of Internationalism on local art practices was considered key to experiencing the “New Abstraction”.\(^7^7\) However, McCaughey’s 1968 essay written for *The Field* exhibition,\(^7^8\) also pinpointed a growing shift in his focus and an expanding interest in a phenomenological aspect: or, the painting’s presence. McCaughey emphasised Greenberg’s cognisance of the objectness of painting by 1969, quoting, “art is a matter strictly of experience”\(^7^9\). Greenberg, towards the end of his influence further added to regional confusion by arguing that local concerns about the supposed anonymous direction in a variety of Australian engagements with abstraction were groundless.\(^8^0\) McCaughey, in supporting Greenberg’s shifting opinions, asserted that regardless of concerns, “art finds new possibilities for itself”.\(^8^1\) McCaughey’s open or responsive reading of ‘Greenbergian Formalism’ concluded with the affirmation, “far from the ‘new abstraction’ heralding the end of painting or the end of art, it has enlarged the area”.\(^8^2\)

However, Greenberg argued on his Australian visit, that in regional terms there was a more interesting type of formalism to be heralded, other than the purist and conceptual ambitions of Australian Hard-edge styles of abstraction he briefly witnessed. This was a reference to the expressive works of Australian Modernist abstract art makers like John Olsen, with his *Spanish Encounter* c.1960 (Fig.10), or Roger Kemp’s *Revolving Forms* c.1960-5 (Fig.11). Greenberg’s interest in this established style of formal abstract painting tended to alienate the “New Abstractionists” who had mostly exhibited Hard-edged abstractionist works in *The Field*.

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\(^7^4\) Op cit. Frederick Jamison.
\(^7^8\) Op cit.
\(^7^9\) Op cit.
\(^8^0\) Op cit.
\(^8^1\) Ibid.
\(^8^2\) Ibid.
In regional terms, the influence of Internationalism on the polarised regional formalist academies has been identified in this study as a unique set of engagements with an emphasis placed on personal narrative, and in hindsight it was a movement that did not totally exclude the local absorption of critical Abstract Expressionistic approaches; as testified by the wide ranging popularity of American artists such as Hans Hofman. Australian or regional expressionist abstractionist artists such as John Olsen (Fig. 10), Stanislaus Rapotek, William Rose and Ian Fairweather (Fig. 52), embraced that style of formalist influence throughout this period developing a clear indigenous Modernist vernacular, and not just because Greenberg had earlier claimed that the formalisation of creative processes found in Abstract Expressionist styles of art, had a universal or absolute language on offer.

Greenberg preferred Olsen and Kemp’s formalist paintings because of their ‘indigenous’ expressive flavour, and it is here that Nelly Richard’s critique of dominant international discourse mentioned earlier is exposed in its proper context. On the one hand Greenberg’s International Formalism assumed a reproduction of cultural ideas (Centrist), yet on the other preferred to acknowledge a local or, ‘peripheral cultural difference’, when it exhibited an exotic appearance that could be gleaned.

Greenberg’s concept of an Internationalist Formalist academy had other problems. Namely, a reliance upon what both the Vienna Secession and the British Contemporary Art movement had worked through much earlier in the century, and defined as an ‘art for arts sake’ ideal. By the late 1960s that early formalist sensibility was considered hackneyed. For example, it was an ideal affiliated with the advent of the Greenbergian Formalist academy already lampooned by Modernist Pop-Art artists of the day, as pointlessly autonomous.

Similarly, the minimal and conceptual art makers belonging to Late-Modernism also attacked Greenberg and the enterprise of the New York School of painting for its lack of irony, disregard of theory, and above all else, critical neglect of social reflection; as defined earlier. The ‘art for arts sake’ attitude was abandoned by later Modernists in

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53 Op cit.
54 Op cit.
55 Ibid.
57 Ibid. NB: Please consider the magazine Studio produced in the early 1900’s, associated with the Glasgow Group. Same source.
60 Op cit.
favour of the 'art into life' ideal or, the inclusive principle Gesamtkunstwerk, which offered respite from the strictures of Greenberg's influence and a narrowing of aesthetic values.

In 1967 Michael Fried attempted to redefine issues surrounding formalist art criticism, but subsequently became a defender of Greenbergian purism by proxy. In Fried's critical account, 'Art and Objecthood', he responded to Greenberg's criticism by raising the notion of a burgeoning anti-aesthetic and the performative 'objecthood' of minimal works of art. Fried claimed that those diverging from traditional practices associated with the objects of Minimal Art, were no longer partaking in fine art making; rather a self-conscious form of theatrical behaviour was placed at stake.

Robert Morris's Card File of 1963 (Fig.84) is an example of the problematic style of work with which Fried had difficulty reconciling. Fried's argument in 'Art and Objecthood', no matter how insightful, did not convince the art world at the time of its publication, nor did it redeem Greenberg's Formalist critique and associated concern for high art's supposed decline into applied arts or, worse, 'Kitsch'. Fried's discourse in one sense amounted to a call for a suppression of the apparent expansiveness of "New Abstraction". In Greenberg's essay/lecture 'Avant Garde Attitudes: New Art in the Sixties', after heralding the experiential objectness of painting he finally exclaimed to all those attending his Sydney University lecture, "Everything conspires it would seem, in the interests of confusion".

In short, Australian art makers were as divided as the critics by 1969, and it cannot be reasonably stated that because regional art makers may have been working in a formal way, or with formalist methodologies set in place, that this means that they should be classed as Greenbergian adepts. For instance, a description of Harry Holtzman's transitional paintings of the late 1930s (Fig.12) could almost be summoned from the pages of Michael Fried's later writings on formalism and painting, such as 'Shape as Form: Frank Stella's New Painting' (Fig.38). Moreover, in this discussion of Colour-Form painting Fried argues for the inherent objectness of Modernist painting, stating, "the whole ... self evidently follows from not merely the shape of the support, but its actual physical limits". If this is so, then it is also a critique of the Modernist paintings' 'objecthood' and the problematic nature of the formalist academy of 1960's Hard-edge painting can be identified as coming to a head.

With an eruption of criticism of Modernist painting in North America and elsewhere in the later 1960s, the seriousness of the New York School's various overt formalist experimental intentions, as laid out during the late 1940s and 1950s, was exposed. Indeed, criticism in the later 1960s focused on the ludicrousness of the idea of transcendence and of advancement in art making itself, ideas debunked as the critical impetus of much Modernist art.

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54 Op cit.
56 Op cit.
58 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
In the 1980s, when a general reviewing of art of this period flourished, Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ met with wider acceptance as a fitting representational critique of Modernist art.\(^{101}\) In late 20\(^{th}\) century or, Post-Industrial terms, Benjamin’s allegorical and philosophical art-critical essay greatly assisted in demystifying the aural presence and ritual character of Modernist representational art making.\(^{102}\) That essay illustrated that a different critical theoretical drive was pulling at the seams of traditional Western art forms, and was eventually useful as a theoretical mechanism in the de-construction of Modernist art altogether. However, it was the activation of the critical device of irony in art making that allowed different kinds of critical formal painting to proceed in the metropolitan centres of New York and London, and importantly, on the periphery, in places like Australia, New Zealand and South America, to mention a few.\(^{103}\)

**Regional Modernist Painting**

As outlined in the previous section, a specific critical concern for Australian artists has been an unchecked immersion in dominant international formalist discourses. In the mid-1960s there was a coolness or distance shown to American-style Hard-edge painting,\(^{104}\) and attendant Greenbergian Formalist discourse focused on the literal functions of painting.\(^{105}\) Bruce Pollard highlighted important aspects of those concerns to Australian Modernist painters of the late 1960s and early 1970s in his retrospective exhibition, *Minimalism in Australian Painting*.\(^{106}\) However, it was *The Field* exhibit in 1968 that brought these concerns to a climax by dividing Australian artists between those who argued for the necessity of Internationalism and those who embraced an indigenous reading of Modernist influence.

This binary involved a critique of specific motifs, such as ‘landscape’ and ‘Nationalism’. The latter motif had disturbed the ‘Tonal Realist’ Max Meldrum earlier in the 20\(^{th}\) century,\(^{108}\) leading him in the decades that followed to establish a formal and problematic linear approach to the history of realist painting, and colour theory. Meldrum did this by making specific use of light (blocks of colour) within traditional painting styles such as Portraiture and landscape. Thus a notion of abstraction was utilised in Meldrum’s ‘tonal theory’ to counter the mythic narrative expression predominant in Australian Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art making styles.\(^{109}\) This earlier rejection of the import of regional social narrative, or cultural reflection, could well be one reason why many Australian artists of the late 1960s who pondered the language of formalist discourses and the idea of Internationalism, were somewhat

\(^{101}\) Op cit.

\(^{102}\) Ibid.

\(^{103}\) Op cit. Harrison and Wood (Eds). *Art in Theory*. An anthology of critical texts where Benjamin’s essays are also featured amongst many others that have relevance here.

\(^{104}\) Bruce Pollard, ‘Notes For Minimalist Exhibition’ Ewing Gallery catalogue. Melbourne, 1973

\(^{105}\) Op cit. Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’.


ambivalent to its purposes. In short, a newer abstractionist movement described in 1968 by Patrick McCaughey in 'Experience and the New Abstraction', served to underline unease. This had arisen because many artists perceived Australia as an emerging cultural art identity. Consequently, it could be inappropriate to adopt reductive formalist influences indiscriminately. At that stage the antipodean image of the visionary landscapist, portraitist or 'mythic' lyricist abstractionist was being successfully promoted domestically in a range of commercial galleries, and overseas in places like the Whitechapel and Tate galleries of London in 1961. These surveys highlighted the fact that Australian Post-Impressionist, expressive, and Neo-Romantic painters, had focused on the development of a nationalistic vernacular by furthering 'mythic' characterisations or cultural fictions or narrations. Bernard Smith in speaking of the self-proclaimed antipodean artists association of Blackman, Boyd, Brack, Dickerson, Percival and Pugh, stated, "We believe that we have both a right and a duty to draw upon our experience of both society and nature in Australia for the materials of our art".

This nationalistic motif in Australian art encouraged by Bernard Smith in the 1950s and early 1960s provided significance for remained landscape and other loosely intertwined Social Realist issues concerning the isolate Australian figure; seemingly caught in a bind of cultural alienations. The Australian regionalists' preference for an image of the alienating landscape of Australia was bolstered by assertions in Bernard Smith's important art-historical writings such as Place Taste and Tradition, and later, Documents on Art and Taste in Australia - The Colonial Period 1770-1914. Also the book, The Antipodean Manifesto.

Rightly or wrongly, cultural marketing abroad further constructed an image of a frontier people bound to an alienating space of a colonial penal realm. In short, this interpretation was orchestrated by surveying the activities of Australasia's Post-Impressionists, Post-war Expressionists, Social Realist movements, and various Abstract and Non-Objective painters and sculptors working in parallel. Bernard Smith, however, whilst arguing a reciprocal relationship to influence and the benefits of cultural influences simultaneously expressed a growing dismay with the expansion of an Australian avant-garde in this period, proclaiming, "Today tachistes, action painters, geometric abstractionists, abstract expressionists, and their innumerable band of camp followers threaten to benumb the intellect and the wit".

11 Op cit.
22 Op cit.
'Regionalism' in an Australian art-historical context is associated with styles of expressive and/or impressionistic painting developed during the first half of the 20th century. An almost blind faith in a conglomeration of figurative expression was ratified during the 1940s and 1950s with the acknowledgement of artists affiliated with the Neo-Romanticism of 'The Sydney Group', with Communist and Social Realist groups associated with Melbourne's Contemporary Art Society, and with John and Sunday Reed's philanthropic enterprise at Heide Park in Heidelberg, not to mention Bernard Smith's academic critical support; as discussed. As stated, the nationalistic notion of an "indigenous modernism" nurtured by influential individuals and groups was marketed abroad. Of special significance in this regard was the exhibition Recent Australian Painting – 1961 at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. There the mythically charged character and special 'light' of the "Australian School" of painting as Kenneth Clark defined it, was a revelation.

This popular characterization of identity also conformed to an antipodean vision that was readily understood by the British art world in the early 1960s. Kenneth Clark, who wrote the 'Forward' to that survey exhibition, supported this image by claiming that the Australian School provided "something entirely fresh to contemporary painting". This enthusiasm encompassed Australian music, theatre and dance, and was appraised as "a blessed event" in Britain. In terms of painting, it encapsulated lessons British painters could glean from the expression of an "Australian light". Here, again, an exotic and peripheral dissimilation was favoured, as something to be 'gleaned' from the 'Periphery' as part of a reciprocal cultural envision that Bernard Smith eloquently outlines in Place Taste and Tradition.

Clark's comments concerning the figurative and landscape traditions in Australian art are significant. However, the importance of other exhibitions must also be acknowledged. Such as Robert Menzies' 1950s Jubilee Exhibition of Australian Art, and the suitably modified Ten Australians survey curated in 1970 by the Australian art critic Patrick McCaughey. The latter exhibition was authorised by another Australian Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, and supported by the newly established Australian Visual Arts Board. These exhibitions were, regardless, central to the development of a contemporary art consciousness in the minds of the British and Australian public.

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125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
The narrative works of John Brack, Sydney Nolan and Russel Drysdale (Fig.13)\textsuperscript{138} are of particular importance in solidifying this vision in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s, and in the UK in the 1960s. This impetus towards the developmental succession of a truly indigenous Modernism was critically supported by Bernard Smith's claim that "the [Australian] painter must be a mystagogue".\textsuperscript{139} Thus, the antipodean or indigenous Modernist was expected to fulfil a predetermined role "by making articulate the dreams and ambitions half submerged in the national consciousness".\textsuperscript{140} Note, he particularly favoured a traumatised post-war art, such as Vic O'Connor's \textit{The Dispossessed}, c.1942, (Fig.14).

Although the Australian School was historicised regionally by Bernard Smith, and similarly promoted as an exotic movement in contemporary art by Clark in London, the Australian critic Robert Hughes perceived it to be an inflexible model. Hughes expressed his own unease about the establishment of the 'antipodean push' and the celebration of regionalist art-consciousness when he coldly iterated, "Australian painters have not even begun to contemplate their own navals".\textsuperscript{141}

This celebration of a regional style, however, amounted to a curious situation that was summarised by what Hughes had to say in the 'Introduction' to the \textit{Recent Australian Painting - 1961} catalogue. He wrote, "the whole question of the image bulks large in Australian art, at the present".\textsuperscript{142} Hughes was referring to the implications of the word 'image'. For the antipodeans to whom Hughes was alluding, image was regarded not so much as a formal notional matter, but as an engagement with an Australian psyche emergent from a growing regional 'realist' tradition. Hughes' critique implies deference towards a constructed play of mythic characters and of readable objects found in an animated literary and psychological type of pictorial space, which had little traditional affiliation with constructive concepts or, super-reductive picturing.\textsuperscript{143}

I suspect Hughes' criticism was based on a concern about a lack of acceptance of International discourse and the slow rate of change in Australian painting from the explicitly regional to a cosmopolitan (International) contemporary art within the post-WW11 transitional period. It is important to understand the implications of Hughes' comments about the Australian painters represented at Whitechapel Gallery in 1961.\textsuperscript{144} His critical commentary outlines opaque issues seemingly absent in Australian dialogues on contemporary art.

Hughes expressed a concern about a perception of Australian art as somewhat staid, or as an isolated sub-genre grappling with a sense of regional identity, hence an obsession with a nationalistic image. His tone suggests that something was awry. Or, the direction of the Australian tradition promoted in the UK was more out of step than

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Op cit. Robert Hughes. P 14.
\end{itemize}
the formal character underpinning the antipodeans' highly inventive works per se. In either regard, it appears Hughes sensed a problem with the push for the establishment of the Post-Impressionist/Neo-Romantic cum Social-Realist camp, Max Harris's literary Angry Penguins, and/or John and Sunday Reed's antipodean hegemony. Many of these artists emerged from the Victorian State art Schools or, from private Schools such as George Bell's in Melbourne, with its association with Nolan and Drysdale in the preceding decades. Contrary to a prevailing view, and as though explaining the central problem regional artists faced, Hughes finally exclaimed, "Australia's artists are confronted by a virtual tabula rasa. They have no tradition readily available to profit from".

Hughes had much to say about that exhibition. His comments, if nothing else, appear to be an augury of the fact that only few years later, American abstraction and British styles of Pop Art were embraced by a newer generation of Australian art makers who likely shared his view. An embrace seen as an alternative to continuing to make mythically charged abstracted landscapes or Social realist works dominant in the previous decades.

To a certain extent, Hughes' critical comments appear slightly hollow. For instance, Sydney Nolan's *Luna Park* of 1941 (Fig.15) references an earlier, highly informed practice, one that intellectually precedes the directive of Australian School in many ways. In *Luna Park* the dictates of the Cubist rupture of pictorial space and Picasso's massive artistic influence are acknowledged and worked through by Nolan; were a conceptual manipulation of pictorial space and form is combined with a critical playfulness, whilst incorporating an Australian vernacular of colours and urban scenes.

This work confirms that Nolan, for instance, had long engaged in carefully considered procedures and an abstracted conceptualisation of the pictorial plane. Contrary to Hughes' suggestive generalisation that Australian artists were possibly not properly informed by international practices, Nolan's *Myth Rider* (Fig.31), shown in the *Recent Australian Painting – 1961* exhibition, is not unlike *Luna Park* (Fig.15) on a formally achieved level, and in hindsight what underpins both these works is a formalisation of pictorial space or abstract schematisation, which the later *Myth Ryder* starkly demonstrates in its dramatic figure-ground relations. In short, Hughes' questions in the early 1960s about the validity of the Australian School on a formal level, and a general lack of interest in the development of a contemporary legacy, are founded on a an assumption that remains debatable. However, I concur with Hughes' implication that the style of presentation and the selection of works presented to the outside world in the *Recent Australian Painting – 1961* was mostly a reflection of an existing meta-construct, or dominant Modernist indigenous stylisation that attempted to exclusively express 'Australianness'.

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145 Op cit.
147 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
'Australianness' is then identified as a specific characterisation of regional artists works exported to the UK and North America during the 1950s and early 1960s. The Australian painter was portrayed as a rugged, isolate, white male figure. This narrow image, or a popular narrative of an 'Australian School' has persisted despite being understood by some foreign critics even at that stage, as provincial and exotically colonial. For example, Brian Robertson, then director of the influential Whitechapel Gallery wrote in the early 1960s that Australia was occupied by, "sun bronzed sheep farmers and their families, living in an empty if picturesque landscape, containing odd pockets of a rowdy, if mildly dull suburbia". Comments such as these likely informed A. A. Phillips to comment upon the "the Cultural Cringe" within The Australian tradition.

A Newer Australian Regional Formalist Academy

In response to the Australian School and the significant appearance of fresh international formalist influences, another regional formalist academy was established around 1966. This occurred with the formation of Galleries such as Central Street in Sydney, and Pinacotheca and Gallery A Workshop, Melbourne. That activity was openly endorsed in 1968 with the new National Gallery of Victoria’s presentation of The Field exhibition.

As stated, this other academy was based on a compendium of reductive styles of painting that had been introduced publicly as "advanced art", as the Australian writer Paul McGillick reiterated in a recent account. Artists who aligned themselves with these galleries experimented with how ‘International Formalism’ was to be interpreted in regional terms. They were influenced by discourse found in visual arts magazines, like Studio International or Art International, as well as by artists returning from forays in the metropolitan art centres of Europe and North America. Visiting foreign artists like James Doolin understood the growing conceptual questioning of Modern Western painting that had arisen on the international stage, and that a growing Neo-Dadaist or Pop Art critique of Modern art was further placing the credibility of all the supposedly 'advanced' art forms at stake.

However, a conceptual underpinning is traceable in much Australian art of the 20th century, but it was the Post-1950s generation who productively gleaned lessons provided by the earlier Cubism of Picasso, the reductive Neo-Plasticism of Mondrian, the Constructivism of El Lizzitsky, Irena Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko and the Suprematism of Kasimir Malevich, the primal criticality of Cezanne, the invigorating tonal-colour theory of Henri

154 Op cit.
155 Ibid.
Matisse, and the rigorous and apodictic formalism of Frank Stella, Donald Judd and Ellsworth Kelly, and a host of other Americans.\textsuperscript{156} It was Ellsworth Kelly, an artist known to enquiring Australian artists in the 1960s who had emphasised an important formalist concern, claiming, "The form of my painting is the content".\textsuperscript{157}

The abstract artists showcased in The Field exhibition\textsuperscript{158} aligned with the newer Australian regional formalist academy, and who likewise sought to contemporise the peripheral status of their practices. Michael Johnson’s sculpting of large colourful blocks into formal arrangements of ‘Colour-form’ is illustrative of the new aesthetic field, as defined in 1968 by Royston Harper in ‘An Important Academy’.\textsuperscript{159} These so-called avant-garde Australian artists were increasingly responsive to international stimulus because it offered not only freshness in formal terms, but also the possibility of presenting themselves in a more cosmopolitan view.

Peter Booth’s Untitled c.1967 (Fig.16) illustrates that the Internationalist or High-Modernist discourse articulated by critical Australian writers such as Royston Harper, Patrick McCaughey and Elwyn Lynn in The Field catalogue notes, had not gone unnoticed.\textsuperscript{160} Likewise, the international style of Colour-Form painting, as locally discussed by Patrick McCaughey and Terry Smith,\textsuperscript{161} was greatly admired by many during the later 1960s.\textsuperscript{162} Their early supportive writing, like Johnson’s exemplifying painting (Fig.4), clearly involved an adoption of formally reductive styles of painting and sculptural concerns that embraced the inherent objectness of High-Modernist painting.\textsuperscript{163}

David Aspden’s Field 1 c.1968 (Fig.17) is another classic Australian Colour-Form painting produced at the height of the Australian formalist painting experiment.\textsuperscript{164} Aspden utilised a minimal language of art that offered availability and directness, and possessed a simplicity that contrasted with the meaningful weightiness of prior art-historical narrative conventions, such as the Post-Impressionist, Expressionist, and Social Realist accounts underpinning the ‘mystagogy’ of the Australian school.\textsuperscript{165}

I claim a responsiveness to newer Modernist styles developed because of the availability of these newer styles of art making, a process that had been accentuated by the pressure exerted by newer foreign influences. This led to an expansion of an available vocabulary regionally, opening up an evolving field of experimentation with

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{158} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{160} Op cit. Elwyn Lynn. Refer to his notes on Colour-Form painting. P 84.
\textsuperscript{161} Op cit. ‘Experience and the New Abstraction’.
\textsuperscript{162} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{163} Donald Judd. ‘Specific Objects’. Arts Magazine, June, 1965.
material applications used to construct paintings and sculptural works by regional art makers. A new Australasian envisioning of contemporary art styles appeared in answer to the question: if traditional concerns were to be transformed, what would a different kind of Australasian art be like?

With that changes occurred rapidly in the Australian visual arts during the later 1960s, as elsewhere. But the clash of regional interests among Australian art makers and local critical opinions was particularly visible. The New Abstraction challenged the hegemony of antipodean Post-Impressionist and generally expressionistic styles then fashionable in Australian art, leading to a conscious rejection of oil-based and representational painting practices consistent with a well constructed mythic vernacular that was associated with an earlier Regionalism.

Alternative and radically abstract art makers favoured the ideal of cosmopolitanism. In that fashion, Sylvia Harrison titled the lyrical and narrative style characterised by the works of Alan Oldfield (Fig.18) and Richard Larter (Fig.19) "Sydney Pop", as contingent with the advent of what she also labelled the burgeoning "social internationalism" of Australasian art.

In both Sydney and Melbourne, Formal abstract styles of painting had become useful for many younger artists as a credible approach route into the task of making critical paintings. According to Bruce Pollard, this was expressed not in Sydney but in Melbourne's formalist academy. That is where, for example, "A Contemplative Art" was more noticeable in related Colour-Form works such as Paul Partos' Orphea (Fig.21); a work also exhibited in The Field. However, Pollard's distinction involved the same systematic collapsing of styles into simple, formal, colourful and often rudimentary geometric formats, similar to that seen in the paintings and sculptural works of both the Sydney and Melbourne artists. Joseph Szabo's painting Within-Without 8 c.1968 (Fig.20) is a further example of that claim.

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2. Op cit.
4. Ibid.
8. Consider the later exhibition titled *Minimal Art in Australia - A Contemplative Art* curated by Bruce Pollard in 1987. This text supplied with the catalogue of works, discussed opinions and certain understandings best described as differences in regional attitudes held towards common issues that have effected both Sydney and Melbourne artists, and their approaches to the making of Minimalist art works since the 1960's. MOCA exhibition catalogue. Melbourne, 1987.
Regardless of which city's art makers were more critical, influenced, or responsive, an equally reflexive paring-down and abstracting of formal painting, sculpture, music and mathematical themes became conceptualised as 'advanced' perceptual motifs around this time. In this particular expression, features such as repetition and systems of formal variation of motifs in painting were experimented with, and publicly articulated. The work of the Adelaide painter Trevor Vickers, whose Untitled c.1968 (Fig.139) was also shown in The Field exhibition, illustrates in a formal yet personal way, how a range of Australian artists had managed the idea of artistic 'signature' within formal their expression. Despite their participation in a trend the international theorist Yve-Alain Bois later claimed was headed inexorably towards the "terminus" of dogmatic Greenbergian theory, they nevertheless continued to experiment and develop their signatures within the looming "endgame" scenario for painting.

Modes of Operation

Greenberg's aim of attaining purity and clarity in formal art making is exemplified by the qualifying theorem in his 1962 essay 'Modernist Painting' where he claimed, "each art had to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself". This expressly High-Modernist formalist understanding is qualified by Greenberg's emphatic assertion that "by doing this, each art would, to be sure, narrow its area of competence, but at the same time it would make its possession of this area all the more secure".

Christine Dixon, a curator for the National Gallery of Australia, recently adverted to the periodic presence of this ideal when she described Gunter Christmann's Colour-Form work (Fig.22) as "an ostensible observation of the protocols of Greenbergian theory". Greenberg's reductive theoretical negation of representation is especially evident in Christmann's achieved chevron paintings, a style of work that is also reminiscent of Ian Burn's London-based Formalist Re-ordered paintings (Fig.116), and the 'literalist' works of Frank Stella (Fig158). Ironically, the new direction which Patrick McCaughey as art critic for the Melbourne Age heralded in support of the Greenbergian

175 Op cit. The Field catalogue.
176 Op cit. Bois, P 229
177 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
rhetoric of ‘Modernist Painting’, became manifest in a kind of Australian painting that developed at a point which turned out to be the culmination of the High-Modernist period on the world stage. Regarding that circuitous belatedness McCaughey later remarked, ‘the sixties came late to Australia’. 

McCaughey’s sardonic statement reflects that the belated Colour-Form painterly movement had somehow registered as a false beginning in Australian art-historical terms. However, this was mostly due to the inherently limiting critical concerns of favoured Greenbergian aesthetics. Dixon also later wryly referred to that era, commenting ‘the Native Expressionism of the antipodean artist was overwhelmed by the self evident importance of Internationalism in the American work’. Further, there was the issue of the apparent usurping of what had ostensibly been Melbourne’s leading role in Australian art. This matter was aggravated by McCaughery’s enthusiastic pronouncement that ‘once again Melbourne has been dragged kicking and screaming into the 20th century’. However, this alleged bad timing of burgeoning Australian Modernist artists interested in imported formalist rhetoric on painting and sculpture, is alternatively discussed in this and subsequent chapters as providing a watershed for many critically responsive formal Australian art makers who followed.

In 1976, Jennifer Glenn, in a periodic genealogy described the rapid rise and fall of Colour-Form painting in her Sydney University essay, ‘Ways of Dealing with the Central Street Style’. She noted that within modes of operation divisions quickly appeared in the works produced by younger Australian artists responding to a newer imported style of art, and not just because it had been de rigueur for an avant-garde of Australian painting to somehow engage with American Hard-edge or British Pop-art styles. For example, Peter Booth’s early practice embraced ‘international anonymity’ or, a paring-down of pictorial content, yet he soon abandoned this for a return to figuration. Likewise, by the early 1970s, the credibility and popularity of formal abstract styles of painting had possibly reached its lowest ebb.

Peter Booth’s unusual (expressionistic) form of monochromatic painting Untitled c.1967 (Fig.16) is discussed by Christopher Allen as, “at once extraordinarily severe in its exclusion of mimetic content, yet allows a painterly life to stir at the edges of the immense stillness.” Regardless of how this important ...

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133 Op cit.
135 Op cit.
138 Ibid.
work is theoretically read today, Booth, like many other critical Australian art makers would cease a reductive painting mode altogether. Booth only resumed painting in the later 1970s after discovering that drawing provided him with the necessary context for the recovery of meaning in his subsequently content-laden, and highly expressionistic figurative works.

The seriousness of the perceived failure of formalist abstract painting practices is reflected in the distance that appears between Booth’s monochromatic Untitled c.1967 (Fig.16) and the recovered meaning found in his gestural and figurative Painting c.1977 (Fig.23). Notwithstanding the obvious disparity of style, there is a degree of gesture found in the earlier monochrome that is consistent with a vernacular understanding of formal practices inherent in both works. I would argue that in Booth’s later revisionist mode of operation, a reversal of the reductive expressionistic abstraction characterised by the presence of drips and so on in the monochromatic Untitled (Fig.16), was harmoniously retained as a significant part of his expression. That is, the monoithic abstraction of earlier Hard-edge work is responsively ‘re-presented’ as an informing modality in later expressionistic works.

Australian art makers’ various strategies in the application of formal practices, like that revealed in the construction of Booth’s painting Untitled (Fig.16), and in many of the formal works produced by Tony McGillick around that same time (Fig.35), had much to do with an appreciation of Frank Stella’s work (Fig. 38), and as significantly, Jasper Johns’ impressive oeuvre (Fig.196). Thus the works discussed in this section, despite displaying considerable differences, also reveal a convergence of formal and expressive characteristics honed within vernacular expressions of their critically discursive interests. Here informed local formalist dialogues emerge, and those meaningfully prefigure a cosmopolitan or international approach to the subject of supposedly ‘advanced’ forms of painting; just as these influences were often made into transparent concerns. Thus, while many painters working in Sydney such as James Doolin or Tony McGillick (Fig.35) became involved with a Non-Objective geometric development of the language of abstraction, others, such as Alan Oldfield (Fig.18) and Richard Larter (Fig.19), made much of the narrative importation of American and British Modernist rhetoric predominant within existing Pop Art dialogues from the mid- to late 1960s; again producing a formalised abstractionist vernacular of their own design.

McGillik’s non-objective style (Fig.35) is very different from the representational works of Oldfield (Fig.18) or of Wendy Paramor, for example, whose Pop-ish ornamental sensitivity to formalism is of especial interest today (Fig.24). Sylvia Harrison has stated that these different styles illustrated “themes that were drawn from idiosyncratic aspects of Australian urban life, though unwittingly or unwittingly revealing links with the unitary culture of Western society”.

Harrison further asserted, “...while the term Internationalism encompassed far more than artistic style, from 1966 onwards it was synonymous with the ‘neutral’ character and formal language of recent British and American

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194 Op cit.
‘abstraction’. In contrast to Sydney’s supposedly hedonistic feel, many Melbourne art makers of this period made much of influences that remained after the robustness of Colour-Form painting and Pop Art directions had cooled off, or had broken up into more cautious approaches. For instance, Robert Jacks personal style is illustrated by the periodic work, Rubber c.1969 (Fig.25).

From all accounts, by the 1970s an associated group of Melbourne painters had settled into a restrained and minimal response to the supposed anonymity of Internationalism. Patrick McCaughey overreacted to that situation by stating that these painters produced a mode of “doctrinaire minimalism that afflicted much of the ‘new abstraction’.” According to Bruce Pollard, the restraint that seemingly garnered “anonymity and impersonality” actually characterised the Melbourne painters from the beginning of the formalist painting episode in Australian art. Pollard later described works like Robert Hunter’s all white paintings, or the monochromatic panels of Paul Partos (Fig.21) as characteristic of, “a more contemplative mood”. They also illustrated a penchant for the objectness of painting, and related perceptual concerns appreciable today.

This ‘perceptual’ and phenomenological moodiness, found in reductive and responsive modes of recent formal Australian painting, is illustrated in conceptual abstractionist works that Pollard believed engaged “the exploration of the paradoxical concept of presence (specific objectness/enigmatic narrative).” It is a post-Greenbergian theme that is considered a significant legacy informing practices grown out of this seminal period in Australian art making. This theme is discussed later as paramount to understanding the appearance of Critical Post-Conceptual painting in the 1980s, and of a responsive category of relational modes of practice that have since appeared.

Responsive Engagements and Personal Signature

With the collapse of the International Formalist movement of abstract painting, reflexive and revisionist formalist styles of painting were remained in the Australian environment. This generally entailed a critical modality that expressed little, if any, interest in spiritual or transcendent meanings, whilst challenging the formal art maker’s ability
to sustain the usefulness of representational art making itself. On this, in 1968 Royston Harper noted that the outstanding painter in The Field exhibition was the referential Dick Watkins (Fig.26), stating, "in many ways he is responsible for this new (regional) academy, but now the only one not working in it". What Harper was alluding to, is that Watkins style always lay outside the academy. This was due to his development of a carefully considered conceptual construct, that is, of a personalised, readable, yet highly discursive and informed artistic signature.

A similarity of view was expressed by Wynston Curnow's essay in the 1984 Biennale of Sydney exhibition catalogue, where it was claimed, "in provinces like Australia and New Zealand modernism's advance was blunted ... [by the] ... persistence on the peripheries, of the painters". The suggestion is that it was the regional painters in particular, in responding to formalist debates in their practices, who managed an engaging resistance to International Modernism through a regional expression of 'personal signature'. For instance, Tony McGillick's synergistic Post-Painterly work, Safari c. 1971 (Fig.27), illustrates a complex mix of critical interests that began to affect the look and style of more current art works produced in that environment of changing concerns. McGillick's, like Ian Millis's conceptually vibrant oeuvre, demonstrates that an outright critical negation of Modernist painting practices, pursuant to a rebuttal of Abstract Expressionist and Formalist ideals of the 'New York School', may have been premature in terms of how further experimentation in relational fields might be interpreted (Fig.35).

In short, Australian Modernist art makers in the later 1960s had begun a process of experimentation in a number of styles, modes, and approaches, by expressing a regional vernacular of reductive formal styles of practice, whilst developmentally critiquing the negation implicit in modernist art making itself. Just as the members of the newly formed avant-garde were diametrically opposed to what Glenn defined in the mid-1970s as "the left over Abstract Expressionists, the Antipodeans, and the Charm School painters".

For these reasons is not difficult to see with hindsight, and as Glenn noted earlier, why so many (including the critical mainstream of the arts establishment of Australia) found that the "new paintings seemed to present problems". Here the influence of the significant American art maker Ad Reinhardt is of comparative interest (Fig.28). Reinhardt was an academic and expert in early Chinese arts, who had by the late 1950s developed a reductive Modernist style that would lead to the establishment of a stylistically formalised area of painting. By making

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208 Ibid.
a self-styled minimal and rather dogmatic Formalist rhetoric public, Reinhardt prefigured the arrival of a responsive reductive aspect of Late-Modemist painting. He did this by sardonically providing a clear, influential example of a personal reading of more contemporary formal art making processes; he was initially excluded from critical celebrity because of his individualistic stance. However, his particular refusal to traditionally ‘represent’ was nevertheless produced within an aesthetically pleasing field of abstract painting, and in so doing eventually illustrated what was critically available even within the severest crafting of a still traditionally achieved representational practice.

One of Reinhardt’s stated aims was “to paint, and repaint the same thing over and over again, to repeat and refine the one uniform form again and again”. He claimed, “intensity, consciousness, perfection in art, only come after long routine, preparation and intention”. Reinhardt’s Red Painting c.1952 (Fig.28) is an example from this compelling and inspirational formal series of works, illustrating an International style. A following generation of critical American art makers such as Donald Judd (Fig.95), Anne Truitt (Fig.57), Robert Smithson, Agnes Martin and Sol Lewitt (Fig.29) saw Reinhardt as an important and influential art maker, mainly because of his complete orientation towards critical judgement, and his minimal and conceptualised display of abstractionist works of art.

Sol LeWitt’s Cubic Modular No.3 c.1968 (Fig.29) is also indebted to a non-literalist or responsive formalist legacy embracing the reductive expression of Reinhardt (Fig.28), and, the stoicism of Piet Mondrian’s axiomatic envisioning of the grid (Fig.29). This complex reductive impetus, directed towards the intellectual production of a minimal abstract-style, was fuelled in part by what Edward Lucie-Smith identified as a powerful reactive trait apparent in the excesses of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Lucie-Smith claimed that a developing interest in North American formalist practices was associated with “a distaste for specific imagery that in a traditionally Jewish sense, had become a Western radical aim linked to some kind of ultimate expression”. He also noted that Reinhardt reacted to the Abstract Expressionist art makers through the late 1950s and early 1960s. Those art makers, according to Lucie-Smith, had promoted the notion that “art could only make an efficient contribution to society by becoming a substitute religion. That more ordinary types of communication would not do”.

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210 Ibid.
211 Ibid.
213 Ibid.
This composite of drives, concerning newly acquired theoretical rhetoric based on quasi religious comparisons, amounted to a partial and inaccurate lumping together of often misleading critical assumptions applied to the way formal artistic practices have since been interpreted. As stated, little was known in Australia in the 1950s about the contentious American-style formalist painting, which first appeared in Australian visual arts dialogues in the mid-1960s, initially finding a home in the workshops of Janet Dawson (Fig.87) in Melbourne’s Gallery A, and in Sydney’s Central Street Gallery run by John White, Halard Norits (Fig. 42) and Tony McGillic (Fig.27).

Significantly what emerged from within these artist-run spaces was a cosmopolitan interest in newer modes of art making. This development occurred despite the general hostility of critics such as Laurie Thomas of The Australian, and his Melbourne counterpart Allan McCulloch, who were both openly critical if not antagonistic. However, a general concern was more mildly expressed by James Gleeson of the Sun Herald, and Wallace Thornton and the more intellectual Donald Brook of the Sydney Morning Herald who, for example, did describe the paintings of Col Jordan (Fig.30) as a supreme example of “muddled thinking”. The awkwardness of Jordan’s expression, and similarly of Joseph Szabo’s reductive abstract style (Fig.20) is what makes them interesting. They are in my opinion, credible types of recent formal Australian painting, regardless of opinions on stylistic value.

In summary, a newer looking and basically imported abstractionist painting style was premised upon a highly reductive expression. Adopting this style in the mid to late-1960s was probably seen as a way of establishing a visible difference from the Antipodean movement of Modernism, a manifestly self-absorbed account of indigenous figurative abstraction. In Sydney Nolan’s painting The Myth Rider of 1960 (Fig.31), the nationalistic mythic narration implicit in typical indigenous Modernist styles of Australian painting is apparent; an account that has nevertheless continued to polarise the opinions of the Australian painters and critics discussed in this thesis to this very day.

From this it is evident that there has clearly been a division of critical interests between a regional and cosmopolitan reading of what Modernism or formalist influence has implied in peripheral environments such as Australia. That division was regionally exacerbated in the mid-1960s by the actions of a disparate range of artists including Dick Watkins (Fig.26), Tony McGillic (Fig.27), Alan Oldfield (Fig.18), Wendy Paramor (Fig.24), Ian Burn (Fig.114) and Janet Dawson (Fig.87), as well as other resident foreign painters such as James Doolin and Mel Ramsden (Fig.36). However, they collectively provided a display of innovative responsive practices that prompted the Melbourne Age’s art critic Patrick McCaughey to pronounce “new Abstraction” had arrived in Australia.

218 Op cit.
As mentioned, these champions of a new style found soon themselves embroiled in a broader critical lampooning emanating from critical North American Neo-Dada art makers who had set out to debunk the Greenbergian Formalist academy’s lofty spiritual aims. In mind of this, Colin Lanceley’s Temple of Earthly Delights of 1963 (Fig.32) directs attention to a local form of Pop Art described by Robert Hughes as “larrkin icon making”. Typified in this work is the distance already sought in the early 1960s by others, such as the Annandale Imitation Realist group (Fig.62). That is, from an earlier dominance of various International styles. That activity, also undertaken from the early 1960s as a way of debunking the Australian school’s limited vernacular, is a separate condition that also prefigured concerns expressed within Australian art of the period.

Objectifying the ‘Idea of Painting’

in the context of Australian art towards the end of the 1960s, Nigel Lendon produced some extraordinary object-works, such as his painted wooden Untitled Floor Structure c.1969 (Fig.33). This is a seminal and informing work for this argument. It illustrates just how possible it was in 1969 for a regional art maker to formulate a clear conceptual formal expression by utilising a variety of contemporary dialogues in a single (painted) abstractionist work of art.

The viewer of this challenging work was first confronted by a new painting model altogether, then a confrontation concerning the objectification of the ‘idea of painting’, and finally, the viewer’s own role in a complex process of interactions. Lendon’s perceptually driven approach was not unlike that of Jasper Johns: viewers generally had little idea that they were engaging in the development of shifting perceptual concerns simply by experiencing such confluent works as objects.

Lendon’s painting/floor structure (Fig 33) is described here as a challenging work because it resides neither in painting or sculpture per se, and in a classic Minimalist move Lendon satisfied the currency of an anti-aesthetic demand concerning art’s sudden and almost compulsory objectness. Writer Kenneth Baker, an expert on these

221 Op cit. Robert Hughes.
matters, stated, "the impulse behind Minimalism was the drive to clarify the terms in which art takes place in the world". Lendon's work fits that definition, but it also expresses an aberrant character. Lucy R. Lippard identified the notion of 'aberrance' in her 1966 essay 'Eccentric Abstraction', claiming it to be a significant developmental concern in the field of formal North American sculpture. This is also discussed in greater detail at a later stage.

An artist upon whom Lippard focused is the North American Conceptualist Mel Bochner, who also developed an abstract style of art that I would say was at various times, like Lendon's, a painting-based installation practice (Fig. 34). The work illustrated is pointedly entitled Theory of Painting c.1969. Similarly, Lendon's Floor Structure (Fig. 33) installation exemplified a stylistic approach that Lippard believed was a sculptural work behaving "eccentrically".

Lendon's art proves a related expression concerning the redirected purposes of abstract styles of language in art making occurred in the Australian context. This new ethos was later summed up in Memory Holloway's 1976 conclusion that the purpose of Minimalism was to "attack the need for meaning, and to focus our attention". Here in these examples and discourses, the "will to silence" Victoria Lynn highlighted in her 1990 'Abstraction' essay, as a significant idea, is seen to be informing an important period of change in Australian art.

Tony McGillick also produced a minimal but co-ordinate model of formal painting practice, and despite sharing closeness to Frank Stella's Chevron Series (Fig. 38), McGillick nevertheless developed an intelligently presented abstractionist style of painting. Polaris c.1968 (Fig. 35) makes clear his discursive commitment to the purposefulness of the enigmatic language of abstraction in his contemporary art making. In that way, and through the use of descriptive titles, he utilised reductive forms whilst eschewing the apodictic idealism of Minimalism per se.

A similarity of approach that seems so characteristic of Colour-Form painting of the mid- to late 1960s in Australia, clearly owes a debt to the language expressed by Frank Stella in his production of shaped canvases. That phenomenon, concerning a newer type of sculpture/painting, may not be as flatly imitative as it may first appear in comparable Australian paintings produced in this period. For example, Frank Stella's style of Hard-edge or Colour-Form American painting would have been understood by other art makers as a model of useful language, and just as readable as Mondrian's and Marcel Duchamp's highly interpretable ideas. Likewise, the shaped canvases and

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224 Ibid. P 10.
226 Ibid.
227 Memory Holloway. 'Minimal Art at the National Gallery of Victoria'. Arts Melbourne. 1976. This essay was in praise of Jennifer Phipps prior Minimal Art exhibition. P 54.
228 Op cit. Chapters 1 and 9.
'chevron' stylisations of Frank Stella would have been considered a 'generic aesthetic' field from a distance, and as an available, flexible, innovative convention because of a prevailing responsiveness.220

My research indicates that this approach into a specific genre of painting was in fact well trodden by interested Australian artists. These include Tony McGillick (Fig.35), Wendy Paramor (Fig.24), Michael Johnson (Fig.4), Trevor Vickers (Fig.139), Vernon Treweweke, RC Robertson-Swan, Harald Nortis (fig.42) Col Jordan (Fig.30), and Alan Oldfield (Fig.137); these are only a few of the art makers who showed responsive, often sculptural styles of painterly work in the National Gallery of Victoria's The Field exhibition, of 1968.220

Alan Oldfield's Mezzanine of 1968 (Fig.137) is a different example of this style first shown in The Field. In that work Oldfield carefully included a fluid conflation of generic language forms. In considering Oldfield's Mezzanine, it should not be concluded that because he used a complex variation of patterning that amounted to an 'impure' codification of the 'chevrons' and designs, or because other art makers made similarly shaped works at that stage, that he or others were slavishly following each other's practice. It is reasonable to assume that they may have been responsively engaging with what appeared to them as an available discourse on a flexible convention.231

As briefly mentioned, Ad Reinhardt illustrated in the 1960s that the art of monochromatic painting is particularly interesting example of a problematic form, one that concerns the notion of representational negation. Monochromatic painting is however replicant, with its origins in a Chinese tradition that breaks up into a host of regional schools over many centuries. Reductive iconic ideas from that tradition have been usefully subsumed in the Modernist era by a legacy of interested painters such as Reinhardt, and that interest continues to this day.

Mel Ramsden's monochromatic object work No Title c.1966 (Fig.36) sent out for The Field exhibition, is an example of a reflexive Modernist-style painting that was achieved in a radical minimalist format that equally confronted the aesthetic values of the institution, and those of the viewer, whilst developing a personal narrative stylisation responsive to the limit conditions of Modernist formalist conventions.

In brief, a growth of interest in the area of formal painting practices has occurred in recent Australian art despite the longstanding criticism in Greenbergian terms of Colour-Form and Hard-edge abstraction: as depicted earlier as a discourse that has become confusing over recent decades.232

Today, a concern for formalist language generally relates to the appropriateness of the chosen language more than anything else. That is, there is a far more generalised critique of obliquely problematic Modernist master narrations at stake within that same critical discourse.233

For instance, genuine concerns have continued to be expressed about unchecked forms of representational artistic expression. Out of a crisis to do with representational expression, various debates have developed in the 1990s that critically engaged writers on contemporary art, such as Arthur C. Danto,254 Yve-Alain Bois,255 and Hal Foster,236 continue to negotiate on an international stage. Locally, Terry Smith237 and Rex Butler238 are examples.

Relevance and International Modernism

In consideration of the previous passages there are many ways of looking at the question, “Who or what is a Modernist art maker?” It is certain that a central characteristic of Modernism has long been the iconoclastic behaviour of its art makers, or the art of an avant-garde, and that characteristic has been a worldwide phenomenon.239 Today that is a conservative conception of a tendency that is generally understood to have sought to subsume traditions and overturn its purposes in an attempt to make art styles appear new. The ongoing process of dissimilation or critical assault and redirection of Modernist art, has worked in the way that literary formalism presents the notion of ‘unfamiliarity’, thereby, establishing what is then not known as newness.240 In either case, the processes share a central aim where the generation of the effect of newness is desired.

Contrasting regional Modernist approaches have likewise needed to produce evidence of some critical or practical newness.241 This Chapter has illustrated that it is reasonable to state that a formally achieved developmental desire can be located in a great deal of Australian art, historically. However, in refuting Bernard Smith’s comparative model of dependency, it is the utilisation of the process of dissimilation in Australian art that appears to be an important characteristic of regional expression; often made in explicit response to the dictates of Modernism.

I have also sought evidence of how a formal, reductive and dynamic art was bound to a kind of responsive abstract extremis. In particular, how the cosmopolitan production of minimal Colour-Form works has participated in the emergence of discursive or interdependent forms of contemporary art making leading into the 1990s. Tony McGillick’s National, made by in 1968 (Fig.37) is a periodic work suitably illustrative of this claim.

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235 Op cit.
241 Ibid.
On this, McGillick was a vocal campaigner for the relevance of Australian art, and equally for a tangible expression of Modernist abstract painting that was seen to be contemporarily responsive to regional concerns and interests, therefore, an art of a place and time. He was undoubtedly a formalist who made reference to influential art makers; nevertheless, he did this whilst being careful to express an affirmative development at the same time.²⁴²

There also is no doubt that National (Fig.37) is close in spirit and appearance to Frank Stella’s 1960s ‘Chevron’ shaped series of paintings (Fig.38). So are Michael Johnson’s paintings (Figs.4) and many other artists’ works, as mentioned. Although particular types of painting informed McGillick, he managed to illustrate the importance of developmental language or, as Tom Langlands wrote in a recent retrospective curation of McGillick’s paintings, “these works show an evolving conceptual stance” and “concern with an avant garde”.²⁴³

The importance of McGillick’s work lies not only in his presentation of “the painting’s formal obligations”²⁴⁴and the transitional physical nature of the form, it is also located as Langlands identified in an underlying “conceptual stance”.²⁴⁵ There is a convergent and co-ordinate aspect revealed by the titles of his other important works, such as Republic, Time and Patriot. Those titles, apart from reiterating nationalistic views as a renegotiable theme of Australian painting, they also allude to a broadening of cultural identification and a desire for the placement of alternative dialogues into what McGillick perceived was a stagnating Australian visual arts arena. McGillick’s feeling of responsibility for informing others of the necessity of taking up a variety of aesthetic positions is well characterised by his brother Paul McGillick’s latter account of the Central Street gallery.²⁴⁶ Paul McGillick recounts his brother’s responsive engagement with the relevance of International Modernism, stating, “the significance of the Central Street gallery is that it was then, and continued to be for years afterwards, the only commercial gallery with a policy, an articulated aesthetic position and a commitment to ‘abstraction’ – all of which meant that the gallery’s exhibition program was curated and included exhibitions which, if not actually non-commercial, were not expected to sell, having instead a polemical or educational purpose”.²⁴⁷

In the heyday of Formalist painting, artists such as McGillick (Fig.37) from Sydney, and Janet Dawson (Fig.87) in Melbourne, took to Colour-Form painting and reductive minimal influences with a genuine expressed enthusiasm for the expansion of regional discourse. But others, like the Melbourne artists’ Robert Owen, Dale Hickey,

²⁴³ Tom Langlands (Curator). Sense of Making. A retrospective catalogue of Tony McGillick’s painting, held at the artists’ studio. Annandale Sydney, 2000. Ref: <mcgillick@pacific.net.au>
²⁴⁴ ibid.
²⁴⁵ ibid.
²⁴⁷ ibid.
Robert Jacks (Fig. 127), and Robert Hunter (Fig. 39), did so with reservation, as Pollard’s curatorial appraisal discussed earlier testifies.\(^{249}\)

Hunter’s _Untitled c.1966_ (Fig. 39) demonstrated coolness towards a prevailing surety and a questioning of international Modernist influences, which I have already described. That ambivalence was for the most part engendered by Greenberg’s unequivocal statements like, “the essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it, but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”\(^{249}\)

That assertion, found in ‘Modernist Painting’,\(^{250}\) was a foundational idea for Greenberg and for many formalist painting adepts. In a detailed study of collage, which Christine Poggi suggests is a form of defiance aimed at the absolute directionality of much Modernist painting, she stated, “Greenberg believed that each medium must emphasise those qualities which pertain to it alone, and thus flatness served to distinguish painting from sculpture.”\(^{251}\) Poggi points out it was just this debatable fact, about the formal painting’s supposed flatness, that provided “Modernist art with its raison d’être.”\(^{252}\) Poggi further noted that Greenberg’s logic was not clear at all despite the plain-speaking tone of his maxims, and many art makers of that period must also have suspected the relevance of aspects of Greenberg’s influential rhetoric at some level in their responsive practices. Examples of a clearly presented alternative view can be found in McGillick’s _Safari_ (Fig. 27) and Nigel Lendon’s _Untitled Floor Structure c.1968_ (Fig. 33), as discussed.

_A Provincial/Peripheral Convergence_

I return to the issues raised in the opening of this chapter, about how it was that Australians began the transition from regionalism to cosmopolitanism, or peripherally aware artists, and what influence International Modernist art played in the development of important aspects of Australian painting. And, to what I also consider to have been the firm establishment of critically responsive interdependent formal art practices therein. Of relevance here are comments made by Terry Smith in 1974 in the essay, ‘The Provincialism Problem’.\(^{253}\) By the mid-1970s Smith was worried about the Australian artists’ abrupt utilisation of an international style, stating, “The accelerated avant-gardism of the metropolitan centre looks even more threatening from a position within a provincial art community. How do I judge

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\(^{251}\) Ibid.

\(^{252}\) Ibid. Poggi P 225.

these new styles? How does it do so? Can I adapt, expand, and extend my art to meet this new challenge? If I can't, what is there for me?"  

The question mark Smith placed over the diminution of earlier regional perspectives and the issue of cosmopolitanism can also be found in commentaries supporting the *Ten Australians* exhibition held in 1974. That survey featuring prominent Australian painters was funded by the newly formed Visual Arts Board of Australia and held at the prestigious Tate Gallery in London, before touring around Europe in the mid-1970s. Patrick McCaughey selected the artists as representative of a culmination of the experimental and developing Australian painting practices of the previous decade. From that repackaging of artists and their concerns, a select aspect of Australian art was once again positioned abroad. It was then made inclusive of international styles, showing that a tenuous acceptance of a variety of newer concerns had dramatically altered the vocabulary, but also the hegemony of the Australian School promoted only a decade earlier.

In the 'Introduction' for this exhibition, Gough Whittam wrote an enthusiastic, literate explanation of recent Australian art. In seemingly echoing Bernard Smith and Terry Smith he opined, "the artists here illuminate a theme common to much Australian art and culture: how does the new world and new culture of Australia adapt and extend the achievements of old cultures beyond Australia's shores? If our heritage is European, our present is Australian. Every artist of substance must feel something of that tension as a creative stimulus within their work.

However, Sydney Ball's *Pawnee Summer*, c.1973 (Fig.40) was shown in this exhibition, and it is illustrative of the type of interdependent work Whittam described. Curiously, the transition by Ball out of an earlier Hard-edge abstraction (Fig.88) into Post-Painterly Abstraction, reflected lessons and impressions gleaned during a recent American jaunt. Undeservedly, this served to link Ball's achieved practice to a failing North American art and the last gasps of Greenbergian Formalism through a type of rhetoric growing critical of formal styles of painting. An aesthetic critique that had in general, begun to exasperate many Australian art makers critically engaged in what was possible to recognise as a developmental field only a few years earlier.

At this point many Australian painters joined Peter Booth and stopped working in the field, seemingly to clear the air of a growing array of misconceptions within an increasingly difficult Australian domain. That period of hiatus in the 1970s did, however, mark a shift away from the regionalist discourses that had previously dominated Australian

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254 Ibid.
256 Ibid.
perspectives. This matter was noted by Whitlam with his statement, "The Australian artist has traditionally played a central role in establishing an Australian identity and ethos".  

Despite reverting to the established conservatism and cultural authority of writers such as Bernard Smith, Whitlam's rhetoric was generally affirmative, but could offer little in terms of direction. Finding that in formal styles of Australian painting after this period would require considerable investigation, and a serious commitment to development in order to escape the trap of producing aesthetically pleasing clichés within what was perceived as a critically diminished field. Before investigating the kinds of artists who took up this challenge in chapter 3, the next chapter provides a second orientation concerning a crucial legacy of older and more recent Australian artists who regardlessly chose to utilise the formalist language of abstraction within their regional expression.

257 Ibid.
Chapter 2  
The Modulation of Abstraction in Australian Painting

This chapter specifically traces the development of the language of abstraction found in recent Australian painting. There are issues concerning this subject currently affecting the contemporary field, and those matters are related to various developmental aspects discussed in the previous evaluation of various 20th century Australian art movements. Subsequently, two questions are now addressed: What developmental role has the international language of abstraction played in these regional movements, and how has a legacy of regional abstractionist discourse matured into a 'meta-language' informing current Australian visual art practices?

The contemporary language of abstraction or, stylistic meta-language, is claimed in this second orientation to be a meaningful and discursive convention placed under constant scrutiny and revision in the field. For instance, the Australian curator Michael Wardell recently interpreted the modulation of the language of 'abstraction' in a survey of regional practices through the Art Gallery of New South Wales' ongoing documentation and accreditation of leading Australian practitioners. This he titled, *Phenomenon – New Painting in Australia: 1,*

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258: In this document the term "recent formal Australian painting" generally refers to works made between 1960 and 2001.

In the previous chapter the significant effects of international Modernist influences placed upon centres of art such as Australia were discussed. From one perspective, it is important to note that in the space of only 80 years a range of internationally recognised art makers have assisted in transforming understandings of what art could possibly mean, generally through the modification of perceptions. Likewise, a transition of cultural perceptions occurred in Australian art through a considerable interrogation of what could actually be done with the act of re-presentation in the Early, High and Late-Modernist periods. In this chapter the development of the notions of abstraction, pictorial illusionism and non-objectivity, are made apparent as pre-dominant art-historical regional concerns.260

For the purpose of opening up this discussion an early Modernist masterpiece by Claude Monet, Antibes c.1915 (Fig.44) is considered here in relation to a Late-Modernist work by the North American artist Robert Irwin, Varese Portal c.1973 (Fig.45).261 These internationally recognised works, existing at either end of the Modernist paradigm are linked to the topic of abstraction, and unifying them is a feat that in Irwin’s work makes the specific character of the art object magically vanish into space. In Irwin’s empty gallery space (natural light only), and like Monet’s Antibes, there is reliance upon the viewers’ conception of art through the apprehension of light. Likewise, Monet’s oil painting is only perceptible by the reflection of light, and the viewers’ perception in turn is an equally abstract or conceptual appraisal of a model. However, Monet’s painting is immediately relevant because of a critical display of abstract qualities immersed in a complex ‘impressionistic’ structure that amounts to an enigmatic constructive conception of a standard pictorial vista (Fig.44).

In briefly putting aside the perceptual concerns inherent in both these works, in Monet’s Antibes the concrete poetic character of the work is allusive in a literary or fictive sense. Monet, like Irwin, directs the viewer’s attention towards an historical vista of painting. It is this point that makes Antibes a Modernist work of art capable of generating further interpretation within the strictures of a Post-Modern (rhetorical) envisioning of such matters. For instance, like Irwin’s Varese Portal, Monet’s Antibes provides an underlying ‘conceptual structure’ that is evidence of the art maker’s special craft of illusion. In my opinion the constructive concept of Monet’s prelude Modern art surpasses even Piet Mondrian’s Trees of Lake Gien, or The Red Cloud (Fig.47), both done later than Antibes in the early 1900s.

That claim is made because Antibes is complete; it is not a transitional work. In clarifying, the Modernist works of

Mondrian are classic representational landscapes that were essential in informing Mondrian’s evolution into a purely plastic, or a Non-Objective abstract style of Modernist painter. These last mentioned representational works would continue, in principle, to inform Mondrian’s expression throughout his career.\textsuperscript{262}

There is a special doggedness in Mondrian’s processes, and that was illustrated by his resignation from the De Stijl movement because Van Doesburg introduced diagonal lines into the manifesto of De Stijl painting (Fig.46). This variation in abstractionist discourse disturbed Mondrian by undermining his interest in the axiomatic grid, and nature’s supposed true underlying pattern. By altering this pattern with the introduction of counter-compositional elements, Van Doesburg integrated disorder into a closed system. For Mondrian, that arbitrarily amounted to the ‘impure’ codification of the reductive purist language of Neo-Plasticism.

Mondrian’s The Red Cloud c.1907 (Fig.47), Pier and Ocean c.1914 (Fig.48), Composition in Colour A c.1917 (Fig.49), and Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue c.1921 (Fig.50) are shown. Collectively, these provide a sequential portrait of Mondrian’s formal presentation of the contemporising of abstract language, into purely plastic symbology. Mondrian’s works particularly illustrate how he had already made the unbending progression from figure/ground or axiomatic perceptual relations (natural), into an artificial ordering of perceptual conventions by 1921.

What underpins the impressionistic art of an artist such as Monet or, likewise, Cézanne, is the same conception of representation as an organic model that informed Mondrian. However, with Mondrian, the notion of representation is methodically transposed into a synthetic structuring of iconic language. That reductive transposition is recognisable as a discernible mechanism, whereby a great many art makers in the first decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century shifted from a emphasis placed on realist art-languages, such as Landscape or Portraiture, into a purely plastic conception of abstract language forms. Despite what appearances might suggest, Mondrian’s unbending drive towards non-objectivity was overridden by the paradoxical fact that the outcome of this shift remained embedded within a production of a representational art. The ongoing significance of this issue for many contemporary abstractionists is profound.

\textsuperscript{262} Ibid.
Mondrian's oeuvre is an example of a radical conceptualisation, and the transposition of Monet and Cézanne's critique of 'pictorial illusionism' into an abstracted meta-language. As claimed, Mondrian's developmental abstracted images are commonly based on a picturing of structural relationships he observed, between trees and clouds, land, sky and water, etc. The historical imperatives belying this latter abstract art remain undiminished. For that reason the deliberately 'banal' abstract art of the 1990s, considered at various stages in this argument, is understood as operating within this same transpositional methodological framework. A 'banal art style' is noted as a pictorial art, regardless of how it may be alternatively critically located as being contemporarily avant-garde (Fig. 193).

The same methodologically complex re-picturing and transformation of the language of abstraction, is also locatable in Ian Fairweather and Tony Tuckson's Modernist Australian paintings. Fairweather, for example, developed an abstract style of reductive Modernist work derived from a similar absorption of relevant indigenous cultural influences. That conceptual and assimilative process is made evident if we compare West Lake at Hangchow c.1933 (Fig. 51) with a mature work like Monastery c.1961 (Fig. 52). In this last example, as with many others, the axiomatic influence of Mondrian, and a range of other internationally known and critically acclaimed Modernist art makers, are discernibly embedded in his indigenous style schema. Mondrian's influence is also traceable in the wider account of Australian painting practices, such as the Late- and Post-Modernist works of formal art producers such as Ian Burn (Fig. 132), Dick Watkins (Fig. 26), Yurek Wybraniek (Fig. 1), Hillary Mais (Fig 53), and Ruark Lewis (Fig. 145) who have all absorbed similar and highly considered cues from Mondrian's abstract experimentation with Neo-Plasticism into very different kinds of regional practices.

Chapter 1 illustrated that a wide variety of Australian artists have expressed a formal interest in a number of abstract stylisations since the 1960s. Because of a polarised developing engagement, it was argued that a special regional awareness that has collectively evolved in recent decades as a response to influences, is a process that repositions the formalist stylistic language of abstraction as a flexible 'meta-stylisation' convergent with concerns that lay beyond a banal replay of historical imperatives.

That is, as a formal language actively and purposefully engaged within contemporary visual arts discourse. This meta-stylisation involves a modulation of abstractionist applications available within what I would describe as informed modes of practice utilising a meta-language or, 'generic aesthetic' response.

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264 NB: Please refer to Film by Curtis Levy and Christine Olsen. Tuckson-A Documentary Film. Curtis Levy Productions. Sydney.
265 Ibid. P 47-49.
266 Ruark Lewis. 'The Silhouettes'. Exhibition catalogue. Art Gallery of South Australia. 2003. This catalogue outlines a relationship Lewis makes between 'Orphaned' indigenous art and his later reductive works within a responsive discourse on "ground plans".
Those utilising an informed mode of practice, as Roland Barthes defined the changing nature of aspects of the representational arts in 1977, seemingly understand the "rhetoric of the image". This implies, for example, that an informed art maker, whilst engaging in a dialogue or language expression with others, can achieve a different result whilst making use of a discourse that may already meaningfully exist. For example, Hillary Mais' *Sleeping Birds* c.1995 (Fig.53) and Yurek Wybraniek's *Cadmium 11* c.1996 (Fig.54) illustrate close ties to Mondrian's formalised and constructive style (Fig.50), whilst developing discrete modes of non-literalist expression of their own critical design and making, after Sol LeWitt (Fig.29).

There are many examples available where the influence of Piet Mondrian's interest in the grid, and a primary arrangement of colour are nominated as significant concerns by contemporary art makers. For instance, in developing this discussion, Mais and Wybraniek have formed separate yet similar discourses out of an originating discourse. A secondary set of dialogues appears from a discourse stimulated by their evident interest in Mondrian or LeWitt's influence, amongst other concerns. This referential form of discourse is developed through practice, and overall amounts to the specific production of a meta-dialogue given on a subject. This commentary is illustrative of a commonplace device found everywhere in the visual arts, therefore, 'similitude' like 'dissimulation' are useful and historical mechanisms located in most forms of art making. Meaningful ideas embedded in tradition, and legacy, evolve naturally in these semantic and consequentially meta-theoretically entwined ways. Many current visual arts practices are activated and composed of the historically known and, therefore, usable dialogues given on associated background issues and concerns, within informed modes of practice, as a generic aesthetic response.

In a structural sense, the meta-stylisation of the visual arts' language of abstraction, when considered as a vast and widely known family of stylisations contemporarily made useful by art makers, is considered in this argument an informing agency in post 20th century terms. Australian art makers have taken up many notions of the meta-stylisation of abstraction through a process of selective revisionism. That understanding has been useful in the making of what Ian Burn, Ann Stephen, Nigel Lendon and Charles Merewether promoted in their collective essay, *The Necessity of Australian Art*, as regionally unique art forms. Bernard Smith and Elwyn Lynn preferred to identify this Australian characteristic as being exotic. However, the latter definition, in relating to a legacy of regional

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Modernist concerns\textsuperscript{271} fails to convince. Any number of peripheral environments can produce like-minded art makers, contemporarily interested in similar concerns. One must query whether these regional expressions are exotic at all or, belong to a stage of international developments via a regional or, peripherally expressed revisionist art.\textsuperscript{272} I suspect the latter is the most probable case.\textsuperscript{273}

\textbf{Meta-Stylistic Influence}

In 1968, Harald Noritits from Sydney began making formally achieved abstract paintings, such as \textit{Come Away} (Fig.42). In terms of a regional legacy, that type of High-Modernist work exists within an art-historical equilibrium, chiefly for being produced in the heyday of the newer regional formalist academy of the Central Street gallery.\textsuperscript{274} The splendid Noritis painting (Fig.42) is positioned in this discourse between one of the earliest examples of a classic Modern Australian abstraction, Roy De Maistre's \textit{Rhythmic Composition in Yellow Green Minor} c.1919 (Fig.41), and a recent yet Late-Post-Modern abstract-style of painting by Claudia Damichi titled \textit{Tongue-tied} c. 2002 (Fig.43).

These three works have been placed together because they exhibit generic characteristics, such as a closeness of chosen line, tonal character, a fluid geometry expression, and a formal abstract presentation. Importantly, they have a defining relationship to a regional legacy of abstraction in common, and are personal expressions made within a homogenate field of formal Australian painting. Most importantly, they are linked because of the chosen meta-stylistic language they have used for divergent reasons, traversing nearly a 100-year span. The Noritis painting (Fig.42) is placed centrally, because it came into existence during the high point of the Modernist Formalist painting project. The Orphic De Maistre painting (Fig.41) prefigures the formalist apex, and Damichi's conceptual abstraction (Fig.43) is essentially a late 20\textsuperscript{th} century revisionist representational painting that refigures explicit interests of the recent past.

These loosely figurative works illustrate that a continued interest and an embracing of the international language of abstraction exists in Australian Modernist, Post-Modern and Post-20\textsuperscript{th} century art practices. This ongoing modulation of abstraction appears to have taken place whether or not a practice has been based on a privileging of pictorial re-presentation, as with Elwyn Lynn (Fig.66), or via a formal processing of practical and theoretical

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\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Ralph Baison. \textit{Constructive Painting}, 1948.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{271} Mary Eagle and Jan Minchin (Eds). \textit{The George Bell School: Friends and Influences}. Resolution Press. Sydney, 1981.
\textsuperscript{272} Christopher Allen. \textit{Art in Australia: From Colonisation to Post-Modernism}. Thames and Hudson. London and Sydney, 1997. Please refer to the final chapter 'Homeless'.
\textsuperscript{273} \textit{Jurassic Technologies}, The 10\textsuperscript{th} Biennale of Sydney exhibition catalogue. Art Gallery of NSW. Sydney, 1999. This is an example of an exhibition with a worldwide focus placed upon an array of discreetly expressed practices.
techniques focused on geometric abstract designs, as in Ralph Balson's *Constructive Painting* 1948 (Fig.55).275

Likewise, the growth in art-historical enquiry concerning neglected regional artists such as Godfrey Miller or Wendy Paramor, and the kinds of dialogue and terminologies that have developed in the Australian context since the 1940s, have generated a better understanding of how the language of abstraction has in both general and specific terms, been apprehended by a wide variety of Australian art makers. In short, the impact of broad stylistic influences affecting the variations of abstract language used by artists operates as a marker of artistic difference in the field.

On this topic, the psychologist C. J. Jung first noted in the 1930s that the domain of abstraction is a vast and unruly terrain. His work on learning to read a commonality of personal expression in his psychiatric patients’ drawings (Mandala Quad-forms), and his wider researching into pre-Modern geometric abstract patterning, illustrated that cultural memory of this type of art spans a vast period; possibly returning to antiquity.276 Unfortunately that fascinating matter, and other non-Western or indigenous areas of research, lay beyond the scope of the thesis.277 However, the fact is, there are many common art-historical motifs that are traded as conversational ideas amongst art makers and writers on specific and generic levels of interpretation, sourced from within and without the Modernist paradigm.278

Much of this currency may not directly concern known painting styles of the 20th century, having been derived from another basis altogether.279 Similarly, broadly based notions such as geometric or monochromatic painting have also greatly assisted in making Post-Modern art forms literally function as ‘contemporary’ art. Angela Brennan’s *Untitled* c.1996 (Fig.56) is an abstract style of painting that is an example of that last claim.280

Influences may also be hypothesised in dialogue form, or resurface as a classic motif, as a Renaissance artist might have described a function of imitation.281

Seemingly, abstract motifs can be brought into and out of any kind of contemporaneous artistic practice as desired, and Brennan’s amoebic looking work (Fig.56) could have been sourced from scientific photography, from designs taken from the Bauhaus workshop studios, from an admiration of John Olsen’s local art production (Fig.10), or, determined through a reconsideration of Paul Klee’s experimental and organic abstractionist style of painting from the 1930s (Fig.123).282

276 C.J. Jung. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Routledge Press. USA, 1985. Here the notion of ‘abstraction’ is considered in the psychological and metaphysical areas that have pre-modern backgrounds of informants.
277 NB: I would at some stage like to write a paper about ‘abstraction’ in relation to current indigenous art forms. The idea of a primitive ‘abstraction’ is questionable assumption and I would like to explore what that actually means.
Brennan's painting (Fig. 56) is similar to that of Claudia Damichi's calligraphic style of abstractionist expression (Fig. 43), which shares a regional heritage of semi-abstract regional practitioners such as Passmore, Godfrey and Fairweather. It is also readily linked to the style of the European painter Albert Oehlen, and to the psychedelic post-expressionism of Sydney's Matthys Gerber (Fig. 191). The latter artists have all been working independently in a Post-Modern expressive vein for many years. A fully abstract and expressive painting style was originally made popular in Australia by the work of Modernists like John Olsen (Fig. 10), Stanislaus Rapotek, and Roger Kemp (Fig. 11). For that reason, the approach Brennan shares with many others is not considered in this argument expressionistic in that same way. It is a model, one that operates as a mannered stylisation, and therefore I would argue, amounts to the 'co-ordinated' construction of a representational art: an art that has an appearance to the contrary.

Another topic to briefly discuss here is the critical negation of international styles of Modernist abstraction, and of associated formal painting practices of the later 1960s. As outlined in Chapter 1, this occurred on a world stage when Australian painters first confronted a growing unease or, cultural introspection in regional terms. That regional confrontation also concerned a questioning of the authorial nature of the visual artist, precisely at a time when many Australian artists were starting to apprehend a hasty engagement with seemingly exhausted Modernist painterly conventions. Here I am referring in particular to the important concern many expressed during the High-Modernist era about the questioned meaning of representation, apparent in then fashionable Western art forms.

This statement relates back to Monet and Mondrian's co-ordinate or harmoniously derived practices, and to the purposeful switching from narrative and pictorial representational conventions to abstracted formalist notions, and then it seems, back again at will. This controlled movement of polarities, or deliberate fluctuation of known conventions such as realism and abstraction apparent in the Oceanic style of the Noriris painting (Fig. 42), highlights the recent existence of a constructive concept or, critical underpinning of concerns that has allowed a conceptual reading of art to make sense. However, what has continued to make this approach problematic, as Jonathan Crary demonstrated in 1990, is a concern for how iconic meaning is to be interpreted art-historically. In a discourse provided on the nature or purpose of the Camera Lucida in the history of Western painting, Crary illustrated for instance that the apprehension of 'representation' and 'significant content' is utterly dependent upon the abilities of the viewer.

Regardless, a division of representational concerns has been experienced by Australian Modernist painters in possibly the same way that it has affected those from many other cultures, via the reception of rhetoric on the meaningfulness (or lack thereof) of image production. However, as Victor Stoichita claims, "that has been the case since the second decade of the 20th century". Stoichita noted, that is when the notion of Plasticism became

287 Please note that the American and European artist have a background of scientist behind their practices that has been supplied by the field of optics, colour theorists and Gestalt psychology etc. Here I would also the considerable influence of Goethe, David Katz, Wilhelm Ostwald, Ogden Rood and M.E. Chevreul. Refer, Faber Birren's anthology of methodological facts titled History of Colour Painting. Van Nostrand Rheinhold Co. New York, 1965.
a powerful influence at the beginning of the 20th century, when many artists switched from a mixture of representational formats of painting into purely abstract painterly practices by the 1920s, whilst maintaining a standardised axiomatic conceptualisation of figure/ground relations.286

Anna Moszynska has written on this specific topic, and I defer to her excellently researched publication for any further reference to various schools of Modernist styles of abstractionist painting, such as Orphism.286 Interestingly, many Australian painters despite being cognisant of the worldwide cultural condemnation and negation of formalist and related abstract painting practices, have embraced a notional role of what the language of abstraction seemingly continues to imply, and what they could personally achieve within evolving practices.

Long Lines are Being Drawn

Given the level of consistency found in Australian abstract painting, and staying in line with the model of interdependency that I have outlined, it is reasonable to state that Australian art makers have been productively influenced by events, trends and discourses often first occurring elsewhere. Taking into account how the international language of abstraction affected the development of Australian regional painting, this comment could be considered an understatement. For that reason, this consideration of abstraction in recent Australian painting is supported by a discussion of parallel claims made in a survey of European art entitled Minimalia,290 curated by Achille Olivia-Bonito in 1997. This was re-presented soon after by Alanna Heiss from the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre, New York, in direct response to a growing American interest shown in the European movement, Arte Povera.291

This topic has significance for the following discourse, as it confirms that elsewhere in a critical context, long and significant lines are being drawn through other regional histories. In discussing the relationship of abstract language to the development of the Arte Povera movement after the 1960s, Olivia-Bonito proposed that a particularly interesting track could be drawn through recent Italian art, back through the mid- and early 20th century. In critiquing and reconsidering the way the language of abstraction had developed in Italian art, Olivio-Bonito referred to the Futurist experimentationists with abstraction and he makes the claim that it influenced the direction of Constructivism.

286 Ibid.
Suprematism, and even the latter stages of Cubism. Overall, Olivia-Bonito’s assertion is that recent Italian art has definitely “not been impoverished by the reductive geometry of minimalism”.  

Moreover, in Olivia-Bonito’s opinion, the precursor of the international Trans-avantgarde is the abstract painter Giacomo Balla. Olivia-Bonito described Balla as “a very great artist of the historical avant-garde, whose paramount importance in the process leading to the birth of abstraction will become increasingly clear”. Olivia-Bonito expressed an idea that caught my attention as a researcher interested in a critical and Post-Conceptual area of abstraction, stating, “Abstraction is to be understood not as abstractionism, but rather as the capacity to capture the image in its conceptual structure”. The term ‘conceptual structure’ provides a methodological understanding of what is implied by the Futurists’ visually dynamic use of reductive imaging whilst expressing, for example, a revisional reading of the nature of abstraction, itself. Olivia-Bonito’s assessment that an abstract artwork is characterised by it being a conceptualised structure first and foremost, interested me because it is an idea that stands in opposition to Donald Judd’s ‘Specific Object’ theorem. Judd claimed the ‘specific object’ (a minimal artwork) abstractly represents an apodictic or demonstrably self-evident experience of the maker, and supposedly of the viewer. LeWitt later simplified Judd’s meaning by stating, “What you see is what you get”.  

In clarifying, Judd’s ‘specific’ minimal object making has been described by James Meyer as a style of making premised upon a new kind of “pared-down abstraction”. Within that discourse, the divisions between say, Robert Morris and Frank Stella, over what the literalists Donald Judd and Carle Andre believed could be achieved with reductive forms of non-iconic art making, are exposed as initial elements of a widening discourse that has considerably informed art-making processes in the late 20th century. These secondary divisions, dating from the High- to Late-Modernist period (1965–1995), have spilled over into the late and post 20th century environments as an investigation of banality in the field of abstraction, and inclusively, art’s generally unstable objecthood.  

A division of perspectives on the early minimalist aesthetic associated with primary forms of abstraction, was identified in 1966 by Lawrence Alloway when he curated the Systemic Painting exhibition for the Guggenheim. This division initially concerned appropriate directions in art, and can be summed up by stating that for the North American minimal art makers of the mid-1960s, there was a formal choice to be made. This was between allusive content and an intuitive approach, and the making of a ‘relational’ versus a ‘non-relational’ art where composition was dispensed with in a break from the past. The latter tendency, in heading towards monumentality, led in turn to a call for a revision of the early minimalist vocabulary by other innovative art makers, who were, nevertheless, still interested in

293 Ibid.
295 Ibid. P15.
296 Ibid.
299 Ibid.
300 A.D.S. Donaldson (Curator). Monster Field. Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW. Sydney. May, 1993. NB: The ‘banal’ in art is a topic uncovered in Chapters 1, 3 and 8 of the thesis. Also, refer to Butler and Donaldson’s various commentaries discussed therein.
301 Ibid.
aspects of Judd’s seminal logic; as discussed. These include the Americans Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt (Fig.29) and Anne Truit (Fig.57), who for reasons of their own, sought a neutral set of applications that they felt progressed from what James Meyer described as the early minimalist’s ‘austere abstraction’.  

The debate over formal issues and the role of abstraction in contemporary practices has tended to be perceived in peripheral environments as an American and British concern, and a subject belatedly witnessed from afar by Australasia’s art makers. The local heralding of the appearance of abstract styles of art, based on the reductive principles of the High-Modernist enterprise, amounted to a radicalisation of then current Australian painting concerns. This has typically included the deriving of a new and specific objectness for more experimental sculptural and/or painting-based art forms. However, Judd’s influential and performative rupturing of Western artistic traditions, like the established conventions of painting or sculpture, for example, was soon critically pilloried. In the seminal 1967 essay ‘Art and Objecthood’, Michael Fried asserted that Judd had proffered a contradictory idea, as discussed earlier. However, Fried’s Formalist and fundamentally ‘anti-theatrical’ proposition for art drew him much closer to a defence of Greenberg’s problematic ‘art for arts sake’ formalism. This matter was taken very seriously, as Fried discovered, when his theory was also critically eviscerated for not being responsive to the demands of newer art forms, and for condemning the performative aspects of newer forms of expression; as not being art at all.

The changing idea of painting and sculpture and the notion of abstraction, when figured as a meaningful dialogue that was in part supporting newer flexible forms, is not a notion easily fixed in historical cement. The idea of painting and the ongoing contemporising of the language of abstraction is a discourse that is negotiable, one that is developmental, and part of a longstanding critical revision. An earlier example of a non-literalist, abstractionist and minimal style related to aspects of formal painting-based practices, comes from the North American Anne Truit (Fig.57).

Unfortunately, Truit destroyed her early and discursively coordinate works such as Spring Run, c.1964 (Fig.57). However, the relative isolation of Truit’s unique non-literalist approach tends to verify Terry Smith’s claims in Australian Painting, that in North America connections were not commonly made between the separated ‘minimal’ and ‘conceptual’ conventions at the beginning of the 1970s; moreover, Terry Smith claims that this idea was more readily taken up in peripheral environments such as Australia, where there was less need to comply with a division of conventions.

303 Op cit.
308 Op cit.
Suggon (Fig. 58) by Vivienne Binns in 1967 is an important Australian painting that can be further appreciated if the theoretical model of co-ordination is applied in a reading of the work. Suggon was done in an international abstract style, yet it is also a representational depiction achieved in a vernacular manner, making reference to various narratives. These include influences of painters like Bacon and Miro, Psychedelic abstraction, the politic of sexual freedom, and Women's liberation. These co-ordinated concerns are embedded in her expressively charged Hard-edge painting. In Binns' seminally discursive works, Olivia-Bonito's definition of "descriptive geometry" presents as a form of abstract painterly expression, one that remains bound to deliver a meaningful cargo of narrative content; as outlined above.

Olivia-Bonito remains topical in this discourse because he expressed a similar concern for the significance of "content-laden" abstract works in Italian Modern art. According to Olivia-Bonito, Giacomo Balla's oeuvre is a type of early Modernist work governed by the principle of "asymmetrical reason". From my understanding of Olivia-Bonito's meaning, this is a methodological principle that "sustains a work, and formalises irregularity". These comments occur in a discourse where Olivia-Bonito asserts that a "creative principle" in Balla's *Incandescent Interpenetrations* c.1913 (Fig. 59) is strengthened by the "non-preventive use of descriptive geometry". That implies styles of formal expression, such as the type of formal geometric abstraction characterised by Balla's work, constitute a controlled form of expressive painting where the signature the artist carries with it a load of associations. I believe this principle is observable in Binns' personalised expression of geometric abstraction, similarly made, as a generic aesthetic response (Fig. 58).

Above and beyond the abstract appearance of Binns' Suggon (Fig. 58), emergent Core Imagery found in other works like *Vag Dens* (Fig. 142) surfaces, can be harmoniously understood in iconic terms. Christine Dixon of the National Gallery of Australia claims this illustrates how "the personal is made political" in Binns' art. But this co-ordinate process also demonstrates how the "non-preventive use of descriptive geometry" presents a complex theoretical -

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309 Op cit.
312 Ibid.
313 Ibid.
314 Ibid.
structure operating within the production of formal abstract paintings. Thus, there is a lexical freedom in the reductive expression found in Suggon (Fig.58). Simultaneously perceivable as a co-ordinate, and intrinsically unrestrictive abstract schema working harmoniously within Binns’ expression of cogent narratives.316

From this commentary about two culturally and temporally separate art-making practices, attention is drawn to the critical language forms embedded in their formally or conceptually expressive works, and directed onto the significance and usefulness of a non-literalist, stylistically complicit, languages of abstraction. This inclusiveness is evidenced in historically annotated forms of contemporary abstract art making of the North American Truit (Fig.57), the Australian Binns (Fig.58) and the Italian Balla (Fig.59). Olivia-Bonito’s idea of descriptive geometry may be equally described as an unrestrictive and narrative form of conceptual abstraction. Either way, this section illustrates that the language of abstraction is a lexically complex form of expression placed under continuous negotiation.

Importantly, the works of these artists illustrate the general usefulness of the language of abstraction. This usefulness has grown in real significance in an Australian context, as elsewhere, and a variety of ideas have been formally and thematically developed by Australian art makers in relation to this methodological matter. A developing methodological approach to the application of known formal languages of abstraction319 is also apparent in Matthys Gerber and Adam Cullen’s 1993 Post-Abstract Expressionist collaboration, Monday, Blonde and Blue Eyed (Fig.60).

In considering the constructive concept of this more recent work, it is concluded that the appearance of a contemporary style of abstraction is considered a meaningful discursive convention, and ultimately read here as a useful informing semantic device that these and many art makers deploy. This lexical codification of language, basically abbreviated as ‘abstraction’ in this thesis, is understood as it is in Olivia-Bonito’s argument where it is portrayed as an application that has emerged in a syntagmatic way out of various Modern periods in Italian art.

Because of the sheer resilience and growing generic character of this language, it is a matter that should be considered significant. That is, the idea of abstraction can be identified as an influential trope on many levels.320 In the essay ‘In the Name of Painting’, the Australian academic Keith Broadfoot has discussed the matter of what newer styles of painting might critically imply, stating that types of contemporary painting can appear as though caught up in “blending in” or, perhaps, “collapsing into the general confusion of optical noise”.321 From these researches I have found, despite the problematic concerns Broadfoot correctly identifies concerning the cogency of certain forms of replay, that the general effect of this art-historically experimental and developmental abstract style of art making remains a critically available contemporary visual art dialogue in Australian art.

320 The word “trope” is used here figuratively. It is intended to stand in for common ideations (e.g. various applicable abstract stylisations). Also, possibly understood as a generic aesthetic, as discussed in Chapter 8.
Abstraction: The Regional Appearance of Difference

In 1961 Australian Mike Brown painted Gloom (Fig. 61), a work displaying a seminal form of "aberrance", but it is more a demonstration of ironic redirection associated with the advent of the North American Pop Art movement. This locally achieved, sardonic, semi-abstract work, is appreciated because it illustrates a witty and pivotal style of realism which distanced itself from the mould of lingering Post-Impressionistic and prevailing abstract and Expressionist styles of contemporary Australian realist painting in the early 1960s. The latter include practitioners like Sydney Nolan and John Percival's antipodean sense of nationalism and mystagogy. This implies that a nationalistic or mythic account is given. Other examples are found in Stanislaus Rapotek's and John Olsen's abstract lyrical expressionism, or Roger Kemp's and Leonard French's theologically denoted or, narratively implicit forms of geometric abstraction.

This Hard-edge and Pop-ish self-portrait style of painting by Mike Brown, engages a clever mixture of what Richard Haese describes as a form of Social Realist mimicry and Neo-Dada style. This work makes it plain that Brown was likely mocking of the antisocial artistic routines of being a lonely Modernist painter, and a questioning of how he and many others made paintings. In my opinion this particular work confirms that Brown produced a cogent formal engagement on a personal level, just as it is most significant that that he worked with the Annandale Imitation Realists. A group Robert Hughes described as Australia's "first totally urban-guerrilla" artists.

Like Fairweather, whose works exhibited Chinese and Asiatic influences (Fig. 52), the works produced by Ross Crothall, Colin Lanceley, and Mike Brown via their collaboration in the Annandale Imitation Realists, collectively expressed a unique interest in Aboriginal, Melanesian and Papuan art, and a rejection of the seriousness and discreetness of the Australian painters' reliance on traditional Western Modernist motifs. Hughes described their engagement as, "that pregnant moment in antipodean art history". On this topic, Richard Haese later wrote in Rebels and Precursors that Brown, "not only re-aligned Australian art with a Neo-Dada critique of culture (now understood as a key point of departure for Post-modernism), but arguably produced an independent, self-aware expression of Post-modernism that was in certain respects more complete and fully realised than other European and American contemporary manifestations".

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329 Ibid
332 Ibid.
333 Ibid.
334 Ibid.
335 Ibid.
Brown stands out as a provider of genuine difference in a regulated regionalist field. A photograph (Fig. 62) shows the Annandale Imitation Realists installation from 1962, at the Melbourne Museum of Modern Art and Design. This was a large collection of works curated by John Reed that included Browns' Melanesian style, The Fabulous Patriot and his Wife c.1961 (Fig. 63); also shown below.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the appearance of the Annandale Imitation Realists as a group of art makers is a useful event for the purposes of this thesis. With these artists a periodic mark is further established where the origins of a more current understanding of Australian painting practices may be located.331 Curiously, the art of the Annandale Imitation Realists seems to have fitted in with a Melbourne audience better than it did in their hometown of Sydney, where they were actually little known. Despite their collective critique of then contemporary concerns, the Annandale Imitation Realists were not known to be driven by "a political dimension,"332 and according to both Robert Hughes and Colin Lanceley they were "as apolitical and un-Marxist as the rest of the Sydney art scene, at that time".333

That must have placed this group in an anomalous situation, as art makers who were at the same time clearly at odds with the more nostalgic conventions of Sydney's lingering Neo-Romanticism. The art scene of Sydney was dubbed by Robert Hughes at that stage as "a charm circle", busy producing what the Melburnian Max Harris called "belated Braques and home grown Modiglianis", apparently inspired by Herbert Read's Faber books.334

It is noteworthy that Melburnians embraced the Annandale Imitation Realists through John Reed's credentials.335 The question is, why did it come to pass that Melbourne, a city generally governed by a commitment to a serious and academically underpinned understanding of art making, took to Sydney's iconoclastic painters and bizarre object makers? I will return to this. There were of course alternative voices in Melbourne also, including those affiliated with the 'Tonal-theory' of Max Meldrum, and the urbane Surrealism associated with Eric Thake's circle.

Eric Thake's painting of 1934, Mentone (Fig 64), is for instance, a pictorial schema showing how prior ideas of the abstract in art making were alternatively placed into still recognisable forms (in this instance a seascape). This is actually an example of a Surrealist's use of the 'uncanny' as a mechanism, or formal device that assists in

331 Op cit. Terry Smith 'What is Contemporary Art?'
332 Ibid.
establishing the crucial effect of dissociation.\textsuperscript{336} This approach also informed the narrative and lyrical forms of abstraction characteristic of the Melbourne or John and Sunday Reed’s Heide Park sensibility, of the 1940’s.\textsuperscript{337}

Despite the appearance of critical artists such as Andy Warhol on the world stage, and the critical vibrancy of the internationally acknowledged Pop Art movement providing an ironic twist in the story of Modernist painting in the 1960s,\textsuperscript{338} a backbone approach of lyrical abstraction was sustained in Australian art. This was most often emphasised by grotesque distortions and whimsical characters expressed in a dramatic abstract manner. This figurative/abstractionist convention effectively persisted as an Australian tradition during the 1960s, and has since been developed in a wide variety of ways by many artists. Progenitors of this generally expressive style include Russel Drysdale, Sydney Nolan, John Percival, David Boyd, Fred Williams, John Olsen, and Brett Whiteley.

For this reason it is important to consider on a theoretical level and in practical terms, why art makers such as the Annandale Imitation Realists first considered a combination of styles as a dynamic and useful language form. This is a significant topic, because the subtle differences developed by many formal Australasian art makers, concerning what constitutes the structural abstractness of a given painting or, a painted work of art, are indicators of a regionally self-conscious decision-making process they tended to inaugurate.

That process, often keyed to the development of abstraction as an available and flexible language, represents a meaningful agency in contemporary discourses, and amounts to a form of ongoing responsive discourse claimed to have been slowly developing for the last 30 to 40 years.\textsuperscript{339} Or, as Terence Maloon wrote in 1990, a continuum that has been leading from "one existent to another".\textsuperscript{340}

\textsuperscript{336} Hal Foster. \textit{Convulsive Beauty}. MIT Press. USA, 1997. This text outlines the significance of the convention of the 'uncanny' as a devise of Surrealist art making.
\textsuperscript{337} Op cit. Barrett Reid. ‘Making it New Again’.
\textsuperscript{338} Op cit. Nelly Richard.
\textsuperscript{339} Anne Luxley. ‘Retro perspective’, Central Street Review, Sydney Morning Herald. (08-01-2003)
\textsuperscript{340} Terrence Maloon. ‘Commitment to Abstraction: One existent to another’. \textit{Contemporary Australian Painting}. Craftsman House. Sydney, 1990.
Abstraction: Notional and Practical Responses

The following section traces the interest various Australian abstract painters have shown in a host of Modernist narrative conventions, such as Expressionism, Surrealism, American and European Abstraction, Pop Art or Neo-Dada, Colour-Form, Minimalism, Conceptualism, and Tachisme; the last is an informal style long characterised by a phenomenological approach favouring a thematic focus on the significance of everyday materials.

Americans prefer to describe a tachist style as Art Brut, itself a relative of what European’s have defined an informal movement, Arte Povera. An early seminal example comes from the and specifically anecdotal work of the influential Italian Alberto Burri, with his blood-soaked Sackcloth, c.1953 (Fig.65). This work is illustrative of a Modern narrative influence found in Burri’s post-WWII works, and in ways is typical of the renewed interest that exists today in various forms of reified practices. In that manner, it is an embracing of the everyday material nature of the world that is admired. This informal and counter Modern abstract style was first employed during the later 1950s by Australian art makers such as Elwyn Lynn. One of Lynn’s late- career works, Thaw c.1983, is shown (Fig.66).

This painting illustrates that Lynn, working towards the end of his career within an expanded vocabulary, had again taken up a minimal approach reminiscent of Burri (Fig.65), and was leaning back to the evocative associations of surface facture reminiscent of earlier Modernist European Art Brut artists such as Jean Fautrier, Jean Debuffet, Karel Appel and Antoni Tapies.341 The onset of Post-Modern versions of Abstract and Lyrical Expressionism also signalled for many a return to a similar material painterliness, as exemplified in the works of New Yorker Julian Schnabel (Fig.67). Schnabel’s flattened-out tachist ‘pictorial’ abstract style underscores the revival on a world scale during the 1980s, of Expressionist painting. However, merely being expressionistic was not enough; artists such as Schnabel needed an intellectual stimulant; for Schnabel it was the invocation of the innovation of Cubism, as seen in Memory & Stimulus for Memory, c.1983 (Fig.67).

Interestingly, research shows that the Australian painter Dick Watkins had a precursory understanding of the conscious overlapping and the deliberate interconnection of known representational concerns, a process that would

later be recognised as a central characteristic of Appropriation Art. In the 1960s Watkins made use of abstraction as a form of expressive language whilst focusing on a re-presentation of previous representational images in art. This 'co-ordinate' citational approach was explicitly expressed in Watkins 1980s works; a tendency also traceable in his earlier works. Watkins allusive re-presentation, A Prodigy in Search of Himself, c.1980, is shown in Figure 68. This painting comes from Watkins middle period and predates Schnabel's work in this area, despite the similarities and equally clear references to a Cubist re-modelling of space that had also fascinated Sydney Nolan (Fig.15). NB: here the influential Les demoiselles d'Avignon (Fig.90) appears to feature as a motif in both these discreetly achieved Post-Modern style Abstract Expressionistic and quasi 'pictorial' works.

Watkins regularly made reference to Picasso's art, and also to the imprimatur of his own art teacher, John Olson. Watkins described Olsen's early work in a letter to Noella Yule in 1992 as "abstract art well made", but the extreme referential quality found in Watkins works represents a different critical and conceptual thought process. Unlike Olsen (Fig.10), Watkins focused upon a conjoining of multiple associations and a variety of stylistically different expressions of abstraction, and that indiscrreet melding of concerns can be read today as a meta-language in Watkins paintings. This seminal citational approach was described by Barbara Dowse of the National Gallery of Victoria as, "painting in the manner of so and so", and refers to a constructive 'cut and paste' style of painted work that Watkins made from the late 1950s. This significant prefiguring of the inherent availability of styles of practice is mentioned here as seminal to later Critical Post-Conceptual painting practices discussed in Parts 2 and 3. Watkins particular methodology provides relevance for assertions made about the longstanding existence of a 'conceptual style' of abstract painting practice found in Australia that has continued to emerge from out of the pivotal High-Modernist period. Again, legacy plays a vital role in the development of the language of abstraction in Australian art; as found in a topical field that Watkins had explored decades ago.

Regardless of how this interpretation is to be ratified in current discourse, a fresh perspective on painting practices had, nevertheless, been presented by Australian artists such as Dick Watkins and Mike Brown by the mid-1960s as forms of regional difference. Their separate oeuvres illustrate the availability of a wide variety of known influences and styles of painting. This includes the accessibility of a range of approach routes into contemporary abstractionist styles of art making. Abstraction in recent formal Australian painting is revealed as a complex field, intimately bound to broader notions of artistic inventiveness, emerging out the 1960s and 1970s upheavals concerning a convergence and subsequent formalisation of seemingly interrelated art practices.

With that, a regional experimentation with the language of abstraction is shown to have occurred on both a notional and a practical level of experience in the recent Australian context. As discussed in Chapter 1, the examples

344 Ibid.
346 Op cit.
of discursive painting I have placed under scrutiny illustrate that the generalised critical negation of Late-Modernist styles of painting, is read as a judgemental idea within contemporary art concerns. Charles Harrison and Francis Francina have stated, "It can be argued that Modernism is a doctrine of the kind we now call historicist, and historicism is an intellectual error". 348 However, the negation of painting is also an argument when viewed in post 20th century terms that has, likewise, reached a point of critical stasis. 349 In fact, there are no longer any Greenbergian Formalists to react against, and in this argument, that situation is considered a relevant contemporary formal concern.

Abstraction: Remandered Formal Painting Modalities

The foregoing passage concerned formal and supposedly 'informal' approaches to the act of making abstract paintings, and examined examples of alternative regional approaches to the act. In fact, many art positions have co-existed throughout the regime of a dominant North American and British formalist hegemony developed throughout the 1940's, 1950s, and 1960s. Similarly, the previous section illustrated that a range of opposing Modernist positions were also adopted in a response to doctrinaire formalist rhetoric, and examples of a reaction to the strictures imposed by Modernist dogma can be traced throughout the history of late 20th century art. 350 What has been discarded over recent decades, both regionally and internationally, is a doctrinaire formalist rhetoric or knowing dogmatism associated with the finity of absolutist narrations in contemporary art making. As stated in the close of the previous section, the notion of privileging supposedly advanced abstract forms of art has little if any relevance in contemporary regional discourses on art in post 20th century terms, 351 especially since Clement Greenberg's demise as a leading theorist in the field. In short, Formalist approaches to remaineder aspects of Modernist painting, and the language of abstraction, need to be thoroughly reconsidered in current terms of reference.

Similarly, alternative formalist perspectives are primarily understood as having arisen out of the fashionable European counter-movement to the international mainstream of Modernism, running loosely in parallel to the more dominant formalist languages and narrative arguments of Modernism per se. 352 Within an intersection of remaineder ideas, and subsequent adjustments occurring in the visual arts, acceptable changes or modifications have been allowed to proceed. In such a positive sense, Ingrid Periz posited the formalist approach of Robert MacPherson's

349 Yves-Alain Bois. Painting as Model. October Books. MIT Press. London, 1995. This is presented as a critical and abridging genealogy of relevant concerns about the notion of painting, and how these are theoretically and strategically manipulated. Consider Chapter 1, 'Resisting Blackmail'. Further, I have personally met Bois at a lecture he gave on this book at the Art Gallery of NSW, and found his insights particularly clear on this subject matter.
351 Kay Larson. 'Art Critics of the World Unite -You Have Nothing To Lose But Your Formalism'. The Boston Phoenix. (05-10-76).
early experimental period as a “working through Colour-field theory of the 1970s,”\(^{363}\) where “containment and limitation served as a principle.”\(^{354}\) That principle informed the redirection of MacPherson’s painting from “bearer to receptacle.”\(^{355}\) Thus, MacPherson’s abstract works became object-oriented, and therefore useful and everyday in a process of de-mystification. In one of MacPherson’s early alternative formal paintings cum object-works entitled One Unit (Untitled) c.1981 (Fig.69), his idea of a receptacle is demonstrated.

A meta-style of abstraction, or more current formal approach to the international doctrinaire rubric associated with this aspect of Modernism, and its criticism, is locatable as a discourse in many Australian art practices. For instance, Judy Holding’s hand-painted earthenware History of Australia 1 c.1995 (Fig.70) is a further example of one such recent approach. Holding’s work, in taking up an “Informe” position (as Rosalind Krauss defined),\(^{356}\) underscores a Post-Modern understanding that a range of contemporary Australian art makers have utilised in an overall convergence of historical critiques of prior formalist painting styles. Here attention is directed towards a broad understanding of the notion of abstraction as a flexible, and equally, available, language form.

This convention is seen in Holding’s display of an array of artistic influences painted onto the surfaces of household plates. Various languages have been relocated as parts of a significant discourse, and that partakes in the wider expression of an extensive vocabulary found in a variety of responsive contemporary Australian visual arts practices.\(^{357}\)

I would describe History of Australia 1 (Fig.70), as an example of a “de-neutralised”\(^{358}\) painting-based art, participating in a personally responsive stance adopted towards remaineder aspects of Modernist art. It is also representative of a shift in position that has been assumed by many Australian artists since the mid- to late 1960s.\(^{359}\) However, it is a work that circuitously verifies that the practicable notion of Revisionism is itself conspicuously indebted to a host of remaineder aspects that are in certain respects, still being worked through.

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354 Ibid.
355 Ibid.
356 Ibid.
357 Ibid.
358 A genealogy of artists and critics etc is required here, however this may also be well illustrated by looking at the oeuvre and influences of Joseph Beuys, or Marcel Broodthaers for example. Joseph Beuys’ was driven by an interest in social engineering, and the theosophical concerns expressed by Rudolph Steiner. Those ideas set up a formal interpretation of representational concerns.
360 This problematic concern was pronounced in an Australian context when in 1966 the National Gallery put on The Field. This highlighted numerous Australian abstract painters and sculptors and inaugurated a critique of ‘abstraction’ and of typifying Greenbergian rhetoric. That concern has succeeded as an argument maintained against abstract painting forms in an Australian context since.
The shift from a specifically defined practice to a highly generic field of abstract painting modalities, comprised from an available and therefore useful family of abstract stylisations, is a topic that has been thematically underlined in this Chapter, and is recognisable as a featured trope or mechanism in the argument. It is important to apprehend this idea because many art makers, designers, architects, et al in a recent Australian art-historical context have made use of this function by degrees. That is, as a semantic device or Critical Post-Conceptual tool. As an example of what is implied by this commentary, a photograph (Fig.71) of the Architects, Jones, Coulter and Young’s recently designed Science Building at the Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia, is illustrated.

The architects of this building claim the designed ‘look’ was based upon an ‘amoebic geometry’, stating the design was ‘enigmatic and expressionistic, using a term borrowed from painting’. Perhaps ‘enigmatic’ and ‘expressionistic’ are appropriate key words of the Late-Modern period of the 20th century, as they directed the artists’ and the viewers’ attention to the expression of a cultural desire. That desire is seemingly for a readable, yet poetic inclusiveness, in any kind of a formal application, practice, or production involving another’s aesthetic skills. The examples from Brennan (Fig.56) and from Jones, Coulter and Young’s building are not directly linked, but they share what must now be understood as a common use value associated with a developmental aspect of abstract visual language, or, a discursively expressed meta-stylisation of that; which is generally communicable to others.

The methodological principle, of making generic use of what had once been explicit information, is a process evidenced in many other regional works, even by art makers active long ago. It is recognisable as a process used by a variety of Australian art makers such as Charles Condor in his Impressionistic The Departure of S.S. Orient c.1888 (Fig.72). This is an affected work with a French look, which was a critically fashionable concern in the late 1880s. In short, this work essentially belongs to the early European Impressionist School, just as it has the sensibility of those times inscribed into the technology of the oil paint’s highly associative application. Further, an iconic symbolism is evinced through the known international visual-language style of the day, and that registers as a sign or ‘meta-imaging’ within the facture of the paint. With this style of atmospheric and Neo-Romantic Australian Impressionist painting, the activation of the surface facture went a long way in then typifying it as a Modern work of art.

As a further example, Elwyn Lynn discussed earlier, provided a significant engagement with a tachist, Neo-Dadaist or Neo-Pop style (Fig.74). Lynn’s late- work illustrates that the production of a positive paradigm remains

301 Ibid.
possible, even from within the limiting governance of historical and contemporary framings found in the fundamentally European influenced style of his late 20th century abstractionist work.

Lynn was doubtlessly a credible Australian painter, critic, writer, teacher and arts administrator who produced a considerable oeuvre that appears to have suffered little from developing specific approaches to his painterly practice. Lynn’s considered art is participant in a legacy that has fascinated others, such as the current European curator Jean Clair.³⁶² That specific interest, expressed in a tradition of Positivism, goes back to the exploits of people like Thomas Eakins, or Alfonse Bertillon, whose now seemingly bizarre Vitrine Photographique of 1890 (Fig.73) is more grotesque as an artwork than it is scientifically valuable.

A type of positivist³⁶³ work made by Lynn³⁶⁴ is, however, more appropriately connected with the American Joseph Cornell and his studied pharmacological arrays of the 1950s; works that carry a strong anthropomorphic theme combined with a late Surrealist sense of the ‘uncanny’, whereby, a fiction appears as an expression of newness. As outlined, in visual art making this device operates abstractly by establishing a sense of unfamiliarity, and is elicited through an act of pictorial disassociation. Lynn’s An Apple for Rose Selavy c.1973, (Fig.74) is a work that pays homage to Cornell and Duchamp via the alias, Rose Selavy.

In a not unfamiliar way, other Australian artists have sought to make the visual into a meaningful concrete poetic experience, in the development of their respective formal œuvres. Robert MacPherson’s Mayfair Series is an example of this claim (Fig.162). Similarly, no matter how formalist Lynn’s work may have become by the early 1960s (Fig.74), he slowly found himself, like the critic Donald Brook and eventually even Greenberg’s original champion in the Australian press Patrick McCaughey,³⁶⁵ at odds with the inconsistencies of Greenbergian Formalist rhetoric then provided on ‘advanced’ painting.³⁶⁶ That revision came after initially supporting of Greenberg’s interpretation of what the ‘art for arts sake’ ideal implied regionally. This complex issue concerning theoretical complicity, and the distance sought from Greenbergian absolutism in Australian Modernist art movements, was investigated in Chapter 1.

It is claimed in this argument there exists a consistent approach to the language of abstraction, which is related to a variety of prior art movements. This domain of later Post-Modern painting practices requires further articulation “after the end of art”, as Arthur Danto³⁶⁷ stated this in post 20th century terms.³⁶⁸ For example, John

³⁶³ Ibid.
Young's *What I am and what I renounce* c.1996 (Fig.75) is a 'quasi-pictorial' painting. From a consideration of what is implied by the synesthesia of this work, a general understanding of the citation of stylistic information found in much recent Australian art can be gleaned. That amounts to a type of studied or learned purveying that could be described as a highly semantic form of 'contemporary abstraction' in Australian art. I further claim that this revisional and, therefore, informed and consequently formal approach succeeds through the manipulation and assimilation of available, applicable, art-historical information into a readable fiction.

Mike Brown is again an example of an artist whose works illustrate how the language of a pictorial image construction alternatively functions as a cue to an intended abstractionist consideration of the art maker. An abstract/conceptual modelling using such processes has been made clear in Brown's *Untitled*, c. 1964 (Fig.76). This seminal and significant work of Brown's illustrates a cut and paste style associated with the Modernist tradition of collage, long allied with Cubism. In this work the flattening out of pictorial space usually made through the use of mixed media as a regulatory device, is manipulated in two-dimensional painterly terms to unexpectedly confound a standard representational convention of visible facture.

In Brown's *Untitled* (Fig.76), the delineation of Cubist space is pictorially stated, and made dissimilar within a traditional expression of the seamless realistic illusion of space. In this temporally defined landscape painting, where a shifting of time zones and the relative position of the viewer is being controlled, the taut and seamless flatness doubles the intensity of a visual friction that would normally be freely associated with the overt facture of a collage work.

In this instance, Brown's notional presentation of collage, where edges would usually disjunctively subvert the unified pictorial representational image is usurped, highlighting an enigmatic structure and a confounding allusive form of abstraction or, fiction. This 'co-ordinate' set of disjunctive pictorial scenes, focuses the viewer's attention on Brown's painterly references to Modernist pictorial illusionism, whilst the planar temporal divisions mask a non-representational abstract presentation or, a meta-image. Here in Brown's work (Fig.76), Monet's sublime landscape *Antibes* (Fig.44) meets Van Doesburg's geometric abstraction *Simultaneous Counter-Composition* (Fig.46), in a single work that references Cubist space, but only in so far as it is an indicator of a developmental level of contemporary abstractness. That is where, in Victoria Lynn's astute observation in 1990 about 'abstraction's will to

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390 The 1984, or 5th Sydney Biennale of Sydney Highlighted the works of first Jorge Immendorff and then also of Juan Davila who appropriated his work amongst others such as Nolan etc. This kind of Appropriation was deliberated upon and had the character of a game, see Gulf, 1983. Julian Schnabel's work of 1983 titled Memory and the stimulus for Memory by contrast is a subtler version of Appropriation, because it is the structure of painting and nature of representation itself that is denoted and re-denoted in a quotidian way. Art Gallery of NSW Biennale Catalogue. Sydney, 1984.

silence", Brown's contemporary picturing of abstraction is deliberated upon and transposed into a visual "will to communicate".370

This discourse on alternative ideas associated with abstract forms of regional painting can be further extended to include filmic and sculpturally formed object-making practices, or to any preferences that might be used in the construction of contemporary painting-based works of art. When reconsidered as standard artistic ideations today, there exists an array of methodologies that can be usefully merged into a broader architectonic schema, capable of producing a refreshed alte vista in the field. A field no longer bound by restrictive 20th century considerations of what actually denotes the true or given boundaries of a form's supposedly pre-inscribed conventions.

This last assertion also applies to considerations such as the degree of abstractness or, the level of conceptual or practical expressiveness found in a contemporary work of art. For such reasons, installation-based painting practice is now a highly active and flexible place of production, emergent from the Late-Modern period into the domain of post 20th century art practices.371 Mikala Dwyer's painterly installation Woops, c.1994 (Fig.77), is an example of how the notional concern for abstraction can be extended in recent Australian art practices, as elsewhere.372

Installation art is fundamentally a 'form neutral' mode of expression, for the want of a better term, and is now clearly available as a painter's platform of activity as much as any others.373 From that perspective, it is reasonable to state that the newer domain of Installation art is perceived as an evolving experimental area, and a prime location of production that is, nevertheless, still often based upon a manipulation of established painting languages or 'norms'.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, installation styles of art making cohered for adventurous art makers, especially those who had taken an interest in aspects of formal painting. That is, the substances and the material nature of the works became a significant aspect of developmental or contemporary painting practices. Nigel Lendon's late 1960s minimal Floor Structures (Fig.33) and Elwyn Lynn's tachist works (Fig.66), with their seminal admixture of painting and 'specific objectness', prefigure the arrival of this model. In this way a critique of Modernist painting styles

371 Refer here to The Experimental Arts Foundation Catalogue. South Australian Visual Arts Board, 1983.
372 Refer to gallery Catalogues of Mikala Dwyer's 1994 installation work shown at Sarah Cottier Galleries, Sydney. This artist makes abundant use of painting and sculptural practices to lay out a highly staged scheme, or virtual impression similar to the effects of a painting. This work is usually done on the round with objects and other curious substances. Small paintings made from nail polish are also included in this installation format.
has been remaindered and merged within post 20th century installation processes. This claim is buoyed by the fact that the idea of a material abstraction or tachisme, overt in newer practices, deserves to be further considered.  

That art-critical dialogue appears to have emerged and blended seamlessly into current practices. It is apparent in Dwyer's (Fig.77) and in Hany Armanious's exceptional installations (Fig.190). Their 'form-neutral' and materially prone abstractionist qualities have been crafted into clear narrative expressions of 'difference' and 'alternative character' in the field of formal Australian art; the notions of difference and alternative character are key signifiers of 'interdependent' Critical Post-Conceptual practices discussed in Parts 2 and 3.

A repositioning of the questioned authorial nature of art makers interested in making related (generic and/or radical) painted works was formally achieved during the later 1980s and early 1990s. Out of a situation that would have possibly concerned Michael Fried a few decades earlier, the subject of formal painting-based practices has become a useful notional and practical objectification of current concerns. This is in fact a meta-discourse on art making woven into the very fabric or architecture of contemporary art spaces during the last decade. Thus, in the late 1980s and 1990s, the 'subject of painting' has continued to emerge as a critical formal discourse.

However, Australian art makers selective modes of working have been fundamentally questioned since the late 1960s, and that is an extensive critical field of activity that remains to be fathomed in the remaining orienting chapter of Part 1. Nevertheless, leftover conventions like the meta-stylisation of the language of abstraction has survived from those formal practices, and through its modulation made considerable inroads into 'installation art' and other newer practices of the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, I believe it is an actual lack of surety that is an affirmative characteristic of the formalist painting field, and this assists in locating a critical function of the form within contemporary art discourse. Formal styles of painting remain vulnerable as critical forms, and with that the critical status of any style of painting-based practice intended to be upheld in the contemporary art world must be given over, as Gail Hastings' work suggests (Fig.109), to a consideration of personal intent and critical enquiry.

Therefore, I claim that a deliberate leaning towards the making of a painting or, a painted work of art for public scrutiny in a recent Australian context, has generally occurred after certain deliberation, and that process is fundamentally interpreted in this argument as a formalised and conceptual undertaking. Hence, the logic of the term Critical Post-Conceptual painting is properly revealed. That notion is, however, further complicated when it is acknowledged that a gradual contemporarising of the language of abstraction has greatly assisted in making a contemporary formalisation of painterly concerns possible. For an illustration of that claim see MacPherson's installation of 1976 (Fig.113), or one of Nixon's 1980s anamorphic abstract painting displays (Fig.165).

375 The Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane Queensland has displayed the kind of interest under discussion here that was taken up by many institutions in art during the 1980's. Refer, IMAA Catalogue IMA - A Documentary History. Bob Lingard and Sue Cramer (Eds), Brisbane, 1989.
377 Ibid.
The idea of the formalisation of a contemporary language or, conceptual abstraction is evident in the dissociative idea of 'group-painting'. Vincente Butron’s 1996 series of Limited Action Paintings are an instance of what is implied here. The examples shown are LAP 175 assisted by the Filipino Ambassador, Mr Miles Kula (Fig. 78) and LAP 156 assisted by John Young and Melissa Chu (Fig. 79). Again, a contempourising of the notion of abstraction plays a leading role in the facilitation of these social, formally executed, painted works of art. With the existence of an attendant formal discourse Butron’s action painting series is more than a 'banal' abstractionist expression.

Alternatively, there is Luatre Fois Luinze (Fig. 80), a group work made by the French artist Bernard Frieze in 2000. In this formal work made by Frieze and various associates, paintbrushes were joined on a long stick, and the group then collectively moved until the formal 'conceptual undertaking' was completed. When I write of a conceptual undertaking, it is not intended to imply the same thing that is likely to have informed prior conceptually prone art makers of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Robert Irwin (Fig. 81). As discussed earlier, Irwin tended to highlight the actual dematerialisation of the art object and, like the European art maker Yves Klein before him, placed an emphasis on the weight of 'non-space' and the metaphysical attributes of art making.\(^{376}\)

The currency of the Critical Post-Conceptual undertaking I have been building into discussion concerns the considered and culturally engaging act of making a painting-based work. That 'made' process involves an orientation of various formal processes and of methodologically developed experimental practices, such as Vincente Butron's abstracted Limited Action Painting format (Figs. 78 and 79) or Albert Gleize's (Fig. 80) collaborative exercises suggest. A contemporary painting-based work, from a Post-20\(^{th}\) century perspective, is more likely to be considered as having been premised upon a conceptualised and -

systematic approach to art making, as a way of making relevant an art that is contingent upon a general cognisance of the availability of information whilst furthering personal interests in its material construction.

It is concluded in this Chapter that the formal act of making a painting that may be engaged with the meta-theoretical discourse of contemporary forms of abstraction, should not to be considered dramatically different from any other contemporary form of art. A re-conceptualisation of physical artistic practices such as making a painted work of art, is currently housed in a wider sphere of critical events closely linked to my earlier commentaries about the usefulness of a 'co-ordinate' or harmonised forms of practice (theoretical/practical or realist/non-representational or abstraction). In that explicit sense the widened field of contemporary formal painting has emerged in the post 20th century environment as a primarily 'form-neutral' genre that engages with the notion of conceptual abstraction.

In a work by Ian Burn entitled *A Thread of Canvas from Jackson Pollock, for Australian Eyes Only* 1951–1969 c.1969 (Fig.82), that same informed idea is represented in a critical and simply achieved seminal abstract work of art. It displays a literalising of the notion of the abstract painting and other conceptual art characteristics. It is both a painting and a painted work of art, specifically about the context of a single painting. In this instance, a generic modality has also been used to emblematise an entire movement of Modernist art (i.e. Jackson Pollock's drip style, his *Blue Poles* painting and then Abstract Expressionism through a lexical referencing). Burn's conceptual abstractionist work represents a model for the kind of abstracted Post-Conceptual model that has critically emanated from the 1970s and 1980s, which I have discussed as an emerging form of painting practice found in recent Australian art, as elsewhere.

Ian Burn's work is generally embedded within a culturally responsive position, one that is directly associated with the growth of academically trained art makers since the 1970s. Burn's notion of a critical practice is well understood today by others, as being experimental, selective, revisionist and informed. Burn's style of critical and conceptually prone practice evolved from the 1970s fragmentation and diversification of practices, was built up through a considered working through of the clever citations of the Post-Modern period of the 1980s.

The appearance of such a model can assist in explaining why the authorial voice has returned in the more socialised formal painting practices of the 1990s. These notions can also help to explain why the expressive hand of the Australian art maker may also remain cautiously restrained. 379 Again, consider Butron's abstract *Limited Action Paintings* in which others happily do his bidding, just as they do in Frieze's highly formalised European oeuvre. The art maker's hand, so to speak, has for many apparently remained clear of an overt commitment to what was considered not so long ago, in unfavourable terms, as the creatively expressive act of actually making a painting. For

these reasons it is reasonable to state that at this stage, the act of making a painting-related work of art has since the 1960s, been more and more governed by a tendency to orchestrate a variety of formal processes on both a conceptual and material level. This implies the hand of the maker may, in certain instances, only be abstractly present or, located in a cool and markedly professional way. That removed approach seemingly epitomise what Ian Burn or Mel Ramsden regularly produced as a contemporary style of art decades ago, which was either ignored at the time or misread as being a facile Conceptual art. One of Ramsden and Burn’s Index’s from 1968 is shown in Figure 83.

With Ramsden and Burn’s Index (Fig. 83) a notional role of abstraction is made apparent in the redirection of a practical or everyday object, and in the re-signification of text, and through that process, the inherent pre-inscription of poetic reverie also. In this abstract ‘co-ordinate’ modality of expression, the viewer is led into a theoretical remove or distance. Curiously, that is a dictionary definition of the notion of abstraction itself. The Indexes (e.g. Fig. 83) are collaboration works made by Burn and Ramsden that formally assist in introducing the idea that such an art could be simultaneously considered as lexical and literal. The lexical notion, which has its own historical and international context, has been well summarised in Tony Coodfrey’s recent anthology Conceptual Art. Conceptual practices have become known as a form of cliché expression, as found in innumerable text-based art works produced throughout the 1980s and 1990s, however, that remains an underrated genre of recent Australian art also. Robert Morris’s early American Card File c. 1963 (Fig. 84) is an influential work in this regard, and is illustrated here to provide art-historical relevance.

In short, Index (Fig. 83) was not an attempt to illustrate a conceptual cleverness, or an art maker’s ability to iconoclastically deconstruct known conventions, even though these acts critically occurred. Far more importantly for the direction of this argument, Ramsden and Burn’s Index illustrates that art and the abridgement of its languages is not beholden to any fixed idea, nor is it completely free-floating or dissociated from its traditions or legacies. In this Critical Post-Conceptual proposition, art practicing and its criticism is viewed as having a tendency towards fluxion, or tension, occurring between a social discourse and a personally felt experience occurring within limit conditions. In a Critical Post-Conceptual reading, as put forward in the thesis, obtaining a meaning from Ramsden and Burn’s work remains bound to a process that needs to be further deliberated upon. In that regard, Burn and Ramsden have, like

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303 Ibid.
many other recent formal Australian artists, provided a substantial legacy of contemporary abstractionist concerns in the field.

As is the case in much of the art examined in this thesis, there is a point of view affected by the influence of a semantic repositioning of the art makers’ work, or intention, and then of the viewer’s ability to ‘read’ it as a specific characteristic of an art. Gordon Bennett’s Verso of 2001 (Fig. 85) is the final regional example in this chapter of the modulation of the language of abstraction, and typifying Critical Post-Conceptual painting. In Bennett’s work a combination of ‘reference image’ and a retroactive referencing of ‘art-text’ play a significant role in the reader’s understanding of an indigenous contemporary work of art. The word ‘retroactive’ is chosen because with Bennett’s work (Fig. 96), I believe the artist has a right to reconsider and retrace the limit conditions that an imposing culture has expressed as supposedly meaningful discourse.

A central narrative concern focused upon in Bennett’s complex paintings, as it has been throughout this Chapter, is the topic of a contemporising of the notionable matter of abstraction found in recent Australian formal painting practices. In the Verso painting (Fig. 85), Bennett’s current interest in the generationally separate dialogues of the New York abstract artists Jackson Pollock and Jean-Michel Basquiat, are thrown into a tumultuous reformatting. Australian indigenous culture is also reframed in this ambitious work, as a defining narrative aspect placed into an unusual or enigmatically structured viewing. Cryptic art terminologies are also made referents of contemporary Australian culture, and these somewhat clichéd ‘art-speak’ terminologies poetically or concretely adhere to the visual inflections of this discursive abstractionist style of work.

In concluding, the contemporary field of abstraction, when considered as a highly flexible, mobile, and notional understanding, is placed firmly in the centre of the action; it occurs in Bennett’s display of a thorough recontextualisation of local or regionally specific meaning within his newer quintessentially Australian formal paintings. A central formal concern acknowledged here is the adaptive and flexible language of abstraction, inherited from a legacy that continues to provide an informing and critical dialogue for Australiasian art makers. This newer convention, or recognisable trope, emerges from what is known to the indigenous, peripheral and/or regional art maker alike. This reading of Bennett’s recent work (Fig 85) is analogous to the way in which contemporary Australian painting is now more widely received. In that extended reading, contemporary forms of abstraction are regardlessly understood as the meaningfully expressed developmental dialogues of a thoroughly contextualised regional milieus.

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385 Here I would site Gordon Bennett’s recent work titled Verso, as an example of what has been stated. Sherman Gallery Catalogues. Sydney, 2001. This painting was exhibited in Bennett’s solo show titled Notes to Basquiat: Modern Art. May, 2001.
In this final Chapter of Part 3, selected Australian Modernist works are considered in relation to issues and topics informing the viability of painting-based practices in current discourse. This entails a discussion on the persistence of international influences such Conceptualism and Minimalism in regional terms, and the critical resistance offered by a 'banal' art style of Australian formalist abstract painting.\footnote{David Pestorius (Ed), \textit{Geometric Painting in Australia 1941-1997}. University Art Museum QMA. Brisbane, 1997. This text outlines a range of artists and relevant activities.} Importantly, an explanation is given for the term 'generic aesthetic', the art-critical responsiveness of the 'painted object', the recovery of 'lost language' forms in a 'contemporary' style, and the currency of the notions 'co-ordinance', 'negation', and 'citation'.
As such, Figures 86, 87 and 88 are featured as different kinds of periodic works made by Australian artists between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s. They reveal the obscured relevance of recent styles and assist in opening up this discourse on significant aspects of recent formal Australian painting. At issue, is whether these works based on an array of Modernist styles and influences outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, are generally representative of the periodic collapse of Modernist painting as an art-critical form, or, do they in a contemporary view display characteristics that highlight the specific significance of recent formal Australian painting styles?\(^{38}\) Follows, is an examination of theory, artefacts, and terminology, which will assist in establishing a fitting context for the subsequent case studies of Part 2 and the conclusion of Part 3.

\(^{38}\) Op cit.
Chapters 1 and 2 introduced the idea that divergent painting practices began appearing in Australian art in the early 1970s. That was when writers like Patrick McCaughey and Donald Brook from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Terry Smith working at *Honi Soit* and *Other Voices* magazines, and Noel Sheridan with the Experimental Arts Foundation in Adelaide, also began publicly voicing their critical concerns for a current definition of Australian 'contemporary' art. In the 1971 essay, 'The Situation Now: Object or Post-Object Art', written by Terry Smith in association with the Colour-Form painter Tony McGillick for Sydney's Contemporary Art Society, the significance of a range of alternative practices manifested in recent Australian art were identified.

Noel Sheridan later confirmed Smith and McGillick's forecast of a regional deconstruction and reappraisal of painting and sculpture, arguing that a perceptible shift in attitudes and the varied interests of a growing range of divergent Australian art makers had, "generated an uneasy atmosphere, where the proper nature and purpose of art were placed at constant issue". Following is a discussion of how critical theory and responsive practices evolved in the subsequent decade; after Australian painting had gone into a type of critical hiatus during the 1970s.

Curiously, it was not until in the mid- to late 1980s that other Australian writer's began to debate the relevance of a range of formal Australian painting-based practices. For instance, in 1988 and commenting in an 'Arts Review' on the emergence of conceptual, abstractionist and minimalist activity in Melbourne, Carolyn Barnes argued that innovative formal painting works were being made by a host of contemporary Australian art makers, and in a phrasing that generally supports claims my various made in the previous Chapter. She described these works as both "signposts of high art, and the divinations of the personality of the artist".

Within this art-critical commentary, Barnes raised the important issue of how personal expression within formal practice could be re-negotiated. Barnes did this by critically acknowledging a still growing disquiet, and particularly with how accreditation in the visual arts was operating, stating, "recent art strategies with their consumption of material from art-historical sources, ...[consider the] adversaries of an artist controlled practice might now be art historians, rather than critics, in their role of ascribing fixed meaning to works of art".

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368 Carolyn Barnes, 'Arts Review'. *Art and Text, Volume 30, 1986*.
369 Ibid.
370 Ibid. NB: Barnes is specifically discussing the implications of John Nixon's monochromatic *Potato Room* installation shown at City Gallery, Elizabeth Newman's *Pictures* installation at City Gallery, David O'Halloran's *Surrogates* at George Paton, a Gertrude Street
Featured in Barnes’ challenge to institutionalised views was the work of Elizabeth Newman, who had developed a formal and discursive installation approach to monochromatic and geometric abstraction (Fig.89). Importantly, relevant formal stylistic expressions apparent in Newman’s Pictures installation shown at the ‘City’ Gallery in 1988, illustrate a matter briefly discussed in the previous Chapter as a ‘generic aesthetic’ response.  

Writers like Barnes and art makers like Newman, Nixon, and MacPherson flagged issues that had sat virtually idle for a decade, and these would become a focus of critical debate in the early 1990s. Likewise, the author and critic Janine Bourke in a book about aspects of Australian women’s art of the 1970s, entitled Field of Vision, publicly endorsed a growing feminist methodology that further underlined that rigour was required whenever a questioning, validation or interpretation of contemporary art is undertaken. For instance, Bourke perceptively speculated on overlooked attitudes in recent Australian women’s art, stating “there is always a danger when theory meets art of an unhappy marriage, a correct line which rules out the wilful, elusive edges of art’s passionate alliance with imagination”.  

Out of this backdrop of newer activity in the field, Ian Burn organised an important art-critical exhibition in 1993. Looking at Seeing and Reading was held at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery at the University of New South Wales. This was produced in association with the gallery’s director Nicholas Waterlow in response to Rex Butler’s introduction two years earlier of an art-critical idea, the notion of ‘Banality’. In promoting a decisive critical argument within a regional theoretical discourse, Butler characterised a growing theoretical tendency or emphasis in Australian contemporary discourses by claiming, “the banality of all art [is] being in some way avant-garde, of only being able to say that at once all art and no art is avant-garde. It is this logic itself that is banal, that it is today to be found everywhere (and nowhere).” Butler’s 1991 critique in the ‘Banal Art’ catalogue essay, openly suggested that everything in contemporary art might be considered clichéd, and I have assumed, whilst attempting to remain iconoclastic this new tendency was directly responding to a newer generic aesthetic field of engagements.  

Like Rex Butler, and Victoria Lynn a year before him, Burn argued in Looking at Seeing and Reading catalogue essay of 1993 that it was necessary to understand how contemporary art had become so tightly theoretically envisioned, within prevailing Post-Modern discourse. Burn provided a critical context for the assortment of Australian and international works that he wished to discuss. Importantly, he made a clear distinction between the act of ‘reading’ and ‘seeing’ art. That concern was intrinsically radical, stemming from a conceptual critique begun

gallery group show entitled A System of Difference: Some Recent Abstraction, and finally, an exhibition titled Artisans: Collaborations/Installations again shown at George Paton Gallery; all from 1988 concerning painting and abstraction, and the appearance of a specific or ‘radical’ formal discourse.

364 ibid.
368 ibid.
369 ibid.
370 NB: The Abstraction show was curated by Victoria Lynn for the Art Gallery of NSW. Sydney, 1990. This promoted a discursive debate over how formal painting in Australian art was developing. There are other factors that background that moment.
371 Op cit.
in the late-1960s when artists like Burn had first questioned his own "engagement with perception" as a formalist style of painter. Later in the 1980s, Burn would again assert the way in which art was considered, was in fact a convention that had become theoretically overshadowed by a "reading of pictures, rather than a looking at them". Subsequently, in the 1993 Looking and Seeing and Reading catalogue essay, Burn concluded in unison with Waterlow, that a Post-Modern "reading of pictures" was problematic. It implied meaning needed to be pre-inscribed or 'read' into a work, whereas, seeing it offered a more direct "engagement with perception". Therefore, 'meaning in art' is better experienced in the act of seeing or experiencing it, and should not necessarily require pre-conditions. However, this idea seemingly harked to Greenberg's claim made in 1969 at the end of his career as an international theorist, that, "Art is strictly a matter of experience."" Waterlow noted in his 'Introduction' that in a proposed 'banal' reading of contemporary painting, the seen surface remained considered "rhetorical", that is, the work is assumed ironic from a cultivated perspective. This meant an ongoing "Post-modern envisioning" of contemporary art still equated uneasily with how the representational surfaces of paintings are available to be experienced. With similar perceptual concerns in mind, Burn, like Butler, had independently called for an extension of credible approaches to the critical reception of aspects of contemporary Australian art, or the "looking at seeing it", as he preferred to express this matter.

What Barnes, Bourke, Lynn, Butler, Burn and others sought via a lengthy public debate from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, was a way of apprehending significant formal aspects of contemporary Australian art that befitted the developmental nature of ongoing critical discourse, and a growing arena of practical experimentation in various fields.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the regional role played in the historicism of contemporary Australian art illustrated a focus or cultural vision that had shifted "from the nature of the art object, to the potential uses of past styles that are re-materialised in the art of the present". Furthermore, this revisionist concern had been quietly at issue before Butler's 'banal' art critique provided a necessary focus in the early 1990s. Overall, this contemporary debate about the direction of formalist styles of Australian painting in particular, amounted to a kind of belated warning at the end of the 20th century; first, to be careful about what is assumed in the domain of regional contemporary painting, and second, to consider what is relevant and appropriate to ongoing 'systems of aesthetic judgement' at both an institutional and personal level.

403 Op cit.
404 Ibid.
405 Ibid.
406 Ibid.
407 Ibid.
409 Op cit. Waterlow. 'Introduction.
410 Ibid.
411 Ibid. Burn.
413 Ibid.
These critical documents discussed in detail in Chapter 8, are flagged here because they offer a unique and now relevant insight into relevant art-critical issues, and present an important backdrop to the diversity found in recent Australian painting. They also substantiate that attitudes to painting changed rapidly and developed in peripheral environments like Australasia during the 1980s. In short, the diversification of painting first noted by Terry Smith and Noel Sheridan, was theoretically clarified a decade later by curators, gallery directors, artists/writers like Burn, and critical writers such as Barnes, Butler, Waterton, Tsoutas, Cumow and many others, who ultimately enlivened the field by providing a updated and necessary criticality.

The Manifestation of Generic Aesthetics in Recent Formal Australian Painting

As briefly outlined, an important series of discursive curations of the early 1990s, beginning with Victoria Lynn's Abstraction at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1990, provides a critical focus that can assist in the seeing or the reading of the William Delafield-Cook painting, Two Chairs c.1972 (Fig 86). In this painting there is an abstracting of the notion of realism in Western art, an aspect made cliché whilst confirming longstanding reductive Modernist concerns by proxy. Delafield-Cook made skilled use of the ‘ultra-realist’ style of painting again prevalent during the Pop art era. More significantly for the argument to follow, he makes clear a pictorial presentation of what Hal Foster identified later in the 1990s as the ‘significant content’ of ‘representational absence’.

With its enigmatic pictorial and theoretical rhythm, Two Chairs contrasts starkly with the later painting by Janet Dawson from 1975 (Fig 87). Dawson’s painting is a carefully executed familial gesture of abstraction. What links the Delafield-Cook to Dawson’s, is that her image is also theoretically complex, where a similar fluxing of known pictorial stylisations occurs. In Dawson's painting there is reference to a Cubist deployment of space and subsequent Futurist dialogues on abstraction, as discussed in Chapter 2. The developmental historical drive of High-Modernist art, and earlier Modernist moments, are replayed by Dawson as a readable meta-language. As discussed in the previous Chapter, that process amounts to a contemporary style of visual image construction. Both these works illustrate the critical usefulness of the formalist ‘art for arts sake’ ideal within a newer constructive concept.

However, this is generally achieved differently, within an expression of the artist’s own contemporary discursive

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415 J.M. Nash. Cubism Futurism and Constructivism. Thames and Hudson. London, 1974. This text illustrates the various subtexts or narrative issues that have underscored various modernist abstract modes of painterly production.
interests. In the late 1980s, Carolyn Barnes recognised this process as an orchestration by artists who either make use of "a pool of ideas and artefacts, as background noise" or, "make that relationship more manifest". Despite differing opinions expressed by Butler, Burn, Bourke or Barnes on how the process of seeing and reading recent Australian painting is suitably located, neither of the works I am discussing fits a definitive critique Modernist formalist painting as readily as Sydney Ball's Hard-edge Zarzan c.1968 (Fig.88). The Delafield-Cook (Fig.86) and Dawson's painting (Fig.87) operate like Post-modern works critiquing Modernist conventions. Whereas, Ball's Zarzan (Fig.88) has overt stylistic characteristics that make it obvious that it is a High-Modernist Hard-edge style of abstraction. However, Ball's locally produced responsive minimal abstraction sits awkwardly within a doctrinaire critique of American style Formalist painting styles; for the many reasons outlined in Chapter 1. It is significant that the three works I have sampled provide a readable (visual) meta-language of their own accord. I have concluded that a meta-expression of language existent in all these works is not part of a rhetorical reading constructed after the fact. Thus, I claim, a discursive and co-ordinate style of activity is shown to be a common characteristic of formal painting styles produced in an Australia context during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

For instance, Janet Dawson's Balgal Diptych (Fig.87) engages in a visual dialogue with the viewer, whether the viewer is reasonably informed on the historical aspects of this style of painting or not. In other words, Dawson assumes a basic knowledge of a previous "pool of ideas" as Barnes puts it, and in that manner familial generic information is strategically placed in the pictorial plane. What informs the viewer in this familial way, is a process or engagement with similitude that amounts to a personalised style of expression, described here as a co-ordinate model. The process of visual co-ordination in Dawson's case implies that a narrative image is derived from that which appears to be concerned with non-representational abstract-styles of painting, entwined with other relational concerns influencing the reading or seeing of the work. These include, formal issues, topical meanings, various known styles, a personal politic, current theory, intrinsic methodological approaches, etc. In this model no one concern rules the artists' demonstration of a co-ordination of idea's that have been presented in a harmonious visualisation or image structure.

Dawson's abstract-style of painting is engaged with complex pictorial imaging for two reasons, though these concerns do not overtly bear down on an experience of the work. First, paintings are generally recognised in historical terms as image structures before they are read as objects, no matter how empty or loaded with apparent narrative content. Second, the discursive and citational form of art expressed by Dawson, smooths over any inherent content in a generic representation of interests and methodology concerns, here a synesthesia of styles and influences amounts to a dissimulation of traditional representational concerns, and that is a key factor for the automated apprehension of

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420 Op cit.
421 Op cit.
422 Op cit. NB: A critical account of Sydney Ball’s Hard-edged painting is found in Bernard Smith’s, Australian Painting. P 427.
423 Op cit.
this form of artificial image concept. The idea of co-ordination, of one or more aspects harmoniously informing others, is perhaps more readily understood as an integrated dynamic referencing that is also evident in the Delafield-Cook work (Fig.86); where various art-historical ideas similarly operate as informing "background noise", as Barnes expresses it. Here the notion of interdependency in recent Australian art is raised.

In Dawson’s Balgalal Diptych (Fig.87), a productive level of co-ordination is maintained in a work concerned with the orchestration of the oppositional notions of realism and abstraction. However, the harmonising function of co-ordination is a dynamic factor played out in reverse mode in the Delafield-Cook (Fig.86), where the notion of representational 'absence' provides a different visual referent. Dawson’s painting is likely based on the Futurist and avant-gardism of Umberto Boccioni, Gino Severini and Giacomo Balla's 'picturing' of motion in painting. In my opinion, Dawson has possibly blended this idea with a reconsideration of the 'significant form' associated with Cubist painting, such as Picasso’s influential, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon c.1907 (Fig.90).

The shifting between abstract and realist imagery already mentioned is a key aspect in this early Modernist work made by the master imitator Pablo Picasso. Margaret Plant has pointed out that Picasso's famous painting is itself a pictorial historical reconstruction, "analytically reminiscent of Cézanne’s The Bathers." Regardless, Picasso’s visually enigmatic ideation, or effect of abstraction expressed as a meta-image in Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (Fig.90), is likened here to a semantic device operating in Dawson’s equally citational Balgalal Díptich (Fig.87). Similarly, these locally produced High- to Late Modernist works (Figs.86, 87 and 88) can be experienced as displays of both original and generic imagery, within a meta-discourse. The same may also be argued for a reading of the Ball’s Zarzal (Fig.88). In short, they are seminal post conceptual abstractions.

As briefly mentioned, at the beginning of the 1970s Terry Smith produced the essay 'The Situation Now: Object or Post-Object Art'. This was a ten-point manifesto outlining a set of guidelines for Australian artistic practices emergent after the 1960s. In light of the foregoing considerations, if the reader is asked to pass critical judgement on the paintings discussed (Figs.86, 87 and 88), it is not difficult to claim that they are "interesting as art" as Terry Smith's essay required as a necessary requirement. As such, I cannot agree with Bernard Smith's 'comparative' or 'dependent' model that may bind them, because they are 1970s Modernist paintings, to a static equivalence. Nor would I have these works cast as examples of a limiting, reductive replica of a fading Modernist

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424 Op cit.
426 Margaret Plant. 'Picasso: Forever Cubist'. In, Picasso, IAC National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1984.
428 Ibid.
aesthetic. They are clearly far more interesting than this critical evaluation of aspects of regional Modernist art forms may suggest.\textsuperscript{429}

I would further argue that it is the conventions of criticism and not the inherent problems associated with the subjects of prior and more contemporary painting that is representative of a dating concern. With this stated, I do concur with Terry Smith's concern for the reading of "A Problematic Practice"\textsuperscript{430} when that discourse aligns with Ian Burn and Rex Butler's later extension of related revisionist interests. Butler and Burn have consistently illustrated, for example, that there are many ways of reading the context of the language expressed in recent Australian art. I would also assert that any formalisations of logic\textsuperscript{431} used to complete the task of defining meaning in Australian art must remain a critical and transparent process, as Bourke claims. In fairness, Bernard Smith modified his 'comparative' model of 'dependency' over time, and his 3rd Edition of Australian Painting reflects a change in interpretive art-historical perspectives.\textsuperscript{432}

Likewise, the art-historian Anthony Blunt found that Leonard de Vinci noted that fixed conventions on the aesthetics of Renaissance painting were problematic.\textsuperscript{433} It is similarly argued here that there are possibly a great many unfathomed mechanisms useful for the purpose of making further critical deductions on aspects of contemporary painting. That is, it is possible to remain critical without becoming dogmatically confined by predicated cultural perceptions or, relying upon limiting authorial opinions upheld in the field. In short, the role of questioning in this area, as Barnes, Bourke, Smith, Burn and Butler have illustrated in recent critical texts, should not be allowed to become a limited theorising.\textsuperscript{434} Therefore, I claim, the three works illustrated in the opening of this chapter (Figs. 86, 87, 88), instead of struggling with a representational condition of stasis and a critical loss of meaning, are but a small sample of divergent works operating within what I propose is a co-ordinate, integrated, and open-ended theoretical regional model. I claim it is possible to conceive these works inclusively within a variety of modes: As artefacts exhibiting a 'generic aesthetic' response or, evidence of an affirmative underlying thematic of recent Australian art.

\textbf{Signs of Aberrance}

The brief analysis of Figures 86, 87 and 88 exposes the theoretical and pictorial notion of co-ordination. Conversely, the earlier deadening notion of relative equivalence is revealed as a faltering critical concern related to the principle of representational negation generally. And more specifically, linked to the model of 'dependency' in regional terms. This


\textsuperscript{432} Op cit.


\textsuperscript{434} Op cit. Carolyn Barnes 'Arts Review'.
implies that development in the field of formal painting has emerged as a positive paradigm in the contemporary art styles of the 1990s, from a perceived crisis in the early 1970s. What needs to be questioned is why a longstanding paring-down of representational concerns has not led to a reduction of available definitions, as the curator Ingrid Periz suggests is correct.\textsuperscript{435} Furthermore, why the formalisation of painting-based practices has not been abandoned by a legacy of critical formal Australian art makers after Modernism. The research and curatorial projects undertaken by David Pestorius in recent years verifies a contemporaneous context for this claim, and confirms that a vibrant legacy of interested practitioners, traceable to early Australian Modern painters, has grown in depth and quality since the local advent of a second phase of geometric abstractionism in the 1950s.\textsuperscript{436}

David Pestorius credibly argues there is a continuous legacy of formalist painters, a tradition that is inclusive of Australia’s classic Moderns such as Grace Cossington Smith,\textsuperscript{437} Rah Fizel, Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson.\textsuperscript{438} The latter were amongst the first to take up abstract geometric styles of painting locally, and their oeuvres register as important individual expressions of artistic production. For example, Grace Crowley’s Abstract Painting c.1950 (Fig 91) shares with Ralph Balson’s work (Fig 92) a particularly lyrical understanding of geometric painting.

Conversely, in the 1990 Abstraction catalogue essay, Victoria Lynn noted “an expanded though aberrant excursion into abstraction is evident today. While the specifics of this eccentricity may be seen to differ from artist to artist, the sense of a largely undefined artistic modification of established forms of abstraction is prevalent.”\textsuperscript{439} In this claim of Lynn’s, a present-day genre of related practices is located in Australian art, but its contemporary significance is downplayed; as an irregularity. Lynn is more guarded in her discourse than Pestorius in his later account, especially in openly specifying this as a genre with real historical consistency. Lynn prefers to qualify the matter by deferring her opinion to commentary made twenty-five years earlier. Lucy Lippard spoke in the mid-1960s of an outbreak on the American continent of what she generally defined as an “aberrance” occurring within an “eccentric [expression of] abstraction” in sculpture.\textsuperscript{440}

Likewise, Lynn describes a recent outbreak of abstraction in Australian painting as a regional “aberrance” that she found, however, to be “in prevalence.”\textsuperscript{441} I believe that Lynn’s considered guardedness was affected by the entrenched notion that international stylistic influences locatable in current formalist styles of Australian painting had been relegated out of critical discourse on contemporary art. Therefore, artists taking up relegated international

\textsuperscript{436} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{441} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{442} Ibid.
stylisations such as abstractionist painting must be engaging in a process understood to be at odds with acceptable contemporary discourses.

By the time of Lynn’s presentation of the Abstraction show in 1990, Terry Smith had supplied the now art-historical term “Post conceptual painting”, in Bernard Smith’s 3rd Edition of Australian Painting. This technical act of naming can still function as a constructive nominal understanding of the formal types of painting Lynn was discussing. It was during the later 1980s, however, that the curator Ingrid Periz warned that a definition of this same type of critical and formal style of painting-based practicing found in more recent Australian art, was going to be difficult to determine. Periz raised this issue by posing the question, “What are the actual limits of painting?” This remains an important question, and finding productive methodological ways of answering it, is a task of this argument.

A photo of John Nixon’s Art Projects, c.1983 (Fig.93) is shown. This is an example of how one academically trained art maker independently responded to the Periz question. It is clear that Nixon’s approach has allowed him to remain personally and critically productive within a formal field of contemporary painting. Here, an ongoing and Radical Modernist system of production has been made available for public and critical scrutiny since the beginning of the 1980s. Nixon’s projects are intended as a form of extensive archive, a dialogic and ethical approach to painting where art making is considered a necessary form of work. Nixon’s ethos is tightly bound up with his interest in specific historical and contemporary painting methodologies, styles, materials, functions and associated legacies.

Nixon’s archive of interests is compiled in a complex system of signs and significations that the artist finds engaging, as a contemporary painter. In this case, a range of associated forms of painting practice extend beyond the Appropriation art of the 1980s, and the ‘Banal’ practices of the 1990s; his proposition presents us with a radicalised representational genre, in post 20th century terms. It also directs attention to a significant conceptually premised development in the domain of more recent Australian formal painting dialogues.

Associated with a questioning of the functional limits of painting is an assimilative and developmental process. This methodological and conceptually critical approach is seemingly focused upon a re-precising of Modernist painterly practices, and in that way a legacy in Australian art is regarded as developmental. This equates with a slowly emerging genre of post-formalist painting-based practices displaying an array of useful critical devices and association to a legacy in Australian art, all used to engage with a system of displaced and re-placed signs of Western culture. In short, this is an approach that is far too regularly accessed by Australian artists to be relegated as aberrant phenomena.

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444 Op cit.
447 Op cit.
A movement away from traditional or purist approaches to painting and sculpture began in earnest by the mid-1970s. At that crucial stage, distance was sought from Modernist formalist rhetoric emanating from discourse associated with New York School, and purportedly "advanced" styles of art, as Harry Geldzahler (The Director of MOMA New York) originally phrased it. Locally, this was heralded as "New abstraction" by avant-garde formalist advocates such as Patrick McCaughey; as discussed in Chapter 1. Terry Smith and Elwyn Lynn also briefly engaged Internationalist rhetoric because it represented change, but it was Donald Brook who first doubted the intellectual credentials of American style Formalism. Likewise, thoughtful critics like Daniel Thomas were apprehensive of the arrival of the International style. This ambivalence is made apparent by barely sympathetic commentaries made in the Bulletin, such as, "it was easier to respond to colour, than structure". By the early 1980s all aspects of formalist abstractionist painting were seen as critically diminished and belonging to an evacuated field, yet a tangible distance had been established from earlier stylised Modernist practices within later regional expressions of interest in the field.

Alternative formal painting practices such as those of John Nixon (Fig.165) and Robert MacPherson (Fig.152) appeared at this time. These examples register today as innovative formal approaches by which artists interested in developing formalist aspects of painting engaged in less didactic activities.

In a wider context, this period in Australian art has been characterised by Paul Taylor as "Australian New Wave". Jenny Watson's A Painted Page of Twiggy: (by Paul Avedon) (for Paul Taylor) of 1979 (Fig. 3), in my opinion, epitomises the quality of Australian painting and critical theory that developed in the classic Post-Modern period of Australian art. The critical reorientation now associated with New Wave Painting, was discussed by Taylor who described its chief characteristics of 'irony', 'distance' and 'impurity', as comprising an art of the "second degree", otherwise understood as an art operating at a critical remove.

In the 1980s, that term was useful in establishing a further critical distance from 'purist' traditional ideals, and provided a location for other formal painterly processes such as conceptual minimalist accounts to develop. A theoretical platform of reappraisal provided by writers like Paul Taylor, also assisted these critical forms of painting to be subsequently considered important contributing aspects of contemporary Australian visual art.

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441 Op cit.
443 Op cit.
458 Ibid.
459 Op cit.
 Likewise, Sue Cramer’s revisional essays, such as her ‘Introduction’ written for The Field Now exhibition in 1984, and an essay written for the 1989 Brisbane Institute of Modern Arts’ consideration of the main interests of Sydney’s Inhibodress Gallery of the early 1970s, are insightful informative documents. They highlight the way in which art makers such as Tim Johnson, Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy had diversified into an expanded appreciation of the formal and the self-expressive aspects of contemporary art making. In engaging with critical and evaluative processes, traditional characteristics of painting were not eradicated in the 1970s and 1980s, rather, they were simply utilised when, and if necessary, by these newer kinds of critical art makers.

As outlined, Terry Smith’s ‘The situation Now: Object or Post-Object Art’ essay was produced during a phase when the notion of art itself came under scrutiny and revision in Australian art and when it was expected to conform to what artists such as Parr, Johnson and Kennedy defined as a newer ‘Trans-Art’ demand. Figure 94 shows visitors to a Transavantgarde installation. This was based on a display of art critical texts, c.1972. It is reasonable to state that an obscuring of developmental painting practices occurred in recent Australian art, and in the 1970s the significance of formal painting was taken over by its criticism and with that most if not all forms of related Modernist styles of painting fell into a critically diminished state. The opacity of artistic intent spoken of in Smith’s manifesto, presented the concern of the viewer and the intentionality of the art producer. That critique affected the cogency and the specificity of important aspects of this field. Thus, the problem of how more contemporary painting practices were to be ‘viewed’ registered as a confusing matter. As such, regarding this aspect as a predominant concern encouraged a critical view of formalised practices that made it difficult to recognise subsequent innovation or development in the field.

I believe a “crisis” of Modernist art making, as Ian Burn identified this matter in 1981, has possibly been overestimated, despite the regular appearance of essays where contemporary writers attempted to counter many of the inappropriate concerns. For example, and as stated in the beginning of this Chapter, Michael Wardell curated an exhibition in 2001 titled Phenomenon: New Painting in Australia: 1 for the Art Gallery of NSW. It covered recent innovations by leading Australian practitioners working with newer and developmental models of Australian abstract painting. Despite the quality of Wardell’s careful presentation of finely honed formal ‘differences’ he found occurring in the current field, I have heard little about it as an art critical enterprise.

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*Note: The image reference is not relevant to the content provided.*

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471 Op cit.
472 Op cit.
475 Op cit.
477 Ibid.
Without doubt there remains a lack of appreciation in the public mind concerning the role of formalist abstractionist painting practices in Australian art. The debates of Australian theorists, curators and critics such as Victoria Lynn, Rex Butler, Terry Smith, Ann Stephen, Christopher Dean, Paul McGillick, Eve Sullivan, John Nixon, Ingrid Periz, Keith Broadfoot, Nicholas Tsoutas, Charles Green, Ben Cumow or Sue Cramer, to name only a few who were active throughout the 1990s, remain for all intents and purposes rarefied manuscripts. A number of catalogues produced from large survey exhibitions of Australian painting by major museums and public art galleries during the preceding decades, have fared slightly better as known publications. These include Paul Taylor's Popism held at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1982, Ron Radford's curation of Recent Australian Painting for the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1983, and Robert Lindsay's Australian Art 1960-1986: From Field to Figuration produced for National Gallery of Victoria, in 1986.\footnote{Ibid.}

'Contemporary' Painting: An Object lesson

Concurrent with the debate on how painting should be received is the issue of which works are appropriate to the category 'painting'. At stake, is whether the subject of painting should remain traditionally perceived as a two-dimensional art form, as argued by Fried, or whether it could theatrically accommodate three-dimensional object making, installation, and other 3-D practices?

For instance, with most abstract forms of minimal or reductive art making now associated with a convergence of Late-Modernist painting and sculpture, 'meaning' tends to creep slowly into focus, and the experiential 'objectness' of painting, so underrated by Greenberg,\footnote{Op cit.} also appears to come later in the equation; unless, that is, the painted-works appear nothing like a picture at all, which is more and more often the case since the mid-1960s. In view of this phenomenon, Donald Judd's 1960s significant intervention with painted 'minimal' objects,\footnote{Donald Judd. 'Specific Objects'. Arts Magazine, June, 1965.} highlights a discourse that has greatly assisted in clarifying how meaning is formally intended in an expanding field of post-painterly engagements.

Judd's Untitled c.1963 (Fig.95) is an example of a "specific object."\footnote{Ibid.} Here the very idea of painting has been transposed into an enigmatic state of objectness. These kinds of painted minimal works were first seen in the...
'10' exhibition (Fig 98) at Dwan Gallery in New York c.1966. That exhibition included the abstract painter Ad Reinhardt (Fig.28), who many of the exhibitors claimed provided a context for their own formal, reductive, abstract-style of object-based practices. Like their works, Reinhardt's paintings were based on a refusal to represent, prefiguring the minimalist's aim of making enigmatic forms, often with 'neutral' painted surfaces.

Since the international advent of Conceptualism and Minimalism, the necessary inclusion of object-based works in any expanded definition of 'painting' means that a wide range of formal practices associated with recent contemporary Australian painting need to be understood as participating in what Rosalind Krauss identified as the interwoven subject of painting and sculpture.474 Yurek Wybraniek's Untitled target of 1998 (Fig. 1) is a theoretically informed Critical Post-Conceptual painting-based artwork exhibiting a minimalist and generic aesthetic, and an example of a conceptual abstraction that is as much a painting as it is a sculpture, specific object or, installation.

This work is an instance of contemporary painting-based art that could be located in Krauss's theory of the "expanded field".475 Wybraniek's works can also be described as a sculptural form or installation, if that is the reader's preference.476 This illustrates that when the domain of Australian painting has been opened up to include a wider variety of formal and Critical Post-Conceptual contemporary practices, and when liberated from an outmoded model of comparative dependency, it is found to be inclusive of ongoing affirmative practices.477 On the other hand, it also raises the previously cited claim that painting may have become banal, that it lacks specificity or, suffers from a critical loss of meaning.478 Nevertheless, if the subject of formalist painting is read in "an expanded and deconstructed field",479 then aspects of formal Australian painting during the later 1980s and 1990s must be recognised as meaningful Post- Minimalist and Post-Conceptual undertakings in a contemporary discourse regardless.

Coincident with Minimalism's 'object' lesson for painters is the concurrent use made of the word 'contemporary' in Australian art. This descriptor must now be recognised as a meta-definition variously applied to all aspects of Australian art, including as previously discussed, a picturing of modulated styles of formalist painting, objects and installation practices. Terry Smith's concern, like Ian Burn's over the narrowing of apprehension in Post-Modern terms, directs our attention to a redefining of a Post-Modern "envisioning"480 as Butler and Waterlow have put this matter. The use of the descriptor terminology, 'contemporary', by Smith, as a specifically meaningful captioning for a recent art style of a place,481 denotes the separate conceptions of painting as a subject and then of that subject

475 Ibid.
476 Op cit.
480 Op cit.
having a distinct temporal character, but is perhaps better understood as a complex "structure of intellect" in
current regional activity.

Thus, the conjoined terminology 'contemporary painting' now implies a formal meta-definition that identifies
a significant and highly semantic aspect of recent Australian art. This is a lexical aspect that makes current formal
painting practices different from, but related to, prior cultural framings, such as the Modern and the Post-Modern.
That transition of terminology needs to be critically discussed in Critical Post-Conceptual terms as a further indicator
of the manifestation of a generic aesthetic response or, newer critical enterprise in the field.

The kinds of formal Australian painting discussed in this argument are considered belonging to a genre of
variegated practices that have emerged from an informing consistent legacy, and known aspects of regional and
international traditions. This critical association has, however, remained a somewhat obscure factor over the last 30
years. Acknowledgment of homogenate development in the field of formal Australian painting, similarly, has been
slowly apprehended despite the existence of an explicit sense of regional difference that Richard Dunn and Rex
Butler have argued confounds critical foreclosure on the field. This critical foreclosure in painting, which came
under critical scrutiny in the early 1990s, directly concerns the supposed collapse of meaning in the field, over recent
decades. This is a reference to the critical opacity Terry Smith recently highlighted when warning that the use of
term 'contemporary' had both a "transparent", and an "opaque" meaning.

I claim the emergence of formal painting in Australian art during the late 1980s and early 1990s is codified
through meta-discourse embedded within the broader domain of contemporary Australian art making. If this is so, I
am convinced that an appropriate way of apprehending the significance of the recent appearance of formalist painting
practices in Australian painting exists within a shift in critical focus. In a 1997 essay on the topic of abstraction in the
1950s and the theories of Paul de Man, Chris McAuliffe claimed that a "non-syntagmatic" reading of art-historical
time lines, movements, and/or visual arts discourses is now acceptable. Similarly I believe this is an appropriate
methodological approach for developing this argument, especially when reviewing a more recent legacy of Australian
formal painting. On this topic, the Chilean curator Nelly Richard has commented that Australasian art, like that of the
South America's, was globally participating as a "culture of repetition" and very importantly, as a "culture of
difference".

McAuliffe summarised his opinions on the value of a non-linear historical reading of art when commenting
how aspects of Australian painting might be paradigmatically reappraised as a meaningful array of interdependent
art-historical matters, stating, "the generality of modernist narratives might be replaced by more specific, contextual

465 Op cit. Terry Smith. 'What is Contemporary Art?'
466 Op cit.
467 Chris McAuliffe. 'Proliferation and Redundancy: The Status of Abstraction in the 1950's'. Geometric Painting in Australia 1941-
468 Nelly Richard. 'Cultures of Repetition or Cultures of Difference'. Leon Perossian (Curator). The 5th Biennale of Sydney exhibition
catalogue. Art Gallery of NSW. Sydney, 1985
moments”.\(^{490}\) Similarly, I have concluded that reliance upon pre-existing limiting framings whilst not disregarded, should be avoided as a mainstay of a research methodology. In short, there are valid reasons for reiterating established discourses, just as there is room for theorisation in supposedly peripheral discourses on associated specific contextual moments.

A recent artist theorising on the critical influences expressed during the 1990s, by producing iconic installations such as *Sconce and Phantasmagorical Looking Glass* c.1998 (Fig. 97), is Alexander Knox. This is a discursive, multifaceted art, constructed and conceptually achieved on the meta-topic of representation itself. Knox was working out of the Melbourne art space First Floor at the time, a critical art space not unlike Artspace in Sydney, IMA in Brisbane, PICA in Perth, and the EAF in Adelaide. These are important places where critical approaches to art making and its criticism have been consistently realised during the 1990s, and where Nicole Tomlinson, in writing about a group of art makers from First Floor Gallery, claims the notion of “conceptual craftsmanship”\(^{490}\) was worked through. The works of Kate Ellis, Alex Pittendrigh, Andrea Tu, Eliza Hutchinson, Kate Benyon, Martin Corompt, Julia Gorman, Sean Meilak, Lyndal Walker and David Rosetzky all attest to that claim.

Knox’s work remains of interest here because of a clear semblance to Michelangelo Pistoletto’s conceptually achieved *Lo Specchio*, c.1974 (Fig. 98). Knox’s mirror raised a similar issue, of a complex conceptual shifting of representational values, and how these are functionally apprehended as art. This is the same topic Ian Burn raised in his 1993 appraisal of Pistoletto’s *Arte Povera*\(^{491}\) work, in the *Looking at Seeing and Reading* catalogue essay.\(^{492}\) Burn stated, “the representation of the mirror is less mirror-like than the surface it is (sic) depicted, but is positioned on the real mirror to encourage viewers to see themselves reflected in the re-presented mirror. Representation thus merges with reflections”.\(^{493}\) Again, the conceptual and intellectual convolutions discussed earlier, concerning reappraised representational values of the 1970s, reappear as relevant contemporary concerns in Knox’s co-ordinate, and Critical Post-Conceptual discourse of the mid to late-1990s.

The kind of approach evident in Figures 1 and 97, allows a deep vein in Critical Post-Conceptual art making to be considered. Knox’s style of working with known representational conventions in a discursive manner,\(^{494}\) is not

\(^{490}\) Op cit. Footnote 13.


\(^{494}\) Ibid.

\(^{494}\) Op cit. Terry Smith. ‘What is Contemporary Art?’
unlike Wybraniek's constructive concept; in that neither of these critical works are actually paintings per se. However, they are both embedded in the field of painting through a developmental 're-presentation' of representational image structures, and the specific reorientation of the viewer's role within an expanded field of formal approaches to painting-based works of art. The representational transparency and critical opacity apparent in Knox and Wybraniek's object-works occurs within the zone of the 'contemporary', as Terry Smith suggests. For these reasons, I consider Pistoletto's Lo Specchio (Fig.98) an informing Conceptual art-historical work, with Knox and Wybraniek's later works exhibiting Critical Post-Conceptual attributes that manifested during the 1980s and 1990s as 'Contemporary'.

The Use of Lost Language

Another aspect of Australian art making that has grown in significance in recent decades centres on a re-occupation of known styles of art. The matter of Revisionism was touched upon earlier in the chapter when discussing Carolyn Barnes' critique of the appearance of abstractionist, monochromatic, non-objective and geometric painting styles that emerged in the late 1980s in Melbourne. The tone of Barnes' essay was affirmative, and appears to have supported the idea that sites of artistic abandonment are useful. Barnes argued that these are productive locations for reoccupation by contemporary art makers, and I concur with her 1988 argument that these art-historical sites are valuable in terms of the art-critical information they offer.

However, in my opinion, art makers interested in this approach should also be able to produce a cogent discursive account on a personal and developmental level, if the procedure is to have any newer meaning for others to apprehend beyond replay, or 'Banal' revisionism. As outlined previously, the Arte Povera artist Pistoletto, likely got his ideas from Surrealist's such as Salvador Dali or Rene Magritte. Knox possibly defined his ideas from the Arte Povera Movement and from Conceptual artists of the 1970s such as Ian Burn (Fig.135), yet they managed a cogent, critical, and interdependent discourse in the process.

The idea of a recovery of lost language has presented Australian art makers with useful material to assimilate as information; for instance, what is known about art internationally. That claim relates to a rational criticism of 'dependency' Terry Smith outlined in 1974 as, "The Provincialism Problem". Moreover, adopting a procedural approach makes sense, especially when the distancing of Australian art makers from centres of art is taken into account. The idea that available art discourse can be useful in informing another's practice has been

495 Op cit. Carolyn Barnes. 'Arts Review'.
illustrated in Dick Watkins’ oeuvre. An example of this claim occurred within the production of Watkins’ formal works. Figure 99 shows Watkins standing in front of one his discursive paintings, from 1967.

If a manipulation of art languages by contemporary art makers can be described as a type of regional critical application, then locating this phenomenon in recent Australian art provides a way of further understanding the complex nature of more recent formal Australian painting practices. The function of this interdependent application allows a pre-inscription to take place. For example, a generic approach to art-historical referencing that occurs in Watkins oeuvre, has led to a unique presentation of readable (familial) motifs in his practice. Known or lost art-languages are redefined in this process as a generic language form underpinning a specific and contemporaneous meta-expression.

The “act of prelude” as the French ‘Situationist’ and anarchist Guy Debord wrote, is a similar engagement with semantic processes, with the repetitious and prescriptive character associated with a literary idea of expression, and of it being pre-inscribed. Roland Barthes’ philosophical considerations in *Empire of Signs*, establishes a similar claim that discourse pre-figures expression. Expression, then, is seen to relate to the Debord’s notion of “Detournement.” The claim is, that if languages are learned in advance of expression, expression must, therefore, be an outpouring of language. Ergo, it is openly suggested that all forms of expression are pre-scripted. This is not a problem when acknowledged, and then developed as an informing aspect of a discourse or meta-expression. In that model plagiarism needs to be carefully avoided.

The previous section provided a background to the debate on the use of the term ‘contemporary’. By the 1990s the term ‘contemporary’ had become a loose convention, and this section follows the shift from a so-called “problematic practice” to the establishment of a ‘contemporary’ ideal where the presentation of enigmatic, abstract and/or deeply referential conceptual concepts in current art making can be understood as a de rigueur characteristic of being ‘contemporary’. The productive role of the language of abstraction in recent formal Australian painting is an example of that claim, illustrating that a journey has been undertaken in recent decades, from the specific into the contemporaneously generic in Australian art. Smith’s recent suggestions that aspects of Australian art, particularly innovative forms of painting, had become institutionally complicit by the 1990s further illustrates that a shift occurred in recent decades, when a variety of approaches were put into practice through recovered, therefore, newer

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409 Op cit. Refer to *Semiotics of Art.* Please note - Saussure defined semiotics as semiology, Buher called it sematology, and Pierce semiotics.


411 Op cit.


413 Op cit.

"languages of art". Just as Smith questioned the looseness of the term 'contemporary', Burn attempted to counter the inherent institutionalisation of what was fast becoming an academically privileged model for 'contemporaneousness', with his 1990s presentation of the Value Added Landscape series (Fig. 100).

That work featured small landscape paintings made by amateur painters Burn collected from 'recycling' shops or roadsides where they had been disregarded. Burn had a variety of theoretical texts overlaid onto these amateur Australian landscapes, describing that as a collaborative project. In a Critical Post-Conceptual modelling, Burn attempted to usurp the sense of privilege that much Post-Modern art has carried over from the Modernist era. By presenting the popular language of the amateur (landscapes) to the institution, he attempted to usurp the value judgements institutions are driven to make. Furthermore, in referencing a longstanding interest in the 'Gum Tree School' of painting in the making of these collaborative works, Burn underlined the 'real' popularity of the landscape tradition with the Australian public. In this critical fashion, a dependent model is not rejected in favour of an interdependent response, but it is shown to have been transformed and invigorated.

The recovery and development of a lost language in art making was emphasised by Rex Butler in the early 1990s when commenting on new directions in Australian painting. Noting, "art did not end with flat two dimensional colour-field painting, minimalism, conceptual art, etc in the 1960s, as there is always an end to be remarked upon". It is the 'banal' practice, characterised by Butler's interest that underpins much of the transition of formal Australian painting into a more generic or, complex referential mode during the 1980s and 1990s. This is a relevant aspect that informs the diversity found in recent Australian painting, and an approach to the production of a different art that Burn seminally championed.

The process of utilising art-historical information, as Burn did, has been a consistent form of iconoclasm in the Australian visual arts. As stated, Dick Watkins illustrated this point with his dissimilative "in the manner of so and so" paintings made from the mid-1960s (Fig. 99), and that may be understood as a local avant-garde aesthetic. This methodological convention concerns the renewability of discourse. The revival of disregarded language and abandoned Modernist sites is further illustrated in Brad Buckley's minimal painting installation from 1995, Those Unspoken Tragedies, and that Slashed Eye (Fig. 101).

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507 Ibid.
508 Op cit.
It is the title of Buckley’s work that signals to the viewer a contemporary artist’s re-occupation and elaboration on specific ideas, in this instance echoing the critical transgressive discourse of George Bataille. Buckley’s contemporary art is referentially inclusive of Surrealist theory, and extension of Modernist and formalist painting practices, Installation Art, and a characteristic Post-Modern distancing from those traditions as a transgressive position. The approach he employs, however, makes the act of formalist painting into an ironic yet personal visual enactment of relational concerns.

This form of painterly installation practice, occurring within the Critical Post-Conceptual field, is engaging because it is an art that involves both the viewer’s and the author’s ability to negotiate complex systems. This work finds its place in current discourse by retracing traditions and legacies. In making commentary and repositioning key elements, Buckley’s art provides an affirmative response to art-historical concerns within a present day context.

In a similar vein, Robert McPherson has utilised lost and current languages of art in his systematic exploration of monochromatic or, ‘process’ works, undertaken since 1974 (Fig.102). These are reminiscent of the earlier and formally achieved auto lacquer object-works produced by Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden in the mid 1960s (Fig 133). In this fashion, MacPherson makes clear reference to both Australian and international art influences.

The growth of specific meta-dialogues in Australian art is in that sense, acknowledged as a living process and one that many Australian art makers have found compelling. This last claim is confirmed by the prefiguring actions of experimental artists such as Ian Burn, Janet Dawson, Nigel Lendon, Alan Oldfield, Rollin Schlicht, Wendy Paramor, Robert McPherson, and John Nixon. These important seminal and divergent contemporary Australian art makers had, by the late 1970s, already engaged post-formalist painting-based practices and developed personalised dialogues within interactive sign systems.

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Negation, Appropriation, Citation

The methodology of re-presenting ideas, styles and specific forms of works, is read here as a defining working model of critical concerns which, as claimed, has engaged many recent Australian art makers. It is a methodology allowing a

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511 Ibid. As above, this same passage of Bois opens out a discourse on what informe implies. This basically states that forms of art or form itself is altered to suit a range of discourses.
reasonably homogenous field of contemporary painting-based practices to proceed, and importantly to participate in
broader debates concerning Australian art during the early 1990s. One such debate concerns the principle of
‘negation’. This is a residual factor of Modernist art making that Michael Fried,513 and later Yve-Alain Bois,514
identified as a primary mechanism operating within most aspects of Modernist painting.

The concept of ‘negation’ is understood as a reductive drive. For instance, this can be associated with a
rejection of the image found in a plethora of Modernist styles of painting, and that critique has existed as a cogent
discourse in recent Australian art.515 Representational negation has been underlined, for example, in the activities of
John Nixon, who has defined his practice since the 1980s as a radical form of Modernism. The negation of painting
altogether is a separate Post-Modern concern. That meta-critique belongs to the rhetoric of the theoretical Post-
Modern era, and Sherrie Levine’s Not Paintings are recent international examples of painterly works that Rex Butler
claims fit a critical definition.516 That fundamentally theory-driven argument about the demise of traditional
representational concerns has, however, registered as a powerful and informing critical aspect of recent Australian
art. It raises the circuitous Post-Modern issue of whether it is still possible to make art, as Arthur C. Danto queried in
his reading of a newer tendency in, After the End of Art.517 Overall, this debate encompasses a shifting of positions
relative to rigidifying cultural understandings concerning the very idea of contemporary painting, and any ongoing
theoretically influenced artistic productions further generated from the de-construction of the representational act.

The fact that many Australian art makers have attempted to work through this dilemma in recent art-
historical terms is an achievement that I believe has been made possible by a credible legacy of regional artists.
Robert MacPherson, waiting to be discussed in detail in Chapter 6, developed a responsive abstract style of art
making by working through problems associated with the negation of representation, after the collapse of Modernism.
There are in fact many committed Australian painters dating back to the 1960s who have responded to the ‘negation’
implicit in Modernist discourse, such as Janet Dawson, Ian Burn, Alan Oldfield and Wendy Paramor. And more
recently, A.D.S. Donaldson, Rose Nolan, Gary Wilson, Kerrie Poliness, Christopher Dean, Kyle Jenkins, Elizabeth
Pulie and Stephen Bram. Within this active local painterly legacy, there has been considerable development of
alternative practices that have either dealt with formalism and a variety of forms of representational negation, or have
chosen to ignore this issue by defining their interests as being informal or, quite reasonably, as more particularised.

The ‘negation’ of painting needs to be discussed here because it can operate as a recensive or limiting
aspect of late 20th century art criticism, an aspect especially noticeable in the recent art movement Appropriation.518
That movement in art occurred internationally during the 1980s. With it came a renewal of expressionistic painting

516 Op cit. Rex Butler. ‘Banal Art’.
styles popularised in Australia by painters such as Peter Booth (Fig.23), Vicki Vavaressos, Davida Allen and Juan Davila. Rex Butler has written a comprehensive book on this subject entitled, *What Is Appropriation*.

Significantly, the appropriation of ideas, styles or theoretical positions began to occur in a much more complex fashion in the early 1990s, when I believe the more subtle act of citation emerged as a permissible form of criticality in Australian art, and A.D.S. Donaldson’s *Banal* painting series is again relevant (Fig.193). In the 1990 Abstraction catalogue essay Victoria Lynn discussed these works in terms of the failure of abstractionist styles of painting to communicate, therefore confirming the negation implicit in previous Modernist forms was still apparent in more recent, reminiscent works. This is possibly because Donaldson claimed that he was attempting to create "banal paintings" in the field of abstraction. Lynn interpreted what Donaldson’s work implied by stating in the accompanying essay, “he self-consciously denies the authentic spiritual, psychological and emotional connotations of gestural abstraction.” She further argued however that, “such intentions are perhaps belied by the works themselves”, and with that, “the problem of intention of the artist becomes the primary focus and the intellectual dilemma of the works". Lynn concluded, “this takes us back to the dialectic between the artist’s will to communicate, and ‘abstraction’s’ will to silence.”

With these comments I feel Lynn was emphasising that Donaldson was not attempting to negate representation as such, rather to usurp an ironic reading of abstract painting. What complicated Donaldson’s ‘banal’ approach was the fact that meaning is generally difficult to perceive in the production of any purely abstract work; because the iconic language is historically understood as reductive. As a consequence, deriving the meaning of a contemporary abstract art can entail a separate and equally abstract task for the viewer; because a vocabulary of artistic signatures must be first apprehended in newer citational forms of abstraction. That is, an artist may have made use of another’s style as a debatable form of cliché or as a homage etc. within a meta-expression.

That problem is exacerbated when an artist is in fact visually expressing discursive ideas on top of a grounding of a necessary citation. However, out of this conundrum, the idea of negation is made redundant regardless of concerns, because late-20th century abstraction is an engagement and affirmation of representation despite conflicting appearances to the contrary. The contemporary abstract style painting of Angela Brennan (Fig.103) is an example of a citational painterly approach mentioned, and of what is implied in this discussion on the up-rated use of Appropriation to garner new meaning in a more recent Australian art.

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519 ibid. Rex Butler.
520 Op cit.
522 ibid.
523 ibid.
524 ibid.
525 ibid.

Fig. 103 Angela Brennan. *Being and Jasper John’s*, 2000.
In catalogue notes produced in 2000, Patrick Hutchings points out the idea of intuition is relied upon by Brennan as a technique. Further, an understanding of what it means to be contemporarily creative for Brennan is in line with Kant’s notion of a “free play of the cognitive faculties”. I would query this formal work. For example, Brennan’s painting is meaningful when discussed in terms of recovered language and its manipulation, but less so when considering Romanticist notions of the mystery of existence or, any conscious rejection of narrative imagery. Concerning the ‘lost’ language found in Brennan’s work (Fig.103), Hutchings suggests that we are “tempted to put something into words”. I would claim that Brennan’s “will to communicate” provides a ‘picturing’ of concerns that registers as a critical idea presented as a cipher. Here Debord’s 1960s theoretical notion of Déroulement operates beneath a generic aesthetic ‘picturing’ of known 20th century art styles. Brennan’s constructive process does inclusively summon a range of dialogues, yet her approach mostly concerns the same condition of ambivalence arising out the repetition of so many prior ideations that had previously concerned Lynn.

In short, it is appropriation in art and not ‘negation’ that is the art-historical subject matter that appears to be a central representational concern of Brennan’s work, and many others. Her Being and Jasper Johns, of 2000 (Fig.103) further alerts us to a concern expressed by James Elkins from Chicago, who claims there is a problem associated with an area of repetitious artistic productions, or banal replay. Elkins’s has noted that we now find pictures “puzzling” and “hard to define”. However, as a viewer of Brennan’s work, I do not find these works puzzling or hard to define, nor are we likely to be denied the pleasure of being “tempted to put something into words”. In considering the idea presented in Brennan’s painting, it would be more reliable to note that her paintings typify a Post-Modem image structure discussed by Butler, Burn and Waterlow. Brennan uses meta-language as a formal device that generates a generic ‘re-picturing’ of Modernist abstract styles of art, and it is that one aspect I find meaningfully discursive. Thus, Brennan’s and A.D.S. Donaldson’s current repositioning of known art-historical information is located in a secondary “envisioning”, within a generic aesthetic field, whereby the principle of ‘negation’ of representation is neutralised.

As previously outlined, Ian Burn made a series of highly referential painting-based works in the early 1990s. These operated in a reversal of how Appropriation in art generally works. As mentioned, Burn’s presentation of the Value Added Landscape series (Fig.100), provided a familiar understanding of art-historical concerns made into a meaningful discourse on the nature of amateur productions of painting, a discourse that effectively critiqued institutional judgements on what validates art as ‘contemporary’. This series was especially set up for a desired

527 Ibid.
528 Op cit. Victoria Lynn.
531 Ibid.
532 Op cit.
viewing of the works, and in Burn's presentation the appropriation of 'lost' or discarded language openly acknowledges a level of pre-scription as an overt concern of the work. The point is there is more to the work than banal replay.

In a critical discussion of representational issues surrounding a current definition of indigenous art, Joan Kerr noted an aspect of the way appropriation of language works in Australian art. In 'Colonial Quotations: Reinventing the Original', Kerr suggests that the literal conversion and subsequent abstraction of known images into contemporaneous pictures is problematic, but also predictable. Kerr writes, "for an artist to copy an image with the aim of having the original recognised as an essential part of the meaning of the new work is hardly a Post-modern invention; it was the inevitable outcome of the historical awareness which accompanied European modernity." Kerr's criticism of revisionist acts of appropriation in Australian art is a criticism of the ways in which Australian art makers have made use of historical information in the production of a fundamentally citational art.

From that it can be concluded that negation has not really been a serious or conscious critical concern of formal Australian painters, even when making highly reductive works associated with remaineder aspects of the regional Modernist enterprise discussed in chapter 1.

With these various issues in mind, despite the outcome of various experimentation, it is reasonable to claim there is a link between the 'negation' of Modernist representation, and the advent of Appropriation in Post-Modern terms, yet that must be understood as a sub-issue for a range of recent formalist Australian art makers interested in painting and associated citational practices in recent decades.

The last section illustrated the emergence of genuine complexity in the Australian visual arts, and that leads into a discourse on the 'other'. This discourse concerns vital aspects of Australian art during the last four decades. These 'other voices', as Jacques Derrida once put it, have proffered significant ideas dramatically influencing the broader outcomes and directions of culture at large. This important aspect is also observable in recent Australian art.

As claimed, the highly critiqued idea of contemporary painting exists as a meta-topic within a broad domain of current art-critical discourse, and yet it also exists as an informing notion that is understood by individuals engaged in expressing their personally meaningful practices. That occurs, as Ian Burn asserts, in the field of individual

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537 Ibid.
perceptual experience. However, although contemporary Australian painting is a field dominated by preconditions, it is also understood as a location occupied by highly mobile art forms.

For instance, the positive affect that Feminist\textsuperscript{540}, \textit{Queer},\textsuperscript{541} and 'other' sub-cultural groups,\textsuperscript{542} and Australian indigenous\textsuperscript{543} art makers have had on recent regional and international discourses on painting needs to be acknowledged.\textsuperscript{544} Despite occasional references to women or indigenous artists in the Australian press and related journals, there was little mention of any 'other voices' in the mainstream of Australian cultural concerns until the 1970s. As a result of a considerable and longstanding marginalisation the needs or desires of Australia's 'other' artists have been slow to be recognised.\textsuperscript{545}

For instance, the indigenous art phenomenon now sweeping across the world stage was not acknowledged in mainstream Australian discourse until the 1980s. Works such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye's \textit{Untitled} c.1995 (Fig.104), now have a profound effect on the direction of recent Australia painting, with many Australian artists such as Tony Tuckson and Tim Johnson, acknowledging their indebtedness to indigenous cultures. The effect of this major aspect of contemporary Australian art produced by so many important indigenous artists has meant that considerable pressure has been placed upon the dominance of mainstream tendencies in the Australasian visual arts.\textsuperscript{546}

Likewise, as Janine Bourke's book \textit{Field of Vision} illustrates, women in general have presented many aspects of cultural difference in recent Australian art-historical terms.\textsuperscript{547} In the case of Francis Budden, this has been achieved through the use of 'core' imagery.\textsuperscript{548} Budden's \textit{Soft Aggression Centre Fold} c.1976 (Fig.105) is an example of an Australian feminist voice engaged, like Vivienne Binns and many others, in what the historian Ann Stephen describes as "the de-neutralisation of the mainstream" of Australian culture.\textsuperscript{549}

Budden's work highlights a relationship between the familiar world of craft with its focus on making, and the generation of explicit narrative (representational) concerns. Women's art is very grounded in that respect, and an important critical aspect to be noted is that only in recent times has the idea of craft become equally understood.

\textsuperscript{540} Op cit. Janine Bourke.

\textsuperscript{541} Michael Warner (Ed). \textit{Fear of a Queer Planet}. University of Minnesota Press. USA, 1993.


\textsuperscript{545} A reference text on this matter is provided by Gidson and Ross. \textit{South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia}. Indiana University Press. Bloomington, 1992.


\textsuperscript{547} Op cit.

\textsuperscript{548} Vivienne Binns and Jenny Barwell. 'The Development of a Political View'. \textit{Lip}, 1978-79.

Beyond that of an applied art. This facet of cultural production belies a form of artistic expression that has required an expansion of terms of reference. An example of praxis in this 'contemporary' form of production comes from the ceramicist Susan O'Neill. She adopted a formalist aesthetic within the production of Vases made throughout the late 1990s (Fig. 106).

In 1979, Frank Watters Gallery in Sydney mounted an exhibition entitled the *Doyles Show*. Produced in association with the Crafts Board and with the assistance of the new Australia Council, this exhibition presented the art of women's needlework and offered a clear example of how a growing range of alternative understandings had merged into a powerful and insightful argument against accepted 'norms' located in the visual arts. The *Doyles Show* was art-critical, and illustrated a significant aspect of Australian art making described as domestic handiwork produced within the general community. This turned out to be an important, yet, repressed area of representational art. In the process of recontextualising the *Doyles* works, the lives and particular interests of the overlooked Australian women who had made them, were highlighted.

In another vein, Clarice Beckett's early *Beaumaris Foreshore* (Fig. 107) is an important Australian landscape inspired by the 'Tonal Realism' theory of Max Meldrum. Beckett and Meldrum are further examples of overlooked Australian art makers whom many find inspirational today. As a consequence of the activity of recovering what is known of the many 'others' in Australian art, there now exists a clearer understanding of what the regional language of painting can be about, and how fundamental principles can be usefully re-posed into socialised and meaningful art forms. In many ways it has been the activity of women, and of other marginalised groups such as the Gay and Indigenous communities in "cultures of difference", as Nelly Richard put it, that have redirected Australian painting from the terminus of Greenbergian Formalism.

This last claim is supported by what Harmony Hammond had to say in 1977, when writing about the language used by Australian women in the making of art, and the development of craft issues. She stated, "much of women's past creativity, as well as the art by women of non-Western cultures, has been abstract. I am thinking of the incredible baskets, pottery, quilts, Afghans, lace and needlework women have created." Similarly, Rachael Maine

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552 Op cit.
summed up issues of difference inherent in the *Doyley Show* by stating, "since men are not now or seldom have been educated in the complex language of needlework symbology, any message transmitted in a textile medium was almost completely safe from falling into the wrong hands. We therefore find stunningly honest, and forthright statements in needlework, delivered to us from across time, space and cultural barriers, on every subject from politics to sex".555

This differentiation leads into an associated topic of why it is many Australian artists since the 1960s have shed away from defining themselves as painters. One aspect of that coolness or, critical distancing from a defining art-historical position, has generally occurred in Australian artistic circles because of an accumulation of negative understandings. In particular, a serious concern is often based on the historical dominance men have exerted in the field. For instance, the implications of retrograde formalist art-language, originally provided by theorists like Greenberg and later Fried, for the critical viability of the "subject of painting"556 led directly to a diminishing of credible approaches in the field in the 1970s and early 1980s.557 However, a redressing of the role of the ‘other’ in Australian society over recent decades has done much to retrieve the usefulness and purposefulness of painting as a credible and integrated social form of making art by either women or men.

Invention: Pictorial Free Play

In the 1980s, Paul Taylor, the Australian critic and editor in chief of *Art & Text* magazine announced that the art world had got to a point where "anything goes".558 With that Post-Pop decree, remaindered Modernist painting styles were read as available for further critical discourse. The convention of Modernist painting was perceived as a representational form of expression truly in crisis, therefore, suitably available for modification.559 However, the dilemma was further underlined when a spectacular collapse of more recent expressive styles of painting was repeated, both in an Australian and international context.560 Jenny Watson’s *A Painted Page 1: (by Paul Avedon) (for Paul Taylor)*, c.1979 (Fig.3) is situated in this argument as a successful work in the midst of a plethora of debates and growing confusions about the appropriate direction in contemporary Australian art at that time.

In Watson’s painting (Fig.3), an ensemble of ideas is presented, and the issues and concerns of the period are mapped out. Watson makes reference to the significance of Internationalism in art, and the fashion-based

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pictorial content is concerned with the local impact of American culture. The painting shows a sensibility associated with Pop-Art culture, whilst Watson simultaneously mounts a critique of the perceived obsolescence of formalism and abstraction in refreshed cosmopolitan terms. In short, this work illustrates inventiveness and a clever use of a free play of pictorial associations. This is seen as an informal approach in the manipulation of content that characterises a critical semi-abstractionist painting tendency of the 1980s. The kind of image structure or, ensemble of available concerns employed by Watson, represents a co-ordinate approach to painting that distanced itself from the literalism associated with more reductive and less ironic forms of Formalist painting.

In Australia in the later 1970s and early 1980s, the formal act of painting was caught in a destabilised state of affairs, and Watson’s regional Post-Popish work is representative of the appearance of a new generation engaging in a critique of the appropriateness and apparent finality of the project of Western painting in Post Colonial terms. Likewise, Paul Taylor’s 1980s Post-Modern critique allowed art makers like Watson to be openly critical of aspects of Modernist painting in a productive way, whilst engaged with a newer stylisation of the same on their own terms. That repetitiousness or, critical circularity based upon an inventive re-contextualising of styles and influences, established the appearance of an informal style of pictorial ‘free-play’ productive within the field of recent formal Australian painting.

Watson’s oeuvre is presented as an “informal” stylisation, because of the way the ’banal’ descriptions of domesticity or suburbia are combined with an expressive style of painting, utilising childlike imagery. However, Watson manages the concept of her personal difference as part of a formal critical expression, while an adherence to the tradition of painting in her art making further illustrates a co-ordination of broader relevant concerns. That complex idea, of a formally achieved expression fundamentally appearing as an informal style of art, falls into alignment with a newer international contemporary style that engaged the task of credibly managing an artistic production at the end of the 20th century. Piero Manzoni (Fig.121) and Jenny Watson (Fig.3) have independently illustrated, in different time frames, that it is possible to critique painterly norms whilst producing rational and meaningful formal work in the field.

Locating Critical Post-Conceptual Painting

It is now appropriate to briefly address what I consider to be three Critical and Post-Conceptual Australian painting styles. Generally speaking, and as this discussion has attempted to ground, what is produced are often highly deliberated art works that have manifest out of an extended dialogue concerning the development of the historical

562 Op cit.
language of Modernism, and that of abstractionism within the more recent history of Australian painting. For example, Figure 108 shows two sets of formally achieved painting-based works, Scale to Rule and Black and White Vertical Strokes. These 1976 works by Robert MacPherson are seminal examples of the kind of Australian art I will discuss in Chapter 6. They are formally conceived, yet, expressionistically achieved works, produced as a co-ordinated critical response to concerns surrounding the Australian regional production of Formalist painting, after Modernism.  

MacPherson's art is useful as a seminal illustration of what a critical and Post-Conceptual painting practice implies, just as the terminology 'Post-conceptual' painting noted by Terry Smith, remains usefully descriptive. Most of the conceptually achieved abstractionist works I have discussed have been produced either before or after the appearance of what Tony Codrington outlined as, the international Conceptual Art movement, or, were not involved directly. Generally speaking, the kind of art-critical work discussed in 'Painting the Object' have been influenced by that movement in some way, therefore, the use of the little-known term Critical Post-Conceptual painting technically seeks to fill a discursive gap in the field.

The two sets of works shown in Fig. 108 exemplify a consolidation of a recent informed approach to the making of formal Australian paintings. It is a conceptually underlined approach that could only have come about locally after the British and American influences or discourses concerned with an Internationalisation of Formalist painting practices discussed in Chapter 1 and 2 abated. MacPherson's early discursive formal works also mark a point in Australian painting where the personal development of a formal approach to the subject of painting became a significant contemporary concern within a variety of art makers' practices.

The works shown in Figure 108 are inclusive of a mixture of late Modernist and Conceptual Art ideas. This involved an engagement with the expression of formal and theoretically inspired painting processes, and the revival of expressiveness and meaning MacPherson found within a lost language. A conflation consistent with Terry Smith's description of 'contemporary' painting has, in MacPherson's case (Fig. 108), emphasised a relationship between hand and body movements, providing both a conceptual and phenomenologically prone reading of the limitations of Greenbergian Formalism. At the same time MacPherson regenerates the formalist language of Modernist painting into a discursive aspect of recent Australian art. In short, Figure 108 shows a harmonious or, co-ordinate local

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566 Ibid.
569 Op cit. Terry Smith. 'What is Contemporary Art?'
570 Op cit. Clement Greenberg. 'Modernist Painting'.
expression of recent painterly concerns and, importantly, of what could still be done with painting in a regional environ as a critical form of artistic expression, after the international demise of Formalist painting.\textsuperscript{571}

Because of MacPherson's significant influence in recent Australian art, it is worth mentioning his interest with the concrete and narrative value of text. This claim implies that ancillary concerns, such as the subject of reverie found in works like Mayfair 56 Paintings for GW and Reno Castelli (Fig.162), operate as enigmatic conceptual narratives informing or working to key an overall reception of the paintings. In short, MacPherson uses text in conjunction with his images as a conceptual tool or mechanism that 'abstractly' affects the way his style may be then freely interpreted by the viewer. This process is called the viewers fabulation.

In this regard, Gail Hastings' \textit{To Make a Work of Thoughtful Art} c.1995 (Fig.109) is also relevant. Here, specific traditions and legacies are approached in a similar revision of art-historical process, allowing the art maker to engage in a critically discursive formal level with known Formalist painting concerns. This is a specific contemporary art about the ongoing interest of Australasian art makers in the "subject of painting".\textsuperscript{572} It is, however, a highly socialised process that needs be understood by others in order to be acceptable as a critically discursive engagement, otherwise the process of fabulation may revert into opacity.

However, Hastings' painted object work from 1995, illustrates a backdrop of available ideas generated in various Modern art episodes remaindered from the history of painting and sculpture. The idea of tradition or legacy in a current context is not necessarily diminished by being critically referenced in recent formal Australian art. In Hastings' expression the idea of tradition or legacy is furthered by its criticism, development, and repetition, within a contemporary practice: As a readable expression or meta-dialogue.

Kyle Jenkins' \textit{Red Constructive Painting} c.2001 (Fig.34) is a third and later example of an Australian production of Critical Post-Conceptual work that I curated into an exhibition in 2001.\textsuperscript{573} Jenkins' conceptual abstractionist approach is different from that of MacPherson's reverie and Hastings art-historical pointedness, in that he harbours a particular interest in various architectural discourses, which figure as inherent narratives in his formal expression. However, Jenkins similarly utilises a constructed approach to making works that exhibit an informed awareness of an International art style, the history of architecture, painting and sculpture, and various informing critical discourses at -

\textsuperscript{571} Michael Fried. \textit{Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot}. Berkeley University Press. California, 1980.

\textsuperscript{572} Op cit.

\textsuperscript{573} Appendix A.
the same time. He combines known Minimalist, Conceptual and Formalist painting styles with an expanded picturing of painting and the remaindered language of abstraction, with architectural concerns. This is achieved in object-works generated from design plans. Here, another personalised yet readable meta-dialogue emerges concerning the conceptual premise and specific objectness of the final work, as 'painted object'.

A relationship exists between MacPherson's formal bodily exercises (Fig.108), Hastings' art-historical and perceptually oriented installations (Fig.109) and Jenkins' architectonic painting/installation works (Fig.110). As in Nixon's experimental workshops (Fig.166), there is an emphasis firmly placed on innovative processes. The specific interests of these academically trained art makers are shown in their individual choice of procedures and techniques, amounting to a radical, constructive, post-conceptual, and highly critical methodological approach embracing the notion of invention in their craft. This summation implies that the development of formal invention in their respective practices is seen to supersede values previously placed on creative or overtly reflexive expression.

Formal Painting: An Interactive Tradition

The aim of this last orienting Chapter of Part 1 has been to illustrate the idea that an innovative genre of abstract painting practices can be accounted for in recent Australian art. This claim is affirmed by the theoretical premise that acknowledges the importance of legacy and the development of artistic discreteness, or the variegation within contemporary practices of formal and informal methodological approaches after Modernism. This Critical Post-Conceptual aspect of contemporary regional (Australasian) painting operates without collapsing an art maker's discrete ideas into an over predicted "Post-modern 'envisioning'. spoken of by Burn and Butler. Further, a central claim made here is that these expanded expressions of 'painting', amount to a developmental genre of painting-based activity made manifest in the oeuvres of a wide range of Australian art makers, theorists and their critics.

Thus, reconsidering how we are to continue 'reading' or 'seeing' paintings like those presented in Figures 86, 87 and 88 remains an issue of cogency in a field that is seemingly always placed at stake. Richard Dunn, in his exhibition curated for Sherman's Gallery in Sydney in 1996, entitled Looking at Seeing and Dreaming, made clear reference to Ian Burn's earlier exhibition entitled Looking at Seeing and Reading. In Dunn's catalogue essay of 1996 it was argued that the kinds of perceptual concerns that motivated the series of exhibitions discussed in the

574 Op cit.
575 Christopher Dean, 'Vernon Trowleeke: Come and See the Real Thing', Lives of the Artists, No.1, August, 2002.
578 Op cit.
opening of this Chapter, beginning with Victoria Lynn’s Abstraction at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1990, could be unravelled further, and that the ways of ‘seeing art’ are, in fact, vastly complex culturally inscribed mechanisms. For that reason it remains difficult to speculate how these diverse mechanisms that have driven recent theoretical arguments concerning contemporary Australian art will subsequently unfold.

What can be discussed is the subject of Richard Dunn’s discursive essay of 1996, which invoked an acknowledgement of Paul Taylor’s reference in the 1980s to a ‘second degree’ or, an ironic distancing from Modernist ‘purist’ forms of expression. Dunn stated, “the functional marriage of aspects of Pop Art, through references to the familiar and the ‘classical’ language of ‘Minimalism’ and ‘Post-Minimalism’ in formal clarity, are what account for the absence of a Greenbergian reading of structural form, characteristic of ‘the classical’ in the work of these younger artists”. Dunn further stated, “It is precisely this zone, of the relative clarity of subject/meaning, that a closure of ‘reading’ or of ‘simple meaning’ is thwarted”. In that statement Dunn illustrated a difference in artistic and theoretical discourse that had been established in Australian art by the late 1990s, where an affirmative consideration was expressed within formal painting-based practices responsive to the advent of minimalism, as a current discourse. A Post-Minimalist discourse that is rightly inclusive of criticisms associated with prefiguring Greenbergian dogma.

Thus, informed local art makers, after lengthy debate, have assumed a position based on an essentially minimal account by radically theorising about the specifics of the role of the ‘art object’ and its ongoing deployment as a useful artefact in Australian cultural terms. The central notion of the art object, which includes formal expressions of painting that had been radicalised, and other forms of image making, appeared out of that meta-process. Post-Minimal regional art is in that way specific, as each artist in Dunn’s curation had selectively engaged with any number of factors. Further, Post-Minimal artists express an art that is engaging a generic aesthetic field, in that it operates via a citational reappraisal of an existing phenomenon: a central concern of it being radical in the first instance.

Dunn claims the meta-images and object works produced by the artists in the Looking at Seeing and Dreaming exhibition of 1996 thwarted a “closure of reading or simple reading” as in the monochromatic/object/paintings of artists such as Christopher Dean (Fig.200). This transition supposedly occurred in a process of the further neutralisation of over-predicated meaning in the field. Here, Dunn’s assertion assumes that Post-Minimal meta-image production is exactly what it is, and held in accordance with the spectator’s always fabulised view: Were the object, the image and the viewer are all equally specific to their own purposes. In this way, I agree that the “closure of reading or simple meaning” as Dunn asserted, “is thwarted”.

580 Op cit.
581 Op cit.
582 Op cit.
Formal Influences in the 1990s

In completing this general orientation of Part 1, I would point out that Australian painters have long enjoyed the influence of foreign art makers, and for that reason I now briefly discuss the work of a current New York based artist Joseph Marioni and the Australian art-historian David Pestorius. Marioni is considered to be a leading international painter in the field. I also believe Marioni to an influential monochromatic art maker whose work is entwined with a particularly expressive and formal style of monochromatic painting (Fig.111). 583 This involves, as French critical theorist Thierry de Duve asserts, the significance and unique cult-like status of the Post-Modern monochrome. 584

In 2001, Marioni participated as a guest artist within a significant Australian survey exhibition of recent Australian formal painting practices curated by David Pestorius. 585 In this curation entitled Monochromes, 586 Pestorius highlighted the legacies and interests of many Australian art makers engaging with international influences, and informing regional practices. Similarly, placing a foreign art maker’s work into a text primarily concerned with interdependent Australian painting practices is done here because, like Pestorius, I do not adhere to the idea that Australian art should only be defined in terms of local concerns, within a limiting revisionist convention. 587

The various catalogues Pestorius has produced since the mid-1990s clearly suggest that there is an interactive tradition in Australian abstract and geometric painting. 588 Pestorius claims this is a significant developmental aspect of Australian painting practices that is today considered an affirmative cultural attribute, and not to be misunderstood as a leaning towards anonymous international influence, as has been claimed of related Modernist Australian painting practices. 589 That point is important because of the ongoing ramifications of the claim that formal painting has been historically considered dependent or, subservient to an anonymous international style of Formalism (as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2).

The pivotal David Pestorius’ Monochromes survey exhibition for the Queensland Museum of Art showed that a wide range of Australian artists have maintained insightful regional dialogues and close affiliations with international art makers such as Joseph Marioni or, the Swiss Post-Minimal abstractionist painter and installation artist John M. Armleder, whose formal work Ohne Titel c.1986 (Fig.112) is

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586 Op cit.
588 Op cit.
shown. Simply put, art makers like Armleder (Fig. 112), Mosset (Fig. 144), and Marioni (Fig. 111) have demonstrated to interested contemporary Australian art makers what remains possible in the field.

Likewise, this chapter has shown that Australian art makers have historically been genuinely interested in relating to influences, and these researches continue to point out that acceptance of one system does not imply the negation of another, such as occurred during the regionalism versus cosmopolitanism debates of the late 1960s. There are, however, long-standing issues stemming from the alleged appropriateness of foreign influences.

Within the four specific case studies of Part 2, the emergence, development, and then maturation of Critical Post-Conceptual painting-based practice, is examined.
Fig 113  Robert MacPherson. Scale to Tool, c.1977.
Part 1 analysed the complexities and debates entailed in the appearance of regionally specific formalist painting styles of practice in recent Australian art-historical terms. In Part 2, a select group of painters are discussed in terms of the developmental part they played in the emergence of a current genre of formal Australian painting denoted: Critical Post-Conceptual. This innovative and inclusive genre arose out of the conflicts, experiments and critically discursive field of Formalist styles of Australian painting enacted in recent decades.

In Chapters 4 and 5 prominent paintings, relevant theory, convergent tendencies, and seminal practices are discussed. For instance, it is proposed that the mid-to late-1960s paintings by Ian Burn (Fig.114) and Alan Oldfield (Fig.137) prefigure the maturing of a range of formal abstract painting styles in recent Australian art. In Chapters 6 and 7, Robert MacPherson (Fig.113) and John Nixon’s (Fig.142) Critical Post-Conceptual oeuvres are analysed.

From these case studies key methodological characteristics are explained, and lead to a definition of Critical Post-Conceptual painting. Through a consideration of Macpherson and Nixon’s art in particular, ideas discussed in the earlier case studies are connected via associated theoretical and conceptual concerns, and the practical processes that these artists seminally engaged.

In these four case studies the necessity of legacy is argued, and the artists’ relationship to the influence of International discourse of which Hughes\(^590\) and McCaughey\(^591\) spoke in the 1960s, is discussed. At issue in Part 2 is the claim that a developmental legacy associated with an avant-garde regional formalist academy and other regional Modernist discourses on painting provided relevance for contemporary artists. Further, the question is asked whether that collective engagement has registered as a positive paradigm. As stated in the Introduction, the term ‘recent formal Australian painting’ generally covers the period 1960 to the present.


Issues, concerns and interconnected dialogues have been investigated in the first three Chapters. From that orientation, relevance is now sought through a focused discussion of Ian Burn's activities as an expatriate during the mid-to late 1960s. In that way, general assertions and claims are repositioned in an account of an important Australian painting practitioner of the day, and his minimal and conceptual response to formalist painting.

Burn is fundamentally relevant to this discourse on aspects of Australian formal art making at the ending of the 1960s. Even though he lived elsewhere, he was associating with other Australian artists living in 'Ladbroke Grove' in London, and maintained regional contacts by exhibiting as an Australian art maker. However, Burn's early painting oeuvre can be understood as participating in a wider process in which he was most significantly engaged with a range of interconnected dialogues. Moreover, I suspect he preferred to be involved in Internationalism as part of an overall experience, rather than engaging with imported concerns as a regional painter. Moreover, Ann Stephen has pointed out Burn's interest in formalism and in systems of painting-based practice is a process central to his being an Australian painter.592

That statement is itself a significant idea, just as Burn's oeuvre has inevitably provided a compelling and intelligently achieved account. Especially for art makers interested in understanding post 20th century issues and a range of centre/periphery problems associated with Provincialism,594 Post-colonialism,595 and Revisionism.596 With respect to his international profile as a Conceptual artist,597 a different focus is provided on Burn's art in this chapter. By considering a set of formalistic paintings manufactured in London from 1965 to 1967 (Fig.114), and commentary from studio notes and the testimony given by his associate Melvin Ramsden (Fig.83),598 it is claimed Burn, like other Australian artists such as Ian Millis, Tony McGillick and Nigel Lendon, prefigure the regional development of late 20th century contemporary painting-based practices.599 In considering his early paintings, Burn’s notion of a formal response to ‘systems of painting’ is presented as a concept that can provide significance for those interested in conceptual, discursive or responsive aspects of recent formal Australian painting.

The idea of relevance is a defining characteristic of Burn's early painting oeuvre, and expands the claims made in Part 1. For instance, the photo of six identical paintings by Burn illustrates what was in 1966, an abstracted conceptualisation of Modernist painting (Fig.114). However, Burn's 'manufactured' paintings have a contemporary relevance because they illustrate the function of a systematic style, or repetitive production of painting that I argue is seminal to a contemporary tendency. For that reason, I claim the set of six Yellow Premises paintings (Fig.114)

593 Op cit. Footnote 5.
represents a unique approach presented as a painting/installation, highlighting the appearance of a definably newer formalist approach that Burn made available for scrutiny in recent Australian art-historical terms.600

For instance, Figure 115 is a much later installation/painting produced in 1994 by the anonymous Group Otto.601 This work illustrates what the curator and historian David Pestorius described in 1997 as "a contemporary sub-genre of geometric painting".602 This discursive Australian installation/painting points to a similar systemic modelling of art-historical concerns found in Burn's practice. That experimental approach, or productive developmental understanding, continues to be employed in a number of places and within a great many formalist oeuvres since its appearance in Australian painting during the later 1960s.

This discussion of Burn's influence pivots on the regional transition of painting into minimal object making and installation practices, directing a critical focus onto a well-trafficked route now taken by Australian art makers. In Burn's case, that route was via a calculated presentation of a conceptual, innovative, serial and minimal style (reductively abstract). Burn's co-ordinated methodological approach of making paintings in a systemic manner prefigures a phenomenon that Terry Smith identified in the 1980s as the "minimal/conceptual nexus".603 Smith used that term to explain the wide range of close-knit differences that he and other writers like Donald Brook604 and Noel Sheridan, for example, found in the diverging expressions of Australian artists during the 1970s.

The 1974 installation The Book Show (Fig.94), is another regional example of Burn's conceptual artistic influence apropos his growing association with the international Art and Language Group,605 and illustrates the range of critical divergence from mainstream concerns that had begun to occur in recent Australian art.606 These divergent regional interests, identified by writers like Terry Smith and Patrick McCaughey, were based upon a conceptual reappraisal of traditional formats of art making, including the redirection of non-objective concerns such as geometric and Hard-edge painting. In 1976, Ann Stephen described aspects of that process as "de-neutralisation".607 This topic (discussed in Chapter 3) is an observable factor informing Burns late 1960s art-critical works.

The early expansive approach that Burn took towards painting is marked by his decision to critically engage with systems of art making, and that would become a signature for Burn and a kind of conceptual art making processes that Joseph Kosuth outlined in 'Art After Philosophy' in 1969.608 In short, Burn's approach is considered a

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600 This comment refers to the fact that many Australian art makers have established a European profile.
601 Group Otto is an anonymous Australian artists group. Their identity is not generally known, and I have respected a request for details of participation to be left out of the thesis.
604 Donald Brook. 'The Young and New Ideas take over Art', Sydney Morning Herald. (02-11-68).
606 A history of this group and institution that developed out of this is sourced in The Experimental Arts Foundation. Exhibition catalogue. South Australian Visual Arts Board. Adelaide, 1983.
consciously achieved formalisation. That conceptual approach to painting incorporated the constructive concept of utilising divergent styles, and for that reason prefigures the arrival of a contemporary form of conceptual abstraction now more commonly found in the domain of Australian painting.

In Burn’s case the conscious formalisation of abstract painterly concerns remained closely associated with newer legacies such as Pop art, or Neo-Dada, and various styles of abstraction associated with the advent of minimal art forms. By 1965, Burn began to embrace alternative readings of North American art, and indigenous or regional styles of Modernism. For instance, Burn’s repertoire was inclusive of earlier Australian Modernist influences, such as Nolan’s vernacular reading of Cubism (Fig.15), and other European influences and legacies running through the logic of dominant American versions of Modernism.

**Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects** was an important exhibition held at the New York Cultural Centre in 1970, and Burn’s involvement in this activity was central to the solidification of a growing personal reappraisal of Modernist art making processes already under way in the mid-1960s. This exhibition confirmed the conceptual underpinning apparent in Burn’s painting practice and his concern for what he felt could be still achieved within a formalisation of painting, as he understood it. Burn’s *Re-ordered Painting* (Fig.116) and *Yellow Premiss* c.1965 (Fig.114) are both early examples of a responsive model of critical formalist painting, and represent a seminal case in point for the kind of Post-Conceptual painting processes now found in the wider domain of Australian art.

This early redirection of interests within the subject of painting, or considered divergence from tradition-bound practices that Burn confronted and engaged during the London period, allowed for what I have been describing as a discursively driven but practically implemented style of art making to evolve. That is, a systematic approach to the then current styles. Thus we can see in Burn’s critical painterly practice from 1965-1967, important relational links were established to the known traditions of painting and to newer art demands. These paintings are evidence he was engaging with the critical manufacture of a serial repetition of thematic works, foreshadowing the arrival in Australia of what Terry Smith would later describe as the “Post-object” period of the early 1970s.

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607 Op cit.
610 Kay Larson. ‘Art Critics of the World Unite-You have Nothing to Lose but your Formalism’. *The Boston Phoenix* (05-10-76).
Like others to come, Burn was critical of how meaning had become tightly posited under Clement Greenberg’s absolutism and dogmatic reading of Modernism, as discussed in Chapter 1. Burn is important in this regard because he responsively opened up an area of contemporary painting that can be identified as Post-Greenbergian. That innovation implies a critical relationship with readable, associative, discursive and variegated forms of reductive (Greenbergian Formalist) painterly practice. Importantly, that specific reappraisal is characterised by the critical usefulness made of everyday materials within a formal painterly practice. This was an approach that embraced formal techniques as an a priori in a practice equally capable, for example, of engaging with Piet Mondrian’s legacy of Neo-Plasticism at the same time. In Part 1, I defined this formal and dialogic approach as a model of ‘co-ordination’, and it seems, it can also harmoniously engage with Marcel Duchamp’s ironic legacy and profound fascination with the ‘uncanny’. Tony Clark’s painting Jasperware Painting c.1993 (Fig.118) is a later example of a work embracing that last categorisation expressed within a formal painting style.

A generic reconsideration of concerns occurring with a formalisation of practice belies Burn’s complex stylistic approach. For instance, Burn made use of ‘similitude’ as an informing academic painterly concern in the production of his Formalist paintings. These were based on a generic reading of the then contemporary concerns. As a point of clarification, ‘similitude’ is an aspect of formal production that was first discussed by Leon Alberti in his 15th century treatise, De Pictura. Alberti pointed out that the act of art making (re-picturing) is in fact a process driven by the use of a combination of ‘similitude’ and ‘intuition’, and it is that combination in academic terms that is formed into a grounded appraisal; however, Alberti noted that plagiarism was to be avoided.

Burn was aware that the idea of process in his mid-1960s paintings was about the re-presentation of meaningfully constructed ‘repetitious’ themes, or motifs, within a developmental practice. However, Burn’s personally expressive yet formal conceptualisation of a painting model was also performative. Blue Premiss No.2 from 1967 (Fig.119) is an example of this claim. This painting was supplied with an instruction diagram on how each marked-out section of the painting could be perceived. However, it is Burn’s generally more pedestrian working through of representational and perceptual concerns that is under discussion here.

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616 NB: McCaughey wrote a column in The Age, and Lynn for The Australian extensively during this period.
Burn's London paintings, like earlier works such as Soft Tape installation (collaboration with Mel Ramsden) circa mid 1960s, illustrates that he had developed more than a passing interest in expressing a methodologically extended approach to art making, whilst still attempting to address perceptual problems he believed were associated with a highly formalised reading of 'painting' during this period. Burn's early conceptual focus on perceptual concerns expressed by leading North American artists such as Jasper Johns or Ad Reinhardt, directs our attention to a central orientation in his practice. His painting oeuvre is significant because Burn's methodological and conceptual approach has attracted likeminded contemporary art makers in recent decades. This amounts to a meta-reading today of a developmental principle that was first extended by artists such as Burn, and others mentioned, beyond a basic deployment of materials and substances in art making associated with formalist styles of painting.

In order to interpret the Minimal/Colour-Field style of Burn's London paintings, there are influences such as the 'constructive concept' in Burn's practice needing qualification. For instance, the formalist language of Constructivism informs his inventive and designed expression. Constructivism is a style of art making dating to the artistic and theoretical turmoil of the beginning of the 20th century that has changed little in terms of its power to influence, especially those interested in establishing or maintaining an avant-garde position, or, as John Berger put this matter in current global cultural terms, "Pockets of resistance". Likewise, Burn's painting practice raises such issues, and conversely, a theoretical demand that art should be socially meaningful, therefore engaged with relevant Reflection theory, as discussed in Chapter 1. In contrast to that art-critical dialectic apparent in Burn's early paintings, is the equally longstanding formalist aesthetic Hilla Rebay poetically described in the 1930s as, "the beauty of non-objectivity".

That same critical co-ordination of aesthetic aspects of abstractionist art making formally underpin recent approaches to the field. These are generally highly focused contemporary presentations in late 20th century terms, often fuelled by an equally severe formalisation of known theory and practices. Regardless, these are generally, also combined with informal understandings of what is considered acceptable, useful, or socially meaningful as art. For instance, Rose Nolan's work from 1984 Hessian Piece (Fig.120) comes to mind here. Like much of Burn's work, it is a recent work that is neither a painting nor sculpture per se. Max Delany noted that it encompasses both aspects, "through an architectonic conception of painting and a presentation of material realism related to the readymade".

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621 Op cit. Rex Butler, 'Banal Art'.
623 Op cit.
624 Op cit.
As it is with Burn’s periodic formal paintings, Nolan’s Hessian Piece demonstrates the non-objective language which Hilla Rebay appreciated, and includes a severe and ethical ‘constructive concept’ sown into the very fabric and meaning of its form. Similarly, Burn’s earlier model is generally presented as an responsive style of art making, which is understood today because of an analogous display of definable and innovative characteristics provided in a “contemporary art making style”, as the American critic Athena Spear wrote. Piero Manzoni is a European formalist artist and painter also relevant to this argument.

Similar to Burn, he seminally made the reified connection between painting and other forms of practice in relation to a more informe style of art making. Many art makers in the 1960s adopted the idea that art could be made personally engaging through the modulation of known forms such as painting and sculpture, or associated styles or languages, such as abstraction and realism.

The photograph Fig.121 shows Manzoni working on a ‘process painting’ in Herning c.1961. In this instance Manzoni is engaging with a demystification of the processes of art making, and with an industrial approach relevant to later formal painting concerns. For Burn, Manzoni and many others, the project of Modernist painting in the 1960s had become culturally verified as only fit for geniuses, connoisseurs and/or the celebrated arbiters of taste. High Modernist painting had developed by the mid-1960s into an art already parodied by 1950s art makers like Yves Klein for example, as deified, isolated, inviolate, and therefore seemingly ridiculous. In following a critical tendency towards analytic and equally diagnostic formal art making processes, Burn, Manzoni, and Lucio Fontana, are examples of different kinds of international artists working separately, who are nevertheless understood a discourse as linked contributors to a counter Modernist account, and to a formalised approach to remaineder aspects of Modernist painting. The underlying factor that appears to characterise most of these anticipatory Minimal and Conceptually prone practices was a genuinely held concern over the idea of what contemporary painting implied, and therefore its validation as a critical or, currently meaningful form of practice.

In making reference to like-minded individuals, active in the same period that Burn produced his London series of paintings, it becomes clearer that a common flexibility of approach existed in their art-critical painterly practices. Yet, these divergent art makers also revered the formal processes of painting, and the unique sense of ritual it could provide. David Pestorius has likened this critical attraction and conceptual approach to formal painting to

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628 Ibid.
630 James Gleeson, ‘From Charm to Dullness’, Sun, Sydney, (18-05-64).
a "European phenomenon that was by no means an underground activity." 635 Here is referring to an alternative Modernist legacy, and specifically to a major European exhibition of monochromatic and geometric abstract painting shown at the Schoss Morsbroich in Leverkusen in 1961, Monochrome Malerei. 636

As discussed in Part 1, a deepening criticality concerning the future of the Modernist project of painting, for most, led directly towards an outright negation of painting by 1970. That predilection for closure in the field developed out of the collapse of the Modernist representational paradigm, regardless of the existence of an array of alternative activities. For instance, for regional Op Art and Colour-Form makers like Gunter Christmann (Fig.22) or David Aspden 637 (Fig.122) the negation of painting became entrenched before it was realised that it was a crisis in representational intentionality that was Modernism’s Achilles heel 638

I feel Burn understood this issue earlier than most and had carefully moved away from Formalist aspects of painting by the early 1970s into a classic Conceptual Art practice, precisely when the Modernist crisis of pictorial representation appeared as a new influential International discourse that deeply impacted on regional practices. 639

Burn’s Conceptual Painting Experimentation

A crisis in representational concerns that overtook regional formal styles by the 1970s was primarily associated with the contemporary construction of images by art makers of the 1960s. Despite certain art makers like Burn and Booth (Fig.16) temporarily moving away from formalist styles of painting in the 1970s, the issue of a representational crisis has remained a confronting matter. It has been considered theoretically by many writers on art, 640 such as Yve-Alain Bois in Painting as Model (1990). 641 This book provided for an international readership a complex account of the range of historical concerns and practical options for those seeking to understand painting and its legacy. Bois, like Hal Foster with his later account on the influence of Surrealism, 642 presented the failure of Modernist representation

636 Ibid.
640 A theorist worthy of mention here is Guy Debord and the Situationist group in Europe.
as an ongoing discourse occurring within an active international field of engagements. They did this by thematically expressing a new obsessiveness with the implications of Freudian analysis, whilst discussing the specific field of contemporary painting. In particular, Bois nominates concerns over the contemporary painter's 'Task of Mourning'.

It is possible to consider this claim as overt, historicist, and a construct: A Post-Modern speculation with an unwarranted conclusiveness in a Post-20th century field. This matter is taken up directly in Chapter 8.

I have highlighted the influential writing of Bois because in Painting as Mode he takes up a question the theorist Hubert Damisch had raised in 1972. Damisch asked, "What does it mean for an artist to think?" Pursuing this question later Bois asked, "What is the mode of thought of which painting is at stake?" and, "Can one think in painting as one can dream in colour?" Bois then rhetorically asked, "Is there such a thing as 'pictorial thought' that would differ from what Paul Klee referred to decades earlier as 'visual thought'?"

Although that is a troublesome question, the questioning of "pictorial thought" posed by Bois is a topic engaged in the affirmative by Burn. A clear response was made in the mid-1960s series of paintings, where Burn analytically addresses perceptual issues similar to those worked through by Klee in his production of formal paintings thirty years earlier. Klee's Blooming from 1934 (Fig.123) is shown, and for comparison see Burn's Painting c.1965 (Fig.124).

These works illustrate a separation of Modernist concerns over the nature of pictorial illusionism (or "visual thought") discussed in Part 1. The expressive abstract imaging produced as "visual thought", as Klee originally put it in discussing his 'creative' schemas, can be understood in contradistinction to the deliberate construction and placement of "pictorial thought" as Bois later wrote, in Burn's discursively analytic systemic works. The meta-dialogue of Bois "pictorial thought" concerns the nature of artistic development, or of the technical situations found in a practice where formal artistic, even deeply theoretical concerns, are made apparent whilst being meaningfully translated into a meta-visual expression of a language.

Regarding the semiotic of painting, or a perceptual "pseudo-science" to do with the now meta-subject of painting, Bois concedes, 'Damisch teaches us above all to rid ourselves of the stifling concept of image upon which the relation of text to art is founded – arrogant, ignorant, predatory texts that consider painting a collection of images

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645 Op cit.
646 Op cit. Footnote 18.
647 Ibid.
649 Op cit.
650 Op cit.
651 Op cit.
to be tracked down, illustrations to be captioned".\textsuperscript{553} I could not agree more with Damisch's concern. By also considering Cézanne's *The Bathers*, Picasso's *Les Demoiselles de Avignon* (Fig.90) and Manet's *Olympia* as works that have been extensively operated upon in such a way, it is interesting to consider how these have remained enigmatic artworks regardless of the *ex post facto* or meta-discursive tenets that have historically been placed upon them.

T.F. Clark's essay 'Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia in 1865'\textsuperscript{554} and Norman Bryson's book *Vision and Painting* are thoughtful examples of literary pieces that have sought to redefine famous pictures, where "the logic of the gaze" as Bryson wrote, masterfully and methodologically paraphrases the seen.\textsuperscript{555} In returning to comments made about Bois influential reading of painting, and of that only being conceivable in terms of it registering as a failed or culminated project, these revisional texts also suggest it is likely that multiple perspectives on the subject of painting, are at the very least, possible. However, Bois relativist logic further implies that any discourse produced within circular understandings makes new meaning both impossible and possible simultaneously.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, despite Burn's conceptual approach to formalist painting, he appears to have been aware of problematic concerns, about the rhetoric of the image for example, and devoted much thought towards making pictorial works that above all else, were to be seen and experienced as paintings and as artworks.

\textit{Painting Re-Premised}

Arnold Hauser identified the literary predatoriness discussed in the previous section in the late 1950s, then claiming it was a matter that needed to be recognised. For him, it was as a "problem of ideology that takes on a different form in the field of art".\textsuperscript{556} Notwithstanding covert objections to the overt reading of "pictorial thought"\textsuperscript{557} expressed by artists such as Burn, as a writer on art I find the *Yellow Premiss* installation (Fig.114) and other works produced around 1966 by Burn discursively interesting, that is, readable and interpretable. I claim that Burn produced a personable, discursive and "influenced" style as Mel Ramsden expressed it,\textsuperscript{558} through a periodic reading of known formalist

\textsuperscript{554} T. F. Clark. 'Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia in 1865'. *Screen*, Vol 21, No 1, Spring, 1980.
\textsuperscript{557} Op cit.
Hard-edge painting. That approach evolved out of his deep understanding and empathy for an earlier legacy of Australian art.\textsuperscript{659}

For instance, the Yellow Premiss installation, and the other Premiss, Equivalence, Variable, Predicate and Re-ordered paintings are considered in this thesis as important ‘systems’ works, or early examples of process-based art in the field. The fact that the Yellow Premiss installation was made in London after a request from the influential art dealer Rudy Komon for the exhibition Young Melbourne Painters held in Sydney and later at Pinacotheca gallery in Melbourne in 1971, only adds an extra layering of interest over the specific context of his displaced periodic works.

Yellow Premiss (Fig 114) provides a sense of the cosmopolitanism discussed in Chapter 1. Even when experienced ex post facto, an inherent cosmopolitanism remains observable in terms of its belated influence upon a range of ensuing dialogues. According to Robert Lindsay, a former director of the National Gallery in Victoria, a type of dialogue has arisen in relation to a series of trends found in more recent Australian art.\textsuperscript{660} This is a concern over the contemprorisng of the “subject of painting”, as Paul McGillick also described it in the Australian context of the 1980s.\textsuperscript{661} As discussed in Chapter 3, this is a topic that was taken up in the 1990s by regional art historians and theorists such as Ingrid Periz, Nicholas Waterlow, Keith Broadfoot, David Pestiuris\textsuperscript{662} and Rex Butler,\textsuperscript{663} involving what is considered to be still possible or critically available to those interested in the broad subject of contemporary painting styles.

The idea of cosmopolitanism being convergent with the development of an ‘exotic’ regionalism in Australian art has been acknowledged in recent decades through major survey shows such the Australian Perspectives and the more regular Biennale’s of Sydney and also, importantly, via activities that have occurred in a range of government-funded or independently run artist spaces nationally. Thus, Patrick McCaughey’s observation that many Australian art aficionados at the end of the 1960s felt that the unsolicited appearance of “international anonymity”\textsuperscript{664} was developing out of longer-term Modernist trends has possibly been borne out.\textsuperscript{665}

However, according to Ann Stephen, the arrival at praxis in Burn’s unique oeuvre during the 1960s was achieved because of Burn’s considered combination of “pragmatism and youthful avant gardism”.\textsuperscript{666} This working out of relevant matters was amplified through the conjunction Burn made “between the conceptual and the minimal”,\textsuperscript{667} as Terry Smith wrote. However, Mel Ramsden has complicated these opinions, stating, “Ian Burn was not one of


\textsuperscript{661} Paul McGillick (Curator). The Subject of Painting: Twelve Australian Painters. This is a joint Contemporary Art Society and Art Gallery of NSW exhibition catalogue. Sydney, 1985.


\textsuperscript{665} The regionally based art makers relevant to this discourse have been discussed in part 1, and reconsidered in Part 3.

\textsuperscript{666} Notes taken from email conversation held with Ann Stephens. (04-10-01).

those artists born with a seamless curatorial self-image”, nor did he start off with any kind of “cosmopolitan knowiness. He didn’t know knowiness”.

If this is so, the question arises, how was the sophisticated level of diversification and experimentation found in the serial Yellow Premiss installation/painting formally generated? Stephen believes this achievement was in part, “stimulated by Burn’s crucial response to Rudy Komon’s invitation to show in Australia”. This is possible true, yet the developmental surge in Burn’s London paintings was substantiated through the manufacturing of the six identical paintings that were constructed with an expanded discourse on Modernist influences in mind. Thus, I generally concur with Stephen’s claim that it is through a specific working process that Burn “aligned him to minimalist thinking”, and, that alignment was an “important part of a figuring out of a relationship with being an Australian painter”.

I first became interested in Burn’s conceptual works in the early 1990s, and especially after seeing his late career Value Added Landscapes (Fig. 100), shown at Monash University and the MCA in 1996. However, I eventually developed a greater interest in his early and mostly expatriate paintings. After having a brief discussion with Ann Stephen I discovered that she believed it was unlikely that the Yellow Premiss installation and other works had been directly influenced by a lineage of ‘Second Wave’ American abstractionist painters coming after Mondrian, as I had assumed.

This Post-Mondrian legacy that I previously held in mind, has been discussed as an defining aspect of formalist influence in Chapter 1, and included Harry Holtzman with his Square Volume with Yellow and Blue c.1938 (Fig. 12), and the musically prone Burgoyne Diller, whose Composition No.33 c.1943 (Fig. 9) are equally reminiscent of a particularly reductive and geometric lineage. It was those works that appear similar to Yellow Premiss (Fig. 114).

This rebuttal caused a change in my thinking, as I had concluded that Holtzman and Diller if not the exact figures, were typical of a type of artist that Burn had most possibly considered. These were artists who had deliberately continued with Mondrian’s Neo-plasticism and a formalist positing of axiomatic perception into a non-ironic experimentation with abstract painting.

It should be recalled that Mondrian quit the De Stijl group after a disagreement with Van Doesberg in 1924 over his making of the Simultaneous Counter Compositional paintings (Fig. 46). Importantly, Mondrian described Van Doesburg’s incorporation of counter compositional elements as “an arbitrary correction to neo-plasticism”. With that in mind, Burn’s contemporaneously discursive Yellow Blue Equivalence of 1965-66 is likewise, stylistically reminiscent of an earlier art-historical debate (Fig. 125).

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667 Op cit.
671 Refer back to overall discussion of Chapter 2, concerning a regional modulation of the language of abstraction.
In briefly expanding upon this matter, like Van Doesberg, later American "second wave abstractionists" as Andrew Ritchie from MOMA described them,\(^{672}\) had improvised and transgressed from Mondrian's "pan-aesthetic vision"\(^{673}\) (Fig.50). In that fashion, Modernist abstract legacies were worked through by a further incorporation of musical, architectonic or, logarithmic themes. These ideas are visibly tangible as 'informing content' within the construction of their later versions of related, reductive, and referential works. It was that type of content-laden approach, or discursive legacy I felt had influenced Burn's formally achieved London works. With due respect for Stephen's refutation, I am sure that Yellow Blue Equivalence (Fig.125) is a work that substantiates the claim that there is a level of co-ordination in Burn's London paintings, and that is related to Mondrian's legacy. Understanding what a co-ordinated use of 'systems' in a repetitive practice means, requires a shifting of perspective. For instance, a lesson that emerges out of a consideration of Burn's London paintings is that there is a discrete complexity or, unique level of inventiveness located in them. Regardless of this matter, Burn's process highlights a way that Modernist painting was being addressed to match newer demands by the mid-1960s.

In taking up the issue of responsiveness to legacy, I have wondered why the difficult, referential, and yet very complete set of generic Yellow Premiss works was made. Burn was aware that a Non-Objective and intellectual style of Formalist painting, couched in the rhetoric of what for many Australian critics was the terminus of Hard-edge abstraction, would not have been greatly appreciated. This point is even more salient if the installation was actually designed, as I suspect, as a work making generic reference to the International style. An answer to this question lies in unmasking Burn's intention, which, it appears, was to provide a relatively unforeseen approach to the subject of painting; if this is so, then that approach could be described as a generic or assimilative form of conceptual abstraction. In that speculative sense, Burn's approach is reminiscent of Dick Watkins non-literalist paintings discussed in Chapter 1. By way of further example, Watkins constructive style painting Moscow c.1963 (Fig.25) illustrates the kind of discursive relationship they shared with a redressing of international styles, and the specific use that could be made of regional and international influence, as available language. It is this understanding that illustrates Watkin and Burn enjoyed a seminal viewing of significant connections in their critical thinking.

That connection was a complex matter well managed by the expatriate Burn in the early and mid-1960s. Terry Smith has argued, in discussion of the interests of younger Australian art makers that the New York and London art scenes had been antithetical to the kind of response that Australia's more exotic abstract art makers were making, between minimal and conceptual trends.\(^{674}\) Smith asserts that this conceptual and minimalist nexus was not being made in North America during the collapse of Modernism. A possible reason for this claim is that in the 1960s and 1970s, New York and London were dominant as metropolitan art-cultural centres, and from the perspective of peripheral environments such as Australian and New Zealand these centres were read as patronising and distant.

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therefore, there was little reason for regional artists to adhere doggedly to (the centre’s) conventions. Although Modernism’s metropolitan imperatives have since been modified as regionally appreciative and pluralist, these centres remain an ever-absorbent cultural mechanism. For that reason, it is not likely that 35 years ago these distant centres would have been appreciative of Burn’s vernacular or personally expressive approach to formalist abstract painting, even if he had been much better known. Thus Burn had little choice but to remain engaged in regional discourses and in the critical re- premising of his own formulation of painterly concerns.

Like Burn, art makers such as Mike Brown and Ross Crothall from Sydney’s Annandale Imitation Realists (Fig. 62) were critical of current discourses. These artists provided a purposeful nexus between Neo Dada and Pop Art influences in the early 1960s. Ross Crothall’s La Petite Fleur Avec les Ham Sandwiches c. 1961 (Fig. 126) is an example of an ‘alternative’ regional style or approach. This reference is important because it illustrates that whilst Burn was an ‘outsider’ abroad, and stood out as an expatriate critical of contemporary debates, there were other regional art makers equally challenged by prevailing polarised attitudes in Australian art around that time.

Burn, like Brown (Fig. 76), Watkins (Fig. 26), Paramor (Fig. 24), Dawson (Fig. 87) and Oldfield (Fig. 137) to name a significant few here, managed a nexus of minimal and conceptual concerns to produce highly evaluative and discursive form of painting before 1970. It is that aspect that shows he had developed within an alternative Modernist approach, a clear understanding of himself as an informed art maker. That understanding was of an emergent Australian artist, living and working abroad, concerned about what he considered to be a developmental approach to painting. However, because Burn lived overseas when Central Street Gallery emerged in Sydney as a focus for the expatriate ‘Ladbroke Grove’ artists returning to Australia, and he had evolved into a Conceptual artist by the late 1960s, his early formal paintings have not been widely appreciated in Australia until more recent times. In short, Burn’s persona non-grata status was amplified because the emergent tendencies of Australian contemporary art ran in different directions from his deepening Conceptual Art commitment.

Given the prevailing art context, it is little wonder that Burn, like other Australian artists at the beginning of the 1970s, had begun moving away from what was perceived as a slavish deference to a distant centrist cultural influences, or dependency. The directives issuing from the metropolitan centres of New York and London would not have been responsive to the subtleties that existed in Australasian works, let alone a regional mistrust of “international anonymity”. This acrimony is testimony to the fact that the Australian mainstream generally had a problem with formalised approaches to painting. For instance, even regionally recognised artists such as David Aspden’s Colour-Form style of painting discussed earlier (Fig.122), have remained undervaluing because he is supposedly an example of a regional artist who embraced the pitfalls of a “generalised imitativeness” that quickly beset the “New Abstractionist”. These avant-garde artists were at the same time those who refused to participate in the mystagogic account underscoring the dominance of an indigenous Modernist figurative/landscape tradition of ‘realism’ that was still developing out of the remnants of the Australian School, as discussed in Part 1.

Melvin Ramsden, Burn’s friend, intellectual confidant, and practical collaborationist, states that the issue of Burn’s personal make-up, realised in work made around 1965, “is more helpfully encapsulated as a controversy about particular positions vis-à-vis artistically possessive individualism...[where]...small matters such as self-propriety rights and powers as expressed contrastingly between post-war US political culture and post-war European political culture.” This personal and political reading of Burn’s formal critical painterly works portrays an individual meeting a conflicting Modernist politic head on. That polarised confrontation in his practice, also concerned the nature of authorship, whereby the regional (persona) and the international (non persona) amounted to an “abject fear of Modernism” Ramsden claims they both shared. The works produced by Burn in that period would have all too easily appeared to be about replay, or perceived as a Formalist expression influenced by American “Second Wave Abstractionism.” This, despite Burn’s awareness and appreciation for relevant concerns such as Michael Fried’s anti-object-theatrical assault, and what he had already carefully distilled from the pedagogy of older Australian artists such as Melbourne’s Max Meldrum, Sydney Nolan or even George Bell.

I have deduced from my research that Burn, neglected in Bernard Smith’s anthology as a truly significant Australian art maker, remained mildly celebrated throughout the 1970s as a persona non-grata. Nevertheless, he made productive use of the confusions and tensions that existed as dominant discourse in contemporary Australian art, that is, in terms of the conflict between regional and international dialogues outlined in Part 1. In short, there is

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580 Ibid.
583 Comments by Mel Ramsden. P 8.
clearly an alternative level of referencing and processing of information existent in the London works. No matter what its origin may have actually been, what is located in the *Yellow Premiss* installation is a rational formalisation of a meta-discourse directing attention not to a desire that Burn may have had to join a genealogy of International-style abstractionists or to be associated with an avant-garde regional formalist academy, but to a personal focus he placed on an inventive, developing art practice responsive to the dictates of High-Modernism.

In the formative years they spent living together in London and later New York, Burn and Ramsden appear to have been deeply engaged on an intellectual and artistically experimental level, on what could still be done with painting as a critical art form. In that sense, Burn was clearly beyond the prevailing formalist discourses in Australian art. That relative isolation as an experimentalist in the hypercritical domain of international contemporary painting could not possibly have lasted. The Melbourne painters with whom Rudy Komon first asked Burn to exhibit with in 1966 were also displaying a cool response to what Australia’s visual arts aficionados had described as the New Abstraction’s “generalised imitiveness”.

Those Melbourne painters include Bruce Pollard, Paul Partos, Dale Hickey, Robert Jacks, Janet Dawson, Robert Hunter, and Robert Rooney. Like Burn, they established a radical minimal appearance in their works that provided an alternative and contemplative painterly vista at the end of the 1960s.

For example, *Transitions* (Fig. 127) is a slightly later polychromatic work by Robert Jacks made in 1975. This work is illustrative of a subsequent nexus that had become an alternative Conceptual, Minimal and radically expressed form of Late-Modernism in Melbourne. These artists were part of a polarised, almost absent movement in Australian painting. Rex Butler later defined aspects of these and other underrated Australian artists within *A Secret History of Australian Art*.

This other world of Australian art would itself slowly begin transforming regional conventions and eventually be characterised by an ironic tendency that led to a complete inversion of context in the field. An inversion of conventions or ‘norms’ was also achieved in part, and according to Robert Lindsay, via the “irreverent tradition of an adoption of non-materials for aesthetic purposes.” However, the earlier transition of the regional formalist academy into critical collapse at the beginning of the 1970s added to Burn’s *persona non-grata* status, as an artist engaging with systems of painting and a discursive form of abstract painterly language that few knew how to interpret.

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692 Op cit. Consider Robert Lindsay’s further comments found in ‘Field to Figuration’. P 113.
The previous sections have illustrated that Burn's early Premiss (Fig.114) and Re-ordered works (Fig.128) are considered seminal to contemporary ideas on painting. They were built upon a complex of discourses, and even though made abroad, they significantly portray how structures or dialogues emerged within Burn's repertoire, and out of his deep art-historical understanding of Australian painting. For instance, systematic paintings such as Re-ordered Painting No.3 c.1965 (Fig.128), illustrate the way in which the viewer's perception in this field was being further shifted, and conceptually re-focused.

This logic was reminiscent of Jasper Johns' various target-based experimentations. Zero through to Nine c.1960 (Fig.129) is one of Johns' perceptual works that particularly influenced Burn. It was concerned with the possibility of 'seeing' a language of art. That is a considerable and accessible dialogic concern that Burn pursued as a displaced regional art maker, despite the apparently real oppressions of Modernism he experienced abroad.

It was Ramsden who later asserted that being "caught in the ontological terrors of dogged Modernism" was the very reason why Burn was "psychologically imprisoned between his sense of his origins, and Cosmopolitanism". For instance, in Re-ordered Painting No.2 c.1965 (Fig.130), Burn posits blocks of pale, ochre-like colours, as reductively Modernist yet regionally explicit colour-forms. The overlay of numerals, according to Burn's notes, was intended to provide the viewer with a perceptual choice of systems where "'natural' or 'imposed' artificial orders are selectively viewed". As stated, the colours in the Re-ordered series are ochres, reds, blues and blacks; these connect to a series made a year earlier that included the Nolanesque The Idiot Figure (Fig.131).

Here the murky Australian colours of works done on Masonite pick up Nolan's experimentations with Cubism and a longstanding engagement with the delivery of a mystagogic account of Australia, as discussed in Chapter 1. The socially grounded drive of 'the figure' and the 'streetscape', fashionable in Melbourne art of -

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694 Ibid. Ian Burn. P.55.
the 1940s, briefly surfaces in Burn's now modulating and highly referential practice. The bridging or transitional Re-ordered Painting of 1965 (Fig. 116) illustrates his co-ordinate, harmoniously evaluative theorisation. Burn's expression was of a self-conscious sense of 'difference' relocated within formal and highly referential parameters.

Ramsden stated that a personal reading was achieved in Burn's case, because he was an artist who not only actively sought out his influences, but desired to make an art from "a different place altogether".695 That is an underlying factor informing Burn's paintings from this period, and the matter of 'distance' and the notion of 'displacement' add to their staying power. However, the last matter was 'naturally' located as part of Burn's "systemic"696 presentation of alternating perceptual concerns, a tendency that existed before his involvement with the Conceptual Art movement per se.697

A productive critical tension was established through Burn's friendship and working relationship with Ramsden, as together they placed a sharp focus on personally making a response to an international style of art. That complex of drives registered particularly in Burn's early paintings. It is for that reason I have claimed that until recently these works have not generally been afforded the significance they deserve in the overall story of how regional tendencies in Australian art have evolved.

Notwithstanding that claim, it is important to mention the efforts of David Pestorius, curator at the Queensland Museum of Art, Paola Anselmi at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and Ann Stephen from the Powerhouse and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney as notable exceptions. For instance, Burn's Blue, Yellow Equivalence c.1965 (Fig. 132) and Blue Reflex c.1967 (Fig. 133, right) are abstractions from the London period that have recently been presented as important Australian works by Pestorius.698 The reason for regional neglect is complex, but I am sure it stems in part from an assumed understanding that propels a subtle condemnation of non-objective approaches within formal models of painting. Today attitudes are different, and the Melbourne-base painter Claire Firth-Smith699 has recently described the "generically assimilative"700 character of her more recent contemporary Australian abstractionist painting as, an affirmative concern.701

695 ibid. p. 7.
696 Op cit.
699 Claire Firth-Smith is an emerging artist, writer and a curator running an independent Gallery in Melbourne, Penthouse and Pavement. I recently curated Claire into an exhibition titled Further, and a catalogue was produced where these issues where discussed publicly. The Further Catalogue is available through Newspace Gallery in Rozelle, Sydney University.
700 ibid.
I claim that the generic character of Australian abstract, geometric or monochromatic painting is observable within Burn’s formalist-style paintings. This is less obvious in later object works like Glass/Mirror Piece, c.1968 (Fig. 136) yet framing, serialism, and formal presentation remain, however, key representational characteristics. *Blue variable No 1* c.1966 (Fig. 134) is a more obvious example, an actual Colour-form work in which Burn took up Greenbergian concerns in a manner that redirects the spectator’s experience of the work, and their reading of contemporary art within that. Burn wrote “[the] highly reflective surfaces, which reflected light and mirrored the person looking at the painting...[drew]...attention away from the object [a reductive presentation of painting]”. Burn’s ‘object’ was a generic representation of a modern-abstract-contemporary style of painting-based art. For Burn it was at the same time a conceptually defined ‘object’, and that paradox provides the location where the idea of surface for example, was seen within a system, as “separate and distinct from colour”. In short, these are not just aesthetically pleasing Formalist works of art, they are systemic theoretic devices for considering the changing character of art making within then contemporary painterly terms.

Burn’s *Yellow Premiss* (Fig. 114) is a similarly attuned work of art. The focus of the work is an astute presentation of a genically derived, abstractionist-style of installation/painting unique for 1966. For these reasons, and for the last in particular, concerning the advent of the notion of generic language in Burn’s contemporary expansion of what painting could be, I consider the *Yellow Premiss* installation seminal to an emergent genre of recent Australian formal painting practices first described by Terry Smith as “Post-Conceptual Painting”.

The *Yellow Premiss* installation is a preclusive form of conceptual abstraction made by a budding regional artist working on an International stage, who in 1968 stepped away from what was an apparent convention by providing a more defining Conceptual art. This secondary phase of painting/objects/installation based works was exhibited in *The Field*. One of the Glass/Mirror Pieces Burn showed is illustrated in Figure 135.

The art-historical significance of Burn’s systematic group of formalist paintings was initially overshadowed by developments in the 1970s. Not because he had already moved on in his painting practice by making Conceptual Art pieces but because, before his exceptional painting oeuvre could be understood, a crisis in representation and a shift

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703 Op cit.
to an informal approach would have to play itself out on the world stage, just as the Arte povera movement\footnote{\textit{Carolyne} Kristov Bakargiev, \textit{Arte Povera.} Phaidon Press. London, 1999. P 16.} would have to make its deconstructive claims on the European and American continental fronts expressly felt. These art-historical moments needed to occur, before alternative Australian visual arts discourses and Formalist dialogues on regional painting could be meaningfully considered in interdependent terms.\footnote{Op cit. Rex Butler. \textit{The Secret History of Australian Art.}}

I believe Burn figures centrally in a regional legacy of contemporary and conceptually driven approaches to formal painting, and provides an influence that has carried through the 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s. It was not until the early 1990s, however, that the important lesson provided by Burn and his systemic approach would be more fully appreciated. Burn’s productive and meaningful regional influence had to be exhumed in the 1990s, from what had become understood in a Post-Modern context as a critically diminished field.\footnote{Ibid. Please refer to ‘Introduction’ text and commentaries.} Therein, the curators Paolo Anselmi, Ann Stephen and David Pestorius ratified Burn’s formal painting practice on an institutional level.
Chapter 5  Alan Oldfield: Neo-Modernism and The Impure Code

The first case study examined a set of ‘systemic’ colour paintings made by Ian Burn between 1965 and 1967, a select focus on a specific aspect of an artist’s extensive oeuvre. This next analysis is methodologically similar, but directly focuses on an analysis of a single work and a significant idea informing its construction. The reason for this is it will assist in uncovering the discursive meaning implicit in a now frequently used term: The ‘impure code’. This term implies that various ideas, styles, theoretical influences are co-ordinated in a single work (As discussed in Chapter 2 in the examination of Modernist works produced by Janet Dawson). This idea has import for many contemporary artists like Marco Fusinato (Fig.146) or, Gemma Smith and Oscar Yanez (Fig.141), who structurally utilise a mixture of previously discrete forms in their formal expressions of meaningful discursive content.

If Burn can be acknowledged for a seminal development of ‘Systemic’ practice. The aim of this section is to establish that by 1968, Alan Oldfield’s expression of oblique waveforms apparent in his Mezzanine c.1968 (Fig.137) painting caused him to stylistically break through perceived limitations of Hard-edge painting, and a sense of purism characteristic of Central Street gallery and the newer regional academy of formalist painting and sculpture.

Further, this Chapter investigates how related concepts such as ‘transitional form’, ‘interactive sign systems’, and ‘fluidity’, are linked to the notion of ‘Neo-Modernism’, and Burn’s important critical investigation of the ‘natural’ and the ‘Imposed’ artificial orders. Further, how these in turn relate to more recent practitioners.

There is a question that immediately links Burn’s methodology to Oldfield’s brief practice as a formalist painter, and that revolves around the query Oldfield posed in making Mezzanine: What happens to traditional ideas of

abstraction when the iconic and reductive language used is pictorially re-presented as an "interactive sign system", or, fluid expression of formalist conventions for instance?

In making claims concerning the transitional character of Oldfield's painting, its specific context is brought to the fore. A transitional form in the field of abstractionist painting would be as Bernard Smith suggests, a work marked by its differentiation forms operational standards, whilst maintaining enough linkage to legacy, tradition, practices, styles, genre, etc, for it to remain recognisable as a related expression. Consequently, I have developed a particular interest in the Mezzanine work because of the core semantic device or 'constructive concept' employed by Oldfield in the work's pictorial layout. In this one work there is a clear presentation of a mixed visual metaphor or, adaptable expression of 'impure' stylistic codification. It was Sylvia Harrison who first described this organic process as, a "fluidly interacting sign system".

She suggests that the oblique chevron patterning predominant in Mezzanine is aligned counter-compositionally with waveforms and other linear irregularities. She concludes that a 'personalised' and 'fluid' reworking of rigidifying conventions within the abstractionist language Oldfield used, was "part of a broader sign system - a protean array of conundrums to be solved by the viewer".

This distinction makes Mezzanine and Neon (on green) (a second lost painting from this limited series), a very different kind of formal abstract painting of the day. I find the modulation of colour and complex forms especially interesting, and the way that process has been achieved within the radical appearance of a non-pictorial art described as "non-referential". Harrison's terminology is reminiscent of Bonito's much later discourse provided on the dynamic abstractionism of the Italian Futurists (As discussed in Chapter 2).

Oldfield claims that Mezzanine was made to "kick against the prevailing dogmatism" of the Central Street academy. In light of the personal politics of that statement, it is further proposed that because of its unique and ambivalent context, Mezzanine should be considered an important developmental Australian formal painting. Oldfield personally clarified the difference of the Mezzanine work when he later described the painting as, a "transitional form".

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708 Sylvia Harrison. 'Sydney Pop and Social Internationalism in the 1960s'. Refer to Power institute Archives. Sydney University.
712 Ibid.
713 Ibid.
714 Ibid.
716 Op cit
716 Ibid.
A radical difference in appearance can also be established by comparing *Mezzanine* with Eric Shirley's lyrically designed expression found in *Enore* (Fig. 138), and Harald Noritís Oceanic style *Come Away* (Fig. 42). In contradistinction, *Mezzanine* can also be further compared to the structurally rigid block works of Michael Johnson's *Window One* (Fig. 4) and Trevor Vickers' segmental or seemingly filmic *Untitled* (Fig. 139).  

With a pertinent development in the domain of abstract or formal painting identified, there are possible unexplored levels of significance and historical import belying the formal structure of Oldfield's *Mezzanine*. For instance, Sylvia Harrison's 1980s article 'Sydney Pop and Social Internationalism in the 1960s' discussed the somewhat overlooked alternative character of formal painting styles prevalent in Sydney during late 1960s and early 1970s. She identifies a 'social' character that should be included in a reading of the *Mezzanine* work, together with a consideration of Oldfield's more recent comments on the Formalist ideology adopted at the Central Street Gallery.  

In *Mezzanine*, Oldfield expressed the radical and discursive idea of the 'impure code', during his brief period as an Australian Neo-Modernist geometric abstractionist. Significantly, Bernard Smith and Terry Smith had used the term Neo-Modernist in the 1980s to describe the work of Oldfield, Watkins (Fig. 26), Paramor (Fig. 24) and Schlicht (Fig. 140). That was because these regional 'Neo-Modernist' painters were, as Smith put it, 'less prepared than most to restrict their work to precepts about surfaces and edges; and ready to experiment with earlier art, particularly the earlier twentieth century styles that were preoccupied with colour' In short, what links Oldfield's implementation of an impure codification of abstractionist language to Burn's early systemic reading of formalist and perceptual concerns, was a less restrictive processing of information that allowed a level of responsiveness; albeit within highly formalised painting-based practices.

I have isolated Oldfield's critically responsive *Mezzanine* painting for two main reasons. First, Oldfield rapidly developed a geometric approach to Hard-edge abstraction out of a general interest in colour painting, and the few works produced within a distinct phase in 1968, are considered personally, and art-historically, as transitional forms of expression. Second, because of the brevity of Oldfield's particularised experimentation, his Hard-edged Non-Objective geometric work has tended to be overlooked in the regional story of Colour-Form painting. For that reason, there is little other than general discussion of these works in regional texts. Passing commentary can be found in Bernard Smith and Terry Smith in *Australian Painting*, The Field Exhibition catalogue essays from 1968, and Sylvia Harrison's account of Oldfield's first solo exhibition, held at Central Street in 1969. Mostly focus is

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718 Op cit.
721 bid.
722 bid. P 418.
723 bid
725 Op cit. Sylvia Harrison.
placed on Oldfield's *The Great Nostalgia Show* and his arrival as a Pop artist. For instance, *Ship of Fools* c.1970 (Fig.18) is a type of work that would become better known as Oldfield's trademark style.

After 1968, Oldfield's integration of social narrative and urban pictorial scenes with a Hard-edged style was seen to be different from the other Central Street painters, with the possible exception of Watkins, Paramor and Schlicht (Fig.140). Oldfield at that stage became closer in spirit to a narrative form of pictorial expression popular with 'antipodean' regionalist Modernists.\(^{726}\) Despite this development, *Mezzanine*, has been recently acquired by The Newcastle Regional Art Gallery, and like most of the now classic Central Street works has also been critically reappraised in Rhonda Davis's *Central Street Live* curation of the 'Ladbroke Grove' painters\(^ {727}\) as a significant Australian abstract, whose specific meaning and relevance for later tendencies is under-acknowledged in Australian discourse.

At the time of painting *Mezzanine* Oldfield was the youngest of Sydney's Central Street painters who participated in the 'Ladbroke Grove' settlement in London, and the subsequent establishment of the regional formalist Academy back in Sydney around 1966. Interestingly, Burn and Ramsden lived nearby, and had some contact with these and other expatriate artists living in London. As stated, Oldfield set off on a different road to the core of the Central Street painters, a path that led him into a combination of figurative, expressive and Hard-edged styles. This conveyed a Pop Art sensibility and a regard for the urban, and the referential tone of his later approach is somewhat similar to that found in the work of the artist Richard Larter (Fig.19). From this, I claim that Oldfield's virtual outsider position as a Neo-Modernist within the Central Street Gallery, was representative of a looming convergence of Modernist styles that would come into view as a separate convention commonly found in later Australian art. In short, the object of Oldfield's painting would later materialize as a personal, referential narrative, whereby social dimensions could be more readily blended into the construction of a Formalist painted work.

However, before this synthesis in Oldfield's practice occurred, he first utilised 'impure' codifications of chevron patterns within the *Mezzanine* painting as a way of opening up his style. He used a dynamic modulation of stripes and bars of colour. Despite some internal criticism of Oldfield at the time, *Mezzanine* was featured among the major Colour-Form works shown in *The Field* exhibition at the opening of National Gallery of Victoria,\(^ {728}\) and like Burn's *Premiss* (Fig.114) and *Equivalence* paintings (Fig.132), discussed in the previous Chapter as significant early examples of 'systemic' painting, I claim Oldfield's *Mezzanine* has specific characteristics relevant to the emergence of Critical Post-Conceptual painting in more recent Australian art.

Moreover, in naming this work *Mezzanine*, Oldfield made allusion to the idea of the public area or accessible "in-between space",\(^ {729}\) as he put it. Also, as the title suggests, Oldfield was ambivalent about the idea of representation, and in making *Mezzanine* he uncovered significant concerns inherent within the construct of a

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supposedly non-referential work. What is referred to is the notion of fluidly in formal expression utilising conventional language, and the idea of that occurring as an "interactive sign system".\textsuperscript{730} This implies the 'impure' codification of abstractionist language was useful in deflating purist values or, reductive representational 'negation' implicit in much of the avant-garde Modernist camp. It is for that reason Oldfield later identified Mezzanine as a "transitional form".\textsuperscript{731}

Likewise, a mezzanine is described in architectural terms as a constructed area where a high degree of social convergence occurs. The concept of an open space, visually existing in Mezzanine, is a device verified by the alternation of chevrons and waveforms seen in the unusual presentation of "non-referential forms" within a Hard-edge abstract painting. Oldfield described his 'constructive concept' of an actual mezzanine area as suggestive of "a middle zone",\textsuperscript{732} whilst Kyle Jenkins (artist and associated researcher), in discussion with Oldfield and myself concerning the production of the Mezzanine painting, preferred to describe it as a contemporary form of "no man's land" in Australian art.\textsuperscript{733} Importantly, Jenkins and I concur that this idea is allegorically representative of a place where interpretation has flourished within a field of active engagements.\textsuperscript{734} In my estimation, within the Mezzanine painting, specifics of content found in the formalised arrangement of a regionally made yet definitively cosmopolitan work override any oblique formalist tendencies. These features assist the 'impure' codifications of the Mezzanine painting to function as a meaningful and therefore informing "transitional form"\textsuperscript{735} located in the field of the thesis.

From that perspective, the radical question put by Oldfield in 1968, was, after Modernism, whether or not remaineder abstract painting styles have ultimately presented the viewer and later artists with a closed reading of related painting practices? A genuine concern over the closure of representational openness that Oldfield's position conjures, in my understanding, has since been taken up in a wide array of Post-Modern and Post 20\textsuperscript{th} century conceptual abstractionist works, such as Gemma Smith and Oscar Yanez's collaborative Untitled c.2003 (Fig.141) or, Claudia Damichi's Tongue Tied c.2002 (Fig.43).

In this same later fashion, Matthys Gerber's Post-Modern abstractions such as Untitled c.2000 (Fig.191), like the Mezzanine painting, openly contradict a clichéd reading of prior formal painting practices. In my view this signifies a way relations between viewing art, and its ongoing construction of forms and language, has been similarly expressed in current works (Fig.141). There are a range of other factors surrounding Mezzanine worthy of consideration, such as the suppressed misogyny and phallocentrism of the period. Harrison's term "Social Internationalism",\textsuperscript{736} in referring to the changing and more cosmopolitan attitudes of Australian artists, was concerned

\textsuperscript{730} Op cit. Sylvia Harrison.
\textsuperscript{731} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{732} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{733} ibid.
\textsuperscript{734} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{735} ibid.
\textsuperscript{736} Op cit.
with how the complex issue of directives of Modernism then affected specific artists’ practices. Vivienne Binns and Wendy Paramor like Oldfield, incorporated discourses on ‘social conditions’ into their works. For instance, Binns’ socially biting, psychedelic *Vag Dens* c.1967 (Fig.142), also produced in this period, is illustrative of another critical discourse emergent in a formal practice amidst the struggles between rival Modernist camps cast on a sea of social and political upheavals of the day.

Similarly, in Oldfield’s transitional and iconic abstraction *Mezzanine*, we find the core of his Pop-art style of practice presented soon after in his *The Great Nostalgia Show* held at Central Street gallery in 1969, and where an aspect of Harrison’s concept of ‘Social internationalism’ is most firmly embedded. Oldfield’s *Hard-edge* portrayal of relevant cultural scenes quickly became a dominant theme in works such as *Ship of Fools* c.1970 (Fig.18). Richard Larter’s *Sliding Easy* c.1970 (Fig.19) is also comparatively relevant here. Oldfield’s slightly later style involved a modestly decadent ‘realist’ imaging of gay cultural life, and was reminiscent of themes elaborated by English painter David Hockney, such as *Peter Getting Out of Nick’s Pool* c.1967. These ‘social’ works produced by Oldfield immediately after *Mezzanine*, were, however, premised upon a stylistic direction first undertaken in his ‘impure’ expression of the International style (As discussed in Chapter 1).

Moreover, it is the transitional character of *Mezzanine* that illustrates Oldfield’s presentation of ‘apparent artistic difference’ via his ‘impure codification’. Oldfield’s personal delineation of concerns was vibrant, fluid, sensuous and discursive. Despite this, his and many of the Colour-Form works shown in *The Field* exhibition of 1968 were initially considered taught formal expressions, emptied of meaning. This initial analysis of the appearance of a radical style caused John Sinclair from the National Gallery of Victoria, and the international Formalist art critic Clement Greenberg, to comment that a concern felt by Australia’s arts aficionados about the arrival of “international anonymity”, was mostly unfounded. Regardless of how ‘specific content’ and ‘artistic difference’ is made apparent in these works, or become historically perceived, works like *Mezzanine* provide key indicators of difference in Australian art. For instance, the Australian visual arts community now has an indisputable legacy of formalist styles of painting, and a range of critical expressions in the language of abstraction that formal artists like Janet Dawson, Ian Burn, Sydney Ball, Mike Brown, Dick Watkins, Wendy Paramor, and Nigel Lendon, have all used to express themselves within an extended context.

Sylvia Harrison confirms that Oldfield’s *Mezzanine*, in a uniquely Australian response, was making a direct reference to an international reading of the art styles of the day. Harrison claims that in Oldfield’s work, “two codes, the referential and non-referential, popular art and high art, merged”. This concurs with Terry Smith’s claim in

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742 Ibid.
Australian Painting" that in this same period, and unlike what was happening in major metropolitan centres like New York and London, the separate reading of Conceptualism and Minimalism were understood regionally as a convergent convention. It is that significant aspect which Harrison has isolated and discussed as an early melding of language forms in Australian abstract painting practices that I find compelling. It is also a reason why I consider the pictorial thought or constructive concept expressed in Mezzanine to be seminal to the kind of Critical Post-Conceptual painting and the varied styles of conceptual abstraction occurring freely today, as discussed in subsequent Chapters.

The conceptual and architectonic spaces occupied by Oldfield's Mezzanine painting, as with Burn's Yellow Premiss (Fig.114) completed two years before it, are manifested by Oldfield's discreet consideration of formal concerns. For example, Burn had previously directed the viewer's focus to a personalised application of formal 'systems', an analysis of perceptual orders, and a radicalising of Modernist legacy. Oldfield generally redirected a 'systemic' focus through the manipulation and substantial investment in abstractionist language itself. He did so by making 'impure' the abstract formal codifications of then fashionable abstract forms of visual language, and by placing those into a fluid expression. In doing this, Oldfield, in a reversal of the process of reductionism, also alluded to the notion of the 'zero degree' or, reductive end-point of painting. This is a concern that fascinated international artists such as the Swiss artist Olivier Mosset (Fig.143) and the BMPT group around the same time.744

For instance, if the transformation of the absolutely reductive abstract language apparent in Mosset's Untitled (Fig.143), a work painted in Paris in 1968, is compared to his Double Reverse (Fig.144) made in New York in 1987, the latter Neo-Geo work has shifted ground considerably from the minimalist 'zero degree' ethos of the BMPT group.745 However, like Burn's systemic conceptual approach, and Oldfield's interactive critique of the iconic sign language of reductive abstractionism, a central aim of BMPT in the late 1960s was to neutralise the rhetoric of Modernism's prevailing dogma.

I interpret Burn, Oldfield and Mosset's reading of abstraction language as independently calculated moves towards fluidity or, formal expression utilising the flexible language of geometric abstraction. In the case of Mosset's contemporary formal painting based installation practices, that same process of critical evaluation has enabled him to continue to achieve a fresh reading of his art. In Mosset's later Double Reverse (Fig.144), were the counter-compositional floating and colliding free forms of Theo Van Doesburg (Fig.46) referenced by Mosset, signals a metacodification of conceptual abstractionist language which now has a far greater relevance in Mosset's evolving contemporary practice. This transitional form of expression is similar in concept but different stylistically to that

745 Op cit.
expressed by Oldfield in his earlier *Mezzanine*. The establishment of transitional forms, an interactivity of signs, and a fluidity of formal expression, are necessary and meaningful components of these developmental practices achieved by very different styles of painters, on opposite sides of the world, at approximately the same time.

I came to a mode of analysis for Oldfield’s *Mezzanine* painting and other transitional works via my investigation of John Nixon’s commentaries made in 1988,746 and various commentaries on similar matters by Bernard Smith in *Place Taste and Tradition*.747 However, by considering Nixon’s diagnostic methodology, I was assisted in clarifying my analysis of significant recent Australian abstract paintings in general. Nixon wrote that he had a direct concern for “a common practice of critical, post-conceptualism”.748 My attention was drawn to that comment, but even more to the qualification “if it teaches anything it is a way of analysis rather than style/look.”749 He explains, “The work itself functions as an action/an intervention, the work represents a model of positive action”.750 Here Nixon is referring to a later form of geometric and monochromatic expression. Nevertheless, he references a process of analysis both in his own practice and within others, and likewise stated that he was engaged in a wider interaction with sign systems.

This implies that his approach was informed by a manipulation of relevant legacy. In short, it is the statement, “a model of positive action”, that I considered most appropriate to bear in mind when seeking to define the methodological character of the types of critical painting that prefigure later relational forms of expression. Since then, I have attempted to seek out specific works or even styles of critical practice that have exhibited this interdependent quality. Nixon’s influence on recent Australian art is considered in detail in Chapter 7; however, I need to reference his critically achieved *Block Painting* c.1968 (Fig.175) for comparison as another important and relational periodic painting. That is in order to highlight why an artist like Oldfield felt it necessary to move away from Non-Objective image construction after completing *Mezzanine*.

Nixon’s *Block Painting* is a monochrome that illustrates how Nixon arrived at a formalisation of his painting/object style of practice in 1968, when Oldfield, like others, began leaving Non-Objective forms of expression behind. Nixon’s realisation of how ‘difference’ was to be further attained is shared on one level with Mosset’s ‘zero degree’ ethos, where a dialogic approach began that would lead Nixon, like Mosset, not into other area’s of semi-abstract figurative image production, but into a long term or developmental engagement with monochromatic and geometric painting-based practices. However, and as stated, an alternative for many critical painters during the representational crisis of the late 1960s and early 1970s was to shut their formalised practices down and seek out other forms of expression. It is in this way that we can perceive how Oldfield’s experimentation with the ‘impure’ codification of abstractionist discourse steered him away from highly reductive expression, into figuration and narration as an extension of his original ‘constructive concept’.

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747 Op cit.
749 Ibid.
750 Ibid.
The collapse and transposition of Peter Booth's 1960s formalist practice (Fig.16), into a figurative representational art (Fig.23) in the 1970s, is an instance that I have already discussed (See Chapter 1). Unlike Nixon (Fig.165) and Mosset (Fig.144), Booth like Oldfield did not attempt to fathom a way through the prevailing conventions of abstractionist painting. Yet, it was abstractionist artists such as Oldfield, Schlicht, and Watkins, who illustrated to the regional formalist academy that a route out of a looming dilemma concerning the mortification of International formalist language was critically available. As Terry Smith said of Oldfield and Watkins, they were “most promising” because they had “chosen to go back a little in order to go forward”. For an aspiring artist like Nixon, a relationship to abstraction was made viable through his radical and discursive manipulation of the abstractionist language forms the former abandoned.

In the 1980s Ruark Lewis expressed an example of the latter methodology within the ongoing production of his False Narrative and Silhouette (Transcription drawings) series (Fig.145). Here, however, a generic aesthetic language operates where the idea of language itself is used not in ‘impure’ codification, but a re-codification of known abstract pictorial schema. This series of works illustrates how language is both manipulated and controls his expression, and how aspects are recovered and utilised as meta-dialogue. His later series of Silhouettes are critical and developmental abstractions that make reference to an underlying formal character of unidentified indigenous works located in various Australian museums.

Here (Fig.145), what has been constructed is a form of Neo-Plasticism. The layout of an indigenous schema is scanned, and a transcription of concerns establishes a fluid interaction of signs made available for further critical discourse. The claim is that formal concerns, operable in the earlier works of artists such as, Ian Burn (Fig.114), Dick Watkins (Fig.26) or Alan Oldfield (Fig.137), represent a necessary and meaningful ‘divergent’ legacy in the contemporary domain of Australian formal painting.

Although Oldfield was a member of Central Street and a competent artist, he was first considered an artist who was supposedly “playing around”. as Harrison writes. That playfulness which involved making sexual references and commentary on mundane aspects of urban life was seemingly interpreted as a negative codification. Importantly, like Rollin Schlicht (Fig.140), this criticism was likely based on the fact that they incorporated a replay of 20th century artistic styles, implying ‘impure’ codification of purist Modernist accounts. This playfulness when reconsidered in contemporary terms as a generic sense of referentiality was extrapolated out of the Mezzanine work, and thematically featured in Oldfield’s solo Pop Art presentation The Great Nostalgia Show, held at Central Street in

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752 Ibid. P 403.
753 Op cit.
1969. As stated, that is where Oldfield moved away from ‘impure’ elaborations on the formalist language of abstraction into a social narrative, and a Pop Art style proper (Fig.18).  

I would like to further this idea by stating it is also appropriate for a formal artist to exhibit a sense of playfulness. The work of the Melbourne avant-garde musician and formal-style painter, Marco Fusinato (Fig.146), provides a current example of a highly diversified contemporary approach to painting. For instance, Fusinato is not interested in refining Post-Modern discourses or in producing a radical form of Modernist experimentation, neither is his approach overtly concerned with prior representational issues. Fusinato’s more performative approach, regardless of the intended use he makes of formal painting techniques, utilises in a similar fashion to Oldfield, a convergence of codes or language forms in the formal expression of a painterly practice. That interactive system, fluidly cohabiting within an informed mode of practice, enables an intersection between his expression of monochrome painting and what Fusinato defines as free noise to harmoniously occur.

The photo-sequence (Fig.146) shows one of Fusinato’s paintings _TM and MF No.3_, made in only 1.23 minutes. This was a collaborative project with the guitarist Thurston Moore (of the band Sonic Youth) in 2000, where the rapid speed of the work’s construction is considered a determining formal factor. Ben Curnow claims there is a meaningful reading of Fusinato’s public practice, which conjures a personal sense of ‘realism’ in the artists’ expression. Curnow elaborates, “This kind of realism expresses, moreover, a conviction that there is a real world – that ‘reality’ exists” and his practice “works in addition to reality and, in itself, as an elementary generation of reality.” This is Curnow’s way of saying that an artist’s personal experiences are readable as viable formal concerns of a work, and that others may consider these aspects of expression within a socialised discourse on Formalist practices. This is what Oldfield similarly achieved in his very different formal expression of painting in the late 1960s.

In this last instance, it is the variety of inventive formal devices found in the regionally expressed language of contemporary abstraction that is of interest, and that ‘impure’ codification of traditional boundaries now includes Fusinato’s experimental contemporary painting/sound practice. Fusinato’s attraction to formal practices concerns a way various forms can be made to function in the processing of relevant discourse, a procedure that works to open up a personalised reading of what can rightly be considered a relevant formalist practice in post 20th century terms. I feel that as an emergent discourse uncovered from an earlier domain of formalist painting practices, and it is a radical idea with credence.

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754 Ibid.
756 Ibid.
757 Ibid. P 11.
From a recent personal discussion I have held with Oldfield it is clear that he has begun discussing *Mezzanine* in terms of the work having an adaptive nature.\(^{758}\) As stated, the oblique expression of abstract language that appeared only briefly in such a complete and exclusive model within Oldfield’s practice in 1968 was complicit and participant in Greenbergian Formalist trends. Yet, *Mezzanine* was also presented as a way of responding to a dogmatic reading of the Formalist ideal of reductivism and a subsequent rejection of supposedly advanced representation values, such as the implicit representational ‘negation’ of Modernist painting. That critical commentary now includes the direction in which the academy of Central Street headed, and close differences apparent in Paramnor (Fig.24) and Watkins (Fig.99) works, for example, are again relevant. Especially significant is the way they have displayed similar alternative readings of the problems faced by Oldfield. Each makes clear an expression of artistic difference, and as a consequence, a discursive level of co-ordinance is evident in the content of the regional Formalist works they produced.

The paintings and associated painting-based practices discussed here are embedded in a recent Australian art-historical context. Since then, many other works have been made which share a generic relationship or commonality, despite a seemingly ever-broadening scope of divergent interests expressed in the active field of recent formal Australian painting. Thus, a sense of commonality, or a generic reading of influences and legacy, underpins the specific divergence that Ben Cumow suggests has been recently defined by more ‘real’ approaches to abstract styles of painting in contemporary Australian art.\(^{759}\)

In summarising, in the transitional *Mezzanine* painting, an enlivened level of alternative formalist painting rhetoric appears regionally, at the exact time that the process of cautious revision of the regional formalist academy began. Terry Smith locates this point of demarcation, as a time and a place were “the problematic practice”\(^ {760}\) first emerged in Australian art. However, that moment comes directly after the period of production that generated *Mezzanine* and other formally achieved Australian paintings. That moment heralded, what has since come to be denoted in expanded cosmopolitan and later Post-Modern terminology, as a relevant precursory field to contemporary Australian practices.

In the same casual meeting were *Mezzanine* was discussed with Oldfield, Jenkins and I proposed that our interest in the work was pertinent as an overdue evaluation of a supposedly failed work of art, later found to be contemporaneously meaningful.\(^{761}\) However, Oldfield modestly claimed he never considered the significance or longer term relevance of works he made during the late 1960s. Many of the formalist works shown in The Field exhibition,\(^ {762}\) remain under analysed, but they have begun to provide contemporary discourse with fresh meaning in

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\(^{758}\) Op cit.
\(^{759}\) Op cit.
\(^{761}\) Op cit.
\(^{762}\) Op cit.
texts such as David Pestorius’s *Geometric Painting in Australia*.\(^{763}\) Likewise, the 2003 Rhonda Davis curation *Central Street Live*,\(^{764}\) tells us by its title that a new appreciation of these works has unfolded.

With the benefit of hindsight, should we now ask whether overlooked paintings like *Mezzanine*, are not the very kind of seminal and problematic works of Australian art history that provide meaning after a lengthy process of revision and reassessment of the period has occurred. For instance, Ian Burn has shown with his *Value Added Landscapes* series, exhibited towards the end of his career in 1991 (Fig.100), that difficult works of art often have a propensity to not provide a closed or locked-down system of meaning. Thus Jenkins and I concurred that the significance located in Oldfield’s “Neo-Modernist”\(^{765}\) *Mezzanine* painting is embedded in the work, and the formal methodology informing the constructive concept of the painting itself.

The impure codification of abstract language that Oldfield presented through an interaction of sign systems in *Mezzanine*, like Burn’s systemic painting practice, illustrates to contemporary artists that a personalised expression of abstract visual art language-forms is an available and useful language.

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\(^{764}\) Op cit.

Chapter 6

Robert MacPherson: An Abstract Style of Painting

The argument that follows tracks innovative processes associated with a regional field of developmental formalist painting-based practices worked through by artists such as Burn and Oldfield, and the impact of earlier concerns on more recent times. These and other informing aspects are examined in the final two case studies of Part 2, which illustrate how artists like Robert MacPherson and John Nixon added to a background of relevant discourse in establishing 'contemporary' practices during the 1980s.

The first case study investigated Ian Burn's innovations within 'systems of painting'. In examining Burn's formalist painting enterprise, it was shown that he systemically evolved an engagement with the art-critical notion of 'natural' or 'imposed' artificial orders of perception. Burn aligned a systemic and constructive conception of Formalist painting within a nexus of conceptual/minimal influences, seminally establishing a contemporary style of formal painting during the mid-to late 1960s. In the second study, a similar analysis was undertaken of Alan Oldfield's interdependent art-critical ideas, and his development of a different model of Formalist painting in 1968 (Fig.137). Therein, specific characteristics and alternate formalist practices were discussed as factors that form a background to current activity, and enable a definition of Critical Post-Conceptual painting practices to be articulated.

The important notions carried forward include: 'fluidity' (eg. the co-ordination of abstract visual expression), the interactivity of 'sign systems' (a formalisation and expression of a meta-language), the significance of establishing 'transitional forms' of expression (the production of evidentiary art work marking difference in practice, methodological development, and the critical enunciation of a style in association with legacy, tradition, etc.) and the 'impure code' (where various ideas, styles, theoretical influences, and language forms, are harmoniously co-ordinated).
Robert MacPherson and John Nixon’s practices are suited to the task of grounding this discourse contemporarily, as they also provide an explicit consideration of the inherency of materials, associated theoretical concerns, and the practical responsive processes involved in the making of contemporary formal painting-based works of art. In the 1970s these artists began a discursive process of investigation and re-investment into the subject of formal styles of painting. They developed in the 1980s, and in turn their critical investigation partook in a cultural ratification of the subject of formalised painting-based practices during the 1990s. Overall these studies illustrate that these artists have affirmatively assisted in shaping tendencies in recent Australian art.

In support of my claim that MacPherson and Nixon are relevant to a study of Critical Post-Conceptual painting-based practices, Peter Cripps’ research into museum practices during the mid-1980s indicates that the once collaborative oeuvres of MacPherson and Nixon were based upon shared formal and historical understandings of the subject of painting. Importantly, that involved a reappraisal and further experimentation with ‘systems’ and of specific ‘styles’ of painting tested in many public exhibitions. Their significant collaborative involvement during the early 1980s with the Q-Space projects in Brisbane is testimony to that last assertion.786

The final case studies also examine MacPherson and Nixon’s affirmative relationship to regional legacy, and to the proposed genre: Critical Post-Conceptual painting. It is important to establish in these studies why the practical and/or theoretical engagements in their practices should be considered positive forms of expression in the field. Ben Curnow recently expanded upon the significance of formal Australian painting-based practices, claiming that what matters in this regard “is not a matter of mournful redundancy (as some might argue) but rather of the resistance they offer against the automatized barrage of detail or ‘content’ which saturates our culture”.787

Since the early 1970s, MacPherson and Nixon’s Australian painting-based practices have independently identified in their practices, characteristics that further define a particularisation of recent formal Australian painting, just as they are generally characteristic of artists engaging in ‘Painting the Object’. However, a central characteristic shared by all the artists so far discussed, aside from the critical resistance to a model of dependency they offer in their formal practices, concerns the development of a radical personal expression or a specific delivery of meaningful artistic content. Likewise, this art of critical engagement with formal processes and cultural concerns has entailed an elaboration of apparent artistic differences, expressed through the formalised usage contemporary art practitioners make of relevant, specific, or purely generic information (for example, significant historical precedence, relevant legacies, models of thought, discourses, styles, and systems).

Thus, I claim a consideration of the conceptual structuring apparent in both MacPherson’s and Nixon’s painterly works (Fig.151) assists in illustrating a meta-characteristic that confirms to the model of ‘artistic difference’ and ‘alternative character’ stressed by Burn, Lendon, Merewether and Stephen in the 1988 essay, The Necessity of

786 Peter Cripps (Curator), Q-Space and Q-Space Annex 1980-1981. Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1986. NB: In 1981 Cripps documented a series of collaborations that had occurred between these artists as part of his interest in museum practices.
In that collaborative proposal, recent aspects of Australian art are historically repositioned as necessary, no matter how replicant certain practices may at times appear. That remodelling was thought by the authors to be a useful way of qualifying the complex practices and issues that have continued to emerge in more recent Australian art. In the same way, MacPherson and Nixon's practices bear a commonality, illustrating a relationship to a theoretical model of interdependence, and the thesis proposition generally.

The suggestion that Australian art had a necessity about it in the 1980s, is an insightful assertion made by Burn, Lendon, Merewether and Stephen. They claimed that an expanded and ultimately far more generous reading of contemporary artistic practising was required, which would include contemporary interests, thus registering as significant aspects of a wider vista of contemporary Australian art. I became interested in the logic of that model in 1995, and I have adopted it in researching MacPherson and Nixon. I have come to consider them as significant, originating and critical, Post-Conceptual art makers. It is important to stress here that MacPherson and Nixon are considered providers of a positive paradigm: a most important and relevant concern for those currently interested in the expanding field of contemporary formal Australian painting-based practices.

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760 Ibid.
MacPherson's Abstract Style of Painting

For the last three decades, MacPherson has engaged with the usefulness of a variety of 20th century artistic notions, encapsulating them, within what I would define as, an abstract style of painting, object-making and installation art. That meta-style has been methodologically achieved via the development of a considered vernacular MacPherson entwines into a formalisation of practice. Trevor Smith has noted that MacPherson was “charting a rigorous yet playful path”770 possibly because MacPherson began his painting practice in the early 1970s, when the notion of ‘advanced’ painting was definably an unfashionable Formalist concern. MacPherson’s critical painterly works from the early 1970s carefully avoided a Greenbergian modelling of medium (paint) specificity, yet it is also true that he was informed as a painter by that same issue. The curator Ingrid Periz has clarified this contradiction when claiming MacPherson’s early practice is “distinguished by its conceptual rigour, and the irreverence it displays toward the historical imperative of Modernist art”771.

MacPherson’s interest in formal painting was, therefore, conditional. His immediate divergence from prevailing Greenbergian dogmatism was achieved, like Burn’s, by systematically modulating the inherent qualities of materials and focusing on the objectness of the artworks themselves. This is verified by Periz’s claim, “McPherson understood painting to operate as a system, and his investigation was similarly systematic as it explored in turn, the formal qualities of paint and surface, touch and gesture”.772 MacPherson’s mid-1970s paintings generally showed deference towards the playfully conceptual, an adherence to formal processes, and the reification of the purposefulness of materials in terms of bodily expression. Periz notes, “Greenberg’s determinations of the limit conditions for painting facilitated MacPherson’s own efforts to define painting, and establish the intellectual parameters of his own practice. Thus, as Greenberg had attempted to critically establish the irreducible facts of painting to be flatness, the enclosing shape of the support, and the nature of pigment, Macpherson devoted successive series of works to those, as conditions”.773

Initially at least, we need to consider his earlier black and white painterly works which were responses to Greenbergian prohibitions; in MacPherson’s words they, “served not as limitations so much as procedures for making painted canvases, as a system of rules that could be tested and rethought in its prescriptive solemnity”.774 By the 1980s, MacPherson’s conceptual and expressive style of painterly works was openly referencing a ‘picturing’ of the

770 Robert MacPherson’s vast oeuvre were recently catalogued by Trevor Smith and Alan Dodge on behalf of the Art of Western Australia. That text is recommended as a reference document on MacPherson’s life work. Similarly, the many Ingrid Periz catalogues, such as The Described the Undescribed produced for the Art Gallery of NSW in 1994, and Robert MacPherson produced for Artspace in Sydney in 1987, are also noteworthy because of the high standard of information they provide.
771 Ibid.
772 Ibid.
773 Ibid.
overt theatrical presence and heavily criticised 'advanced' International painting styles. From that constructive methodology, a personal concept of the limitations of recent painting came forward in the form of MacPherson's presentation of Paintbrush’s with Written Text (Fig.148). One of these Duchamp-like objects from 1981 is shown, and the text supplied for this quietly performative 'object work' pronounced, "When I dip the brush in paint the bristles become coated in paint, any move beyond this point is superfluous". 775 This transitional form marked for MacPherson a point of departure from traditional styles of painting.

I concur with the Periz assertion that MacPherson's early formal works were not flawed by a proxy deferral to Greenbergian rhetoric, and further agree with her comments that within MacPherson's paintings there is a clear illustration of how "the force of Modernist dogma was subverted". 776 Despite displaying mixed feelings over the practice of making paintings in relation to the notion of the 'found' object, MacPherson sustained a fascination with working through systemic forms of practice. A central theme of his interest in painting was the personal development of a formal and contemporary language of abstraction. This was an important stylistic theme or 'constructive concept' that emerged at the very beginning with his production of the various black and white works (Fig.160).

The interest MacPherson displayed in formalist painting practices and the fluid language of abstract painting centred upon the usefulness of those as an informing agency. MacPherson combined that with a generic and modulating interest in utilising the very processes of art making (Fig.155). These conceptual abstractionist aspects were placed in close relationship to seemingly unrelated poetic or enigmatic presentations of narrative, pictorial, and topical concerns that interested him as an art maker. What has appeared out of that is a vernacular form of expression focused on the meaningfulness of locally expressed dialogues (Fig.164). In particular, the somewhat unusual notion of 'memorial' is presented in a thematic discourse running through MacPherson's vernacular style of contemporary art production (Fig.162).

The clear emergence of a vernacular style in MacPherson's art is of specific interest for a number of reasons. Most importantly, it expresses his conceptualisation of contemporary art making processes. That includes the distinctive way in which facts, events, people and places are fabulised into ciphers in his formalist abstract style of painting. For instance, the Frog Poem installation-based series is another massive body of work where it is visible that these concerns have been embedded into the structure of an engaging formal art making system (Fig.149). Tony Bond, Head Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of NSW has commented, "The poetry of these installations is most rewarding, when it is encountered as a synthesis of visual and verbal experiences that create the conditions for the spectator to begin to spin their own yarn". 777 Here the conceptual conditions of the work act as a contemporary form of abstraction. The idea of abstraction is no longer confined to linear graphical concerns such as

776 Ibid
lines, markings or geometric patterns, but has been overrun with a plethora of semantic content expressed within new locations.

Importantly, throughout his career MacPherson has identified with unique subjects, and with a process characterised as ‘inherency’. ‘Inherency’ (implicit content), like ‘memorial’ (allusion to memory), are considered by Periz and by Trevor Smith to be key narrative elements of MacPherson’s extensively layered representational practice. This uniquely critical system, originally based upon his interest in making various literary and visual devices conceptually productive in his practice, was first developed when MacPherson began approaching painting from a more phenomenological perspective. Bond noted that MacPherson’s “formal language is often contrasted with the chaotic appearance of the organic”. This is an aspect of MacPherson’s oeuvre that verges on Scientism or Positivist discourse (as per the discussed in Chapter 2 on the curator Jean Clair and the exploits of Alfonse Bertillon).

However, MacPherson’s later modes of practical presentation are closer in spirit to the museum practices associated with Hans Haacke, or locally Peter Cripps and Mike Parr. This is an area of theoretical investigation that has fascinated international writers such as Douglas Crimp and Marta Rosler, interested in critiquing the idea of the contemporary art museum. There is a similar critique operating in MacPherson’s installation art, and a confounding attitude is evident in works like 20 Frog Poems: Distant Thunder (A Memorial) for D. M. c.1989. A work requisitioned by Rene Block for the 1990 Biennale of Sydney, and owned by the Art Gallery of NSW.

Bond addressed the problems some have had with apprehending the meaning of that work, stating, “behind the reverie of the poems, lies a serious consideration of the infinite complexity that language and objects weave in consciousness”. Bond was addressing the idea of ‘inherency’ that had grown out of MacPherson’s critical responsiveness to Greenberg’s doctrinaire reading of ‘medium specificity’, and an implausible ironic redirection he was critical of in Duchamp’s static ‘found objects’. Thus, the reasoning behind MacPherson’s fascination with objects like beehives, for instance, is clarified. These are claimed by MacPherson to be vessels with inherent character, and like his earlier paintings,

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776 Op cit.
777 Op cit.
783 Op cit.
desire to be filled. This implies that his paintings are objects, and the surfaces receptacles of meaning. But, MacPherson is as inclusive of pedestrian objects such as paintbrushes as he is with complex objects like the specifics of a technical language or the universal signage of flags (Fig. 149), or scientific specimens. However, it was local cultural forms of textual expression such as roadside or newspaper advertisements, and discarded banal materials like pins and rubber bands (Fig. 150) that appear to have mattered the most in his installation works.

The International style that interested MacPherson is a language he 'pictured' with the presentation of the Six Flags Frog Poems installation in 1991 (Fig. 149). In this instance, the inherent qualities of objects and materials have been merged in a fundamentally 'representational' display. That is, a much wider account and a personal engagement with a variety of known dialogues on contemporary art were alluded to with MacPherson's toying with the 'found', and the stylistic Formalism of signage. In Group 9 (Scale from the Tool) c. 1976 (Fig. 147) and Relics of Boredom: Red Tape Ball and Rubber Ball c. 1977 (Fig. 150), the widening scope and pathos of MacPherson's argument, already apparent by the end of the 1970s, is illustrated. In particular, the office works made from clips, pins and rubber bands were described by Trevor Smith as "miniature Robert Smithson's" and as "monuments to monumental boredom". Like the European Marcel Broodthaer's manipulations or 'object works', these were produced, according to Trevor Smith, because of "a frustrated desire to collect that has led to the production of work".786

Trevor Smith, in a commentary provided for MacPherson's Art Gallery of Western Australia retrospective of 2002, described the poetic condition of his oeuvre as incorporating the "re-presentation of memory", where "the preservation of vernacular culture, the poetics and politics of naming, the deployment of the readymade, and the ongoing legacy of abstraction" are played out as themes. Smith further noted, "The integrity with which MacPherson has been able to carry out this double act is rare, and special indeed".787 I concur, and a recent conversation with John Nixon in Melbourne confirmed that Smith, Nixon and I are not alone in our appreciation of MacPherson's enigmatic art, and of the overall contemporised dialogue of abstract styles of painting he has provided.

786 Op cit. P 70.
787 Ibid.

MacPherson and Nixon first worked together in V-Space in Melbourne, then collaboratively in Q-Space, and later in the Q-Space Annex in Brisbane in the early 1980s. They have shown works together that share a dialogue over a focusing of formal interests, and especially a hard-line appreciation of avant-garde ideas, Art-music forms, and 1920s Constructivist principles associated with Formalist art.
Figure 151 is a photograph illustrating one of the many brief Nixon/MacPherson collaborations held at Q-Space in Brisbane in 1980. Society for Young Artists Vkhutemas 1920 is a collaboration that publicly pronounced the arrival of an avant-garde approach in both MacPherson's and Nixon's art making. An approach that has tended to encourage the notion of invention and the socialist convention of applauding the 'dignity of labour' involved in working (in this case art making practices), whilst eschewing the creative or emotional compositional arrangement of paint associated with traditional romantic painterly styles. The mystagogic expression of Albert Tucker\(^7^9\) is an earlier local example that is useful here as a 'creative/expressive' art-historical reference point.

MacPherson began what I claim is a Critical Post-Conceptual painting practice in Brisbane in 1974, first showing at Ray Hughes Gallery, the Institute of Modern Art, and then Coventry Gallery in Sydney. That series of shows, and the ideas permeating the four large black works entitled Two Blacks (Norden) for MM (Fig.152) made for a formalist enterprise that stood MacPherson in good stead until the early 1980s when he briefly moved away from painting. Like Booth, he returned to painting, producing in the 1990s the impressive Mayfair series (Fig.162). However, that was not until a confluence of styles of art making had been seen through in the hard-line anti-aesthetic of the 1980s.

When MacPherson returned to a significant production of painting done in a contemporary abstract style, earlier experimental painting works like Popov and the Lost Constructivists c.1982 (Fig.153) became reinvested as relevant archival works pertinent to a latter conceptualisation and further production of painted works of art. MacPherson’s supposed deference to Greenbergian Modernist assertions concerning the inevitable functions of painting was made far more transparent as an ongoing concern in the later installations of the Mayfair paintings (Fig.162). There, a principal interest in formal concerns clearly began referencing previous works, themes and aspirations from his overall production.\(^7^9\) It is noteworthy that even at an initial stage, Periz remarked that MacPherson had “developed his own model of the Greenbergian ideal of painterly self criticism”, where “the notion of inherence which, having

\(^{7^9}\) Op cit. Bernard Smith, Australian Painting, P 131.

considered the painter’s tools, found the means rather than the history of painting capable of generating its subject matter". On that point Trevor Smith has generally described MacPherson’s longer term interest in painting as antithetical to the “aesthetically questionable reductivist endpoint of the blank canvas”, believing instead, that in MacPherson’s painterly works, “the canvas and the paintbrush become the seedbed for an aesthetic system that has its antecedents in concepts of measurement relating to the body, which are definitively pre-modern in origin”. Of interest concerning that matter, and also MacPherson’s passage through the domain of contemporary painting, has been his relationship with the Modernist legacies of Duchampian anti-aesthetics, Greenbergian Formalism, Minimalism, and Conceptualism, with its own revision of Russian Constructivist principles. It is for that reason that I claim that MacPherson, like Nixon, has elaborated what can be defined as a critical and Post-Conceptual convergence of all these ideas and concerns as a workable constructive concept. That entails an extended critical appraisal of a wide range of influences and styles that seems to have neither tarnished nor encroached on the personable quality of MacPherson’s formally achieved and highly discursive painted works of art. Periz has described this aspect positively, stating, “the investigation of painterly process provided MacPherson with a range of procedures and prescriptions for his practice, so to the structuring procedures of the more recently adopted sciences, offered the means through which work is generated”.

Trevor Smith’s speculative claim that MacPherson’s works are Pre-Modern in origin is problematic. What is known is that MacPherson claimed not to be a Modernist, with Modernism having run its course by the time he took up making art. If that is so, then a Pre-Modern reading is as unavailable as it is available, so we should have little interest in attempting to align his art with iconic ciphers, tribal markings, or whatever it is that is supposedly authentically pre-Modern about his art making. We also know that influences have been taken on board, and a considerable amount of rhetoric also, within MacPherson’s responsive oeuvre. For instance, MacPherson was aware of criticism, and made good practical use of it through a playful form of parliance that was allowed to appear within the internal mechanism of his personal expression of Formalist art making processes.

As an example, in 1977 he asked a sign writer to make as many graphic-art letterforms using only the capital ‘A’ as possible. Artist-Artisan (Fig.154) was exhibited as a litany of styles and influences that were apparently widely known and obviously freely available for use. This is a personal favourite of MacPherson’s installations, as it eloquently responds to the criticism of his painting aligning with Greenbergian Formalism. In this work the abstract quality of the graphic art styles overrides the significance -

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790 Op cit.
792 NB: What is directly implied by the use of the term “discursive work” is a meta-discourse, or participation in a developmental and dialogic approach to contemporary art making.
794 Op cit. Trevor Smith, Robert MacPherson.
of the repetitive letterforms. The capitalised letter 'A' is transformed into a variegated cipher, a semiotic art form or visual lexicon, ultimately operating as a personal signifier of an abstract expression experienced as a contemporary formal painting/installation. This, then, in an exaggerated sense, is not unlike a tribal style of communicable identification (a variegation of repetitive body markings perhaps), and in a conceptual manner possibly relates back to Trevor Smith's earlier claim of a Pre-Modern meaning located in MacPherson's art.

This commentary, concerning a conceptualisation of ciphers and tribal markings I have associated with an abstract-style of painting, is a poignant reference to Trevor Smith's allusion, as MacPherson shunned a Modern look in the production of his abstract works. Notwithstanding that somewhat paradoxical consideration, if we do not first note the subtle detail in Two Blacks (Norden) for MM (Fig.155), the unwary critic or uninformed spectator could be forgiven for being fooled into seeing this early painting/installation as deferring towards Reinhardt, Malevich or even Rodchenko's infamous Pure Red, Yellow and Blue painting of 1921 (Fig.156). Or it could be seen as acknowledging their sharp intellectual displays of reductive Formalism as a leading concern, and by proxy, linking to notions of perspective and classicism due to the representational 'absence' they present.795 This leading assumption would be a mistake, even though there is a degree of accuracy to it.

To explain this assertion, the minimal Two Blacks (Norden) for MM (Fig.155) carries a phenomenological responsiveness and clarity of methodological and conceptual prescription, which are cogent concerns in MacPherson's then physical expression of a formalist type of art.796 With the first public presentation of MacPherson's black abstractionist paintings, what was carefully paraphrased in the Two Blacks (Norden) for MM is the tripartite idea of containment, capacities, and capabilities. This entailed a self-limiting perspective on art production that was manifested early in MacPherson's career. It should not be confused with the reductive drive of Modernism per se, as discussed in Part 1. MacPherson's reduction was intended to eliminate the confusions he associated with the use of colours. According to MacPherson's testimony in 1975, colour tends to "let artists off the hook".797 By this I assume he meant that colour, as a known seductive element of Modernist composition, overshadowed the contemporary problems that he felt needed to be focused upon.

795 Op cit. Yve-Alain Bois, Painting as Model.
796 An early Australian article was provided by Pamela Bell, 'Brisbane Scene'. Art and Australia, July, 1975.
For Macpherson, addressing this perceptual concern manifested itself in an analysis of physical processes and a preference for a phenomenological responsiveness gestured to through a considered act of making in the Two Blacks (Norden) M.M. (Fig.155). Thus, the inherent nature or qualities found in the tools available to the art maker became interesting by proxy, and read as envoi capable of conjuring a critically focused formalist understanding. For example, it appears that MacPherson concluded not only that the constraint of using just black and white paint was suitable for a systematic development of a serially thematic painting project, as Ad Reinhardt, Robert Ryman, Ian Burn, and a great many others had done, but he also read the act of formalisation as "a tool that could be used like a brush, so that nothing might interfere in the apprehension of process".796 Again this is not really a pre-Modern consideration in my opinion, but rather a developmental idea that deflated and transformed ideas lifted from the mausoleum of antiquated Modernist aesthetic language forms.

This achievement in MacPherson's art, aside from providing the domain of formal painterly practice with a dynamic, productive, and personalised 'telling of a tale', configures MacPherson's abstract style in the realm of Post-Modern artistic practices. In the earnest yet inquisitive production of the four black process paintings (Fig.155), the important developmental idea of 'bodily gesture' was conceptually re-posed, radically distinguishing these from other avant-garde Formalist Modernist Australian paintings. Tony McGillick's similar looking Republic c.1967 (Fig.157) for instance, was constructed close in spirit to Jasper Johns' rhetorical engagement with the perceptions of the viewer.

Yet, the object of painting for MacPherson posed a different question than it did for McGillick, it was about the painting as receptacle or vessel.

In the performative act encapsulated in the systemic production of the Two Blacks (Norden) for MM (Fig.155), MacPherson was stating what McGillick hinted at by his placement of markings tangible on the stylistically defiant Republic painting (Fig.157). McGillick's Republic was a politicised form of 'advanced' painting issuing from an earlier Australian context. Like many other minimal formalist paintings made at that time, McGillick's generally referred to a burgeoning 'objectness' in the field, and specifically, to the sculptural and irregular polygons of Frank Stella's influential Coloured Chevron Series of paintings (Fig.158).

McGillick's irregularly shaped Republic (Fig.157), with its pointedly minimal concern for the painting's objecthood, was no less discursively combined with the Neo-Dadaism of Jasper Johns confrontational perceptual works, and to a degree with the austerity and Romantic mysticism of Rothko's late Abstract Expressionist period. The difference between MacPherson's Two Black's (Norden) for MM (Fig.152) and McGillick's reminiscent Republic

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796 Ibid.
(Fig. 157) made seven years earlier, is that aside from a serialised presentation of the notion of *faktura*, as the Constructivists described the importance of the surface of a painting and an artist's physical relations to it, MacPherson's sharply focused interest was in the substances used to construct a painting. That interest became readable as a constructive concept in his art; thus, it is understood in a Critical Post-Conceptual modality as a signature element in MacPherson's abstract style of painting. This physicality was something like a new tool, one that was capable of being made significant within "the real", as Rex Butler put it elsewhere.\footnote{\textsuperscript{790}}

Thus, MacPherson's later interests places him far from Rothko's mysticism, but also close to what he called "the wet paper bag" of Greenbergian Formalism.\footnote{ibid.} MacPherson was also familiar with many of Duchamp's found objects, such as the tubes of paint, toilet fountains, or the sculpturally redirected bicycle wheels and shovels. However, MacPherson felt Duchamp's 'found objects' tended to lose their functional essence once ironically or allegorically transformed by their nomination into an art object within an institutional frame. Conversely, MacPherson argued that substances like paints, and objects such as brushes, were capable of providing a discursive or loosened lexical meaning, whilst functioning as originally intended. Here a central device is revealed in his practice. The conceptual idea of art is first deflated, because the object or substances of art are considered to be neutral. Second, a lexical idea of art is retrieved as a Critical Post-Conceptual concern because of the transformative potential of substances and objects are considered both mobile, and inclusive.

\textbf{Representation in Formal Discourse}

In the previous section the fluidity and neutrality of materials was discussed, and similarly ian Burn had also worked with unusual or everyday materials prior to the 1970s. An example of this is his *Glass/Mirror Pieces* (Fig 136), first shown in the National Gallery of Victoria's *Field* exhibition in 1968.\footnote{ibid.} Burn maintained that this was a work of art that could be shaved by, as he himself had done, in another instance panes of glass used by Burn in various installations were given to back to his associate Mel Ramsden, who reused them for the construction of ordinary picture frames.\footnote{ibid.}

Similarly, in MacPherson's hyper critical and conceptual envision an artwork can become 're-found', it is capable of being displaced and recovered,\footnote{\textsuperscript{803}} as materially purposeful so to speak. This is where orders of perception emerge as conditional concerns for the inherent objectness of an art. In this convolution, the conceptual order that underpinned the notional conditions of the 'found' art-object's ironic yet seemingly fixed reading was confronted, in

\footnote{\textsuperscript{790} Op cit. Rex Butler. *An Uncertain Smile*.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{800} ibid.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{807} Op cit.}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{802} ibid.}
the 1980s, with newer and more complex demands to exist in a state of flux. The Duchampian found object could not exist both ways. It could not be lexically loosened from standard locations, associations, or signification as art, and then be expected to stay put.

Or to put it another way, a suitably denoted work of art is co-ordinately related to a host of factors, in order to provide a range of available meanings. Despite this complexity, I feel that MacPherson, like many contemporary Australian art makers, understood the purposefulness of this semantic ideation, which helps explain his interest in making the somewhat seminal formalist black works in the manner he did in the mid-1970s. It would also provide a rationale for each painting being made as though it was an individual container, just as each surface area was prepared and carefully executed using a variety of implements and specified physical strokes. The pitch-blackness of his early paintings, however, uniformly denies composition and pictorial illusionism, as though a hidden Suprematist agenda was also in play. This implies there is a substantial level of visualisation involved in these highly reflective works, which is an outcome of the surface's tensions, and that further implies subjectivity by proxy. Peter Osborne's article, 'Painting's Negation, Gerhard Richter's Negatives' is relevant to the kind of representational issues surrounding MacPherson's Critical Post-Conceptual practice; which are also evident in both Burn's (Fig.136) and Pistoletto's (Fig.98) presentations of Mirror Pieces.

For MacPherson, the body was engaged in making the early abstract paintings, generally by working through a formalisation of the rituals of application. Each representational work was conceived through a strict methodology that made use of the dynamics of the materials' 'inherence' and the bodily condition of physical reach. Thus, a developmental differentiation or 'natural' order of artificial perception appeared through the provision of variations of stroke, form and material application. Note that the term 'artificial' implies that art making is a representational act, therefore, twice removed from reality.

Strokes over Black (Vertical) for T c.1974 (Fig.160) is another example of how MacPherson utilised process as a form of 'natural' ordering of representational expression. In this seminal Critical Post-Conceptual approach, the search for new content reveals a critical practice that co-ordinately or harmoniously produces content. Therefore, the non-arrest of meaning, a concern that interests Bonito and Dunn (discussed in Chapters 2 and 8), is apparent in this particular system of Formalist painting were the aesthetic appeal of MacPherson's works is contingent to the process of its making, therefore, sidelined as a once over-dominant convention.

In Figure 160 and other early series of conceptual abstractionist painting (Fig.152), MacPherson's specific interests in formal procedure, Non-Objectivity, and mechanical relationship to bodily movement, are expressed as highly contingent matters that are often representative of the only verifiable content in the works; aside from the

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804 Camilla Grey. The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922. New York, 1962. NB: The subject of 'Suprematism', and the doctrine of 'Non-Objective painting' promoted by Kasimir Malevich in the 1920s, are outlined in detail in this text.
poetic references made in the naming of works to establish other notions such as 'inherency'. For these reasons, and because the 1970s series Strokes Over Black (Fig.160), Scale To Rule (Fig.147) and the Two Blacks (Norden) for MM (Fig.152) have clearly eclipsed Greenberg's essentialist Modernist dictums over medium specificity, I consider these to be Critical Post-Conceptual paintings and significant Australian works of art.

In researching for the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Trevor Smith indicated that in the midst of making Two Blacks (Norden) for MM (Fig.152), MacPherson refused to buy into critical oppositions such as abstraction and/or non-representational art versus representational/figuration. MacPherson referred to this as "an argument of fools", making it clear that he took a certain position because those interested in this subject "failed to accept the fact that no matter what the way in, the things that influence or excite you to paint are the real, the seen". In this way MacPherson's own fabulation of a differentiating formal contemporaneousness in Australian art, like that of Burn, Oldfield and Fusinato, is embedded in a personal sense of having a realistic practice. That rationale falls in line with Sol Lewitt's non-literalist minimal approach discussed in Part 1 and exemplified by his statement, "obviously a drawing of a person is not a real person, but drawing of a line is a real line".

That idea of Lewitt's can be extended, and can assist in qualifying ideas that I feel MacPherson and many other contemporary Australian art makers have paraphrased in their own regional production of formalist styles of paintings. Despite the multiplicity of factors and considerations about the idea of painting, the many ongoing representational issues, it is reasonable to state that MacPherson has done more than just make formalist paintings or, painted works of art. In brief, MacPherson's early painting approach emphasised appraisal and innovation, and the idea that a uniqueness or reality in painting is achievable. It is that aspect which remains an underrated consideration in Australian art-historical terms. In this same manner, the appearance of truly indigenous painting in Australia, as defined by Terry Smith in Australian Painting, and by Peter Sutton in a more specific cultural interpretation in Dreamings, has helped to clarify the importance of visual narration to Australian culture generally, and the individual's need to define their expression no matter what racial, ethnic, or cultural denomination.

Medium: The Manifest of Materials

MacPherson represents a newer generation of painter in the Australian context. For, instance, he is an art maker who quickly reconciled the prevailing reasoning of Greenbergian Formalism and Michael Fried's reflexive concerns about

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605 Op cit.
607 Ibid.
610 Op cit.
611 Op cit.
the tendencies of the Western project of painting. On this Fried wrote, "The realm of the arbitrary and the visually meaningless must be experienced in a meaningful relationship to the pictorial". Although he expressed his opinions about tendencies in abstractionist art making as a negative paradigm, it was however more a critique of Minimalist art forms, and a challenge to Judd's self-evident and theatrical "specific objects" idea. It is one argument that MacPherson appears to have critically responded to early in his career, and also in his later painting practices.

Rosalind Krauss expressed a view different from Greenberg's formalist notion of painting and its "manifest physical qualities", yet as Trevor Smith concludes, Krauss, like MacPherson, remained "doggedly attached to this notion of medium". In the light of that observation, and because it is relevant to MacPherson's practice as a painter, it is necessary to understand why the notion of 'medium' has remained a cogent issue.

As mentioned earlier, MacPherson had referred to Greenberg's theories humorously, as "a wet paper bag" that he was "constantly poking his finger through ... without wanting to tear his way out". Importantly, MacPherson further stated that he would not "toss the bag aside, nor walk away". An answer to this expression of ambivalence is straightforward. Greenberg's idea on medium specificity provided MacPherson with a foil, a platform to stand upon, and a location where new meaning was discursively achievable; as discussed in Part 1.

A series of Untitled works, made for a systemic painting installation first shown at the Brisbane Q-Space Annex in 1980, is illustrated in Figure 161. In these works whilst canvassing a co-ordination of factors, issues, and concerns, MacPherson was also exercising his interest in how meaning is constructed. He had been developing these ideas through his involvement with John Nixon. From the logic exposed in this aspect of MacPherson's art making, Ingrid Periz has discussed the way meaning is declared, noting "the coupling of groups ... is a process that acknowledges language as a system of differentiation, one in which meaning is derived from a system of differences." Periz further wrote, "such differences between one stretcher and another, one word from another, have no meaning apart from their value as differentiation (see Fig. 161).

Periz's semantic reading of 'differentiation' within Non-Objective visual expression further implies something curious about an art maker who had claimed that it was not possible to define himself as a Modernist, since the tasks of Modernism had already been completed before he even began to make art. That refutation confirms that without a foil, the symbiotic meaning located in MacPherson's impure codification of

812 Op cit.
813 Op cit.
816 Op cit.
817 Op cit.
818 Ibid.
819 Ibid.
formalist practice, and even within that of an art-critical theorist such as Rosalind Krauss, could possibly evaporate into pointlessness. Here at the abstracted edges of artistic comprehension available to words and intended meaning, a seemingly necessary and tentatively balanced co-ordinance is made evident in MacPherson's Critical Post-Conceptual 'abstract style' of painterly practice, that is, nevertheless, inextricably linked to a legacy of Modernist Formalist painting. The rhetorical question arises: if an art is so necessarily linked to a past movement, style, or tendency, then why isn't it participating in its current development?

Periz has investigated this anomaly through a consideration of MacPherson's contemporary interest in Formalism, concluding, "This system's explanatory viability has never been completely exhausted, even if its model of operation has". Further, "the lure of systems resides, in part, in their generative capacity and for an artist compelled to produce, desirous of structure and anxious to delimit the role of choice, there is an obvious attraction." There are many other aspects of MacPherson's oeuvre, and these have been well addressed by Ingrid Periz for many years now, and more lately by Trevor Smith and John O'Brien. This paper is not an appropriate place for attempting a similar task; suffice it to say that the Vertical Stroke works, the seemingly endless series of abstract Filled Gestures, the various Scale To Rule paintings, the Sarah Merles process works, the Secular Red and Grey object works, The Robert Pene Drawings, the innumerable installation works with the Frog Poem titles, and most recently the vast array of Mayfair works, all deserve to be fully reconsidered in detail at some point.

However, a brief discussion of MacPherson's recent Mayfair painting installations is appropriate. They relate better than other works to the idea presented in this thesis concerning the advent of an emerging genre of formal painting in Australian art. A typical Mayfair installation of this type is from 1993, Mayfair 56 Paintings for GW and Reno Castelli (Fig.162).

The Mayfair works typified by this photograph highlight the conceptual and material links that I wish to establish as being characteristic of a Critical Post-Conceptual form of painterly practice. The many Mayfair works appear to have flowed from MacPherson's interest in making plain a convergence of signs and symbols registering first and foremost as a painterly image activated by the poetic or reverie of the accompanying 'naming', within a constructive concept.

For instance, a critical form of pre-inscription is significantly made evident in the painting, Mayfair June (Blue-Hay Morning) For GB c.1994 (Fig.163). This later expression of vernacular commentary circuitously references

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821 Op cit.
822 Op cit. P 13. NB: The Curator Ingrid Periz points out that there are parallels that can be drawn to John Nixon, Peter Tyndall and Bronwyn Clark-Coolee's separate oeuvres.
823 Op cit.
back to the earlier series of blacked-out paintings (Fig. 152). Equally significantly, reference is made in this work to the infamous Big Banana tourist and truck stop, and with it a sideways reference towards MacPherson’s previous anti-nationalistic canvas paintings shaped in the outline of Queensland. This is a series gently mocking the supposed literalism and nationalism in certain Colour-Form works of the Central Street painters such as Tony McGillick (Fig. 35) and Michael Johnson (Fig. 4). These Australian artists had made specially shaped canvases a la Frank Stella (Fig. 158), whose regional works implied for MacPherson an American vernacular, despite the appearance of so many local differences already discussed. Periz claims that the interest MacPherson shows in explicitly local language is premised on an interest in the fading poetic demands of “a rich vernacular” found in Australian culture. Colloquial nicknames like Buggers, Muggins, Arthur and Martha, Pat Malone, Joe Blow and Lord and Lady Muck highlight the special character of this passing regional language. According to Periz, “as in the earlier process paintings, the title of the individual works and series describes the image”. 825

The work shown in Figure 164 is responsive to the vernacular style of the Mayfair installation series itself, and is entitled 14 Paintings (Naming) Arthur and Martha in Memory of DP. This was also made 1993. I believe that these conceptually informed painted works of art, are not secondary to a linguistic signification as the object of the exercise, rather they are formally convergent upon the discourse of reverie, and of a nostalgia for making painting in less complex terms. In these works facture (surface texture) relates to content, and abstraction and reverie inform the presented visual/sign, in an open transaction or interaction between ‘sign systems’ that Oldfield’s painting first illustrated was possible in 1968 (Fig. 137). These factors are to be witnessed in MacPherson’s ‘abstract style’ of painting as co-ordinate characteristics of Critical Post-Conceptual painting found in an active, positively expressed, contemporary field of engagements with representational issues. As Burn put it, this can occur on both “natural... [and] ...imposed artificial orders” 826 of perception.

The last sample of MacPherson’s painting illustrates two completely different series of Mayfair works (Figs. 162 and 164) that have, however, begun informing each other on various levels since the beginning of the 1990s. Setting aside the linguistic style they share it is of especial interest that the notion of ‘memorial’ has been abstractly arranged in oppositional ways.

Firstly, it is found in the vanishing tone of the localised vernacular of the bigger Mayfair installation (Fig. 162), a work displaying an orchestration of local car advertisements that have become marked and humorously dated over time. Then in another manner altogether, the notion of ‘memorial’ in MacPherson’s still changing art is made comical and endearingly personal in the sole textual work sub-titled, Arthur and Martha (Fig. 164).

825 Op cit. P 64.
826 Op cit.
in this case study, MacPherson's early and mature formal painting processes have been discussed, and are posited as relevant to the thesis argument. The analysis shows that MacPherson has not only developed the idea of a fluid interaction of systems of painting, but also in doing that he has importantly presented a positive paradigm for formal styles of painting in recent Australian art. One that I claim is Critical Post-Conceptual.
Chapter 7  John Nixon: A Model of Positive Action

Fig. 165  John Nixon.  
Twenty Years of Monochrome Painting;  

John Nixon's extensive formalist painting practice represents the fourth and final case study of Part 2. Nixon began painting in the late 1960s, maintaining his practice to the present day. In the 1980s, Nixon specifically defined himself a Critical Post-Conceptual practitioner, producing a body of work to support that position. Nixon is now represented in major museum collections of contemporary art around the world, and in Australia's leading contemporary private galleries including Sarah Cottier in Sydney, Anna Schwartz in Melbourne and David Pestorius in Brisbane.

By examining these paintings, object-works, installations, personal notes, and commentary by associates and public criticism, an influential practice is uncovered that characterises a model of positive action in the nominated field. It is argued that the central claim of the thesis is verified through an examination of evidence and testimony. Here, as it was in the MacPherson study, a second specific example of a Critical Post-Conceptual practice is recognised as a formal and poetic achievement in the field.
In clarifying that claim, I refer to a letter Sue Cramer wrote in 1988 after privately surveying Nixon's studio. In seeing Nixon's works in situ, Cramer claimed she had come to understand what Kasimir Malevich meant when he spoke of the "nature and meaning of artistic creation".527 Cramer in further quoting Malevich, stated, "Feeling is always and everywhere the one and only source of creation."528 Adding, "I understand too, how the [Nixon's] ready-made sculptures, the monochrome, cross and object paintings, stand defiant of illusionism and are the anathema of simulation. They are quite simply what they are — reality in the first order and they are rich with life and feeling because of it. The integrity of being is after all the essence of non-objectivity".530

Through research and after a lengthy consideration of Nixon's Non-Objective painted works, I also feel his Formalist works produce a profound effect. For myself this is particularly evident in the newer geometric paintings like the small Orange Monochrome Construction in Five Colours c.200 (Fig.176). This is a work concerned about "a unity of the abstract and the real",530 as expressed in Cramer's letter. That succinct critique of the role of abstraction in Nixon's oeuvre is, as Carolyn Barnes wrote in notes at the back of the same small catalogue containing Cramer's letter, is an accurate and informative observation.531 Barnes' notes also provide a perceptive analytical comparison of Nixon's supposedly 'radical' Late-Modernist style to theorisation made by Yve-Alain Bois concerning the death of Modernist painting.532 That critique of Barnes is discussed after further commentary.

Barnes and Cramer's supportive and constructive critical accounts are, however, at odds with the way some writers in recent Australian press perceive Nixon's formal art making. For instance, the critic John McDonald has generally expressed a negative appraisal. His critique of Nixon's art is also referenced later as a relevant discourse. However, before entering into an analysis of Nixon's self-proclaimed "critical, post-conceptual"533 or, "meta-conceptual"534 art making processes, it should be noted that there has been no detailed academic book published on Nixon's work to date. There is, though, an extensive range of newspaper articles and exhibition catalogues available. These are considered credible research material, as contemporary critical texts on Nixon's art making practices over the last 20 years.

The most relevant texts include the E.P.W. or Experimental Painting Workshop series of essays, produced by writers to be discussed later in this case study. There are also three booklets that define the archival character of Nixon's works up to 1994: Songs of The Earth c.1990,535 Tableaux c.1991, and Thesis c.1993. The latter two were issued by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne. These texts introduce significant ideas that will

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528 Ibid.
529 Ibid.
531 These texts are found in a catalogue entitled John Nixon—1990 and have been independently published through Pataphysics Books. Melbourne, 1990. This document accompanies a set of exhibitions produced by John Nixon. The galleries where these exhibitions occurred are City Gallery, Melbourne. Galleria Ingrid Dacie, West Germany. Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland. And, Roslyn Oxley 9. Sydney, 1990.
535 Refer, Pataphysics Books.
be referenced, and were published by the time Nixon held the *Twenty Years of Monochrome Painting* exhibition in various galleries, including Roslyn Oxley Gallery 9 in Sydney during 1988 (Fig 165).  

In February 1994 the curator Clare Williamson from the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, in association with Monash University in Melbourne, published the most important of these small books, *Thesis*. This accompanied the above-mentioned travelling exhibition of works made by Nixon between 1968 and 1993, amounting to a form of retrospective survey. In this, Judy Annear, Ben Curnow, Laslo Reber and John Barlycorn (pseudonym) provided significant commentary on his theoretical and practical approach to a contemporary formal painting-based practice. Importantly, *Thesis* provides through Nixon's own testimony an unambiguous picture of a committed, thoughtful and formal contemporary oeuvre, just as it is a measured response to the considerable criticism levelled at Nixon in the Australian press.

Williamson's *Thesis* is a credible publication for another reason. It highlights a methodology that made it possible for Nixon to provide so many presentations of contemporary art in a great many places around the world. Those have been at the private, independent, state, and national gallery level. It is that far reaching aspect of Nixon's practice that helps to explain why his ideas are appreciated by a widening circle of artists and theorists in Australia and in Europe; and now also in America, with a recent acquisition going to the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Thus it is reasonable to claim that John Nixon is one of Australia's better-known contemporary art makers on the world stage. The painting/installation *Experimental Painting Workshop (EPW)* 3, held at the Australian Embassy in Tokyo in 2001 is illustrative not only of his cultural successes abroad, but also of the considered combination of painting and installation processes that characterises his practice. This particular work highlights Nixon's long-term fascination with collecting designed or crafted chairs as integral cross-functional objects/artworks (Fig 167).

Through researching Nixon's practice I can now see why he has defined himself a radical Modernist art worker, just as there is little mistaking why Vladimir Tatlin's 1920s maxim "Not for the new, not for the old, but for the necessary" was paraphrased at the beginning of *Thesis*. That quote is an indicator of a philosophical approach...
perspective underlying Nixon’s art. For Nixon it is necessary to illustrate what he personally feels is required from a committed practice and especially, of what it means to be practically experienced in the problematical field of contemporary painting.

Tatlin’s maxim is suggestive of a number of issues for Nixon. One is that art making should neither be considered a function of fashionable reflexivity or, a slavish result of conditional revisionism leading into pointless replay. However, the key suggestion of Tatlin, which Nixon effected in his own practice, is that the process of art making could be considered ‘entirely’ by experiencing relational aspects in a dialectical manner. It is evident that for Tatlin, as for Nixon, the production of art appears through a paring-down process via a “necessary” discourse. Tatlin’s Modernist views and socialist orientation appear well summarised within his maquette, the Monument to the Third International c.1919 (Fig.168).

Fig 168 Vladimir Tatlin
Monument to the Third International, 1919.

Criticisms, Cues and Details

Although the practices of MacPherson and Nixon are associated, they are not readily interchangeable, even though John McDonald has defined Nixon’s influence on others in such terms. For instance, McDonald recommended to the readers of the Sydney Morning Herald in the early 1990s that they should “overlook the likes of Nixon, and his young talent team . . . [who were] . . . remarkably similar . . . [producers of] . . . recycled works where it is hard to spot any significant difference”.

That abbreviated critique is more a reflection on McDonald’s unwillingness to focus upon the interdependency of historical and contemporary cues, in relation to specific discursive details, as important aspects that inform the formal painting styles of artists like MacPherson and Nixon; as socialised artistic expressions.

Yet, it seems that it is also because of the cues and discursive details found in Nixon’s art, relating to the pertinence of legacy, that McDonald seems to have a problem reading the constructive concept and analytic mode of Nixon’s practice as anything beyond a replay of selected stylisations. For instance, I refute the simplified claim that he is bent on replaying Modernist formalist conventions. Furthermore, as far as I can discern from the large quantity of work Nixon has produced, no two works actually appear the same, despite his systematic elaboration.

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542 John McDonald. ‘Not only the Economy that’s in Recession’, Spectrum. Sydney Morning Herald, (01-02-92).
543 NB: I have personally viewed and handled Nixon’s main collection of works and feel the claim made here is an accurate account.
McDonald’s confusion on that last topic is profound, but not uncommon. That is possibly because of the sedentary nature of critical rhetoric that has generally surrounded systemic approaches to Modern styles of abstract painting throughout the last century. Regionally, this is a problem exasperated by the fact that innovation often occurs by degrees, found in subtle cues and details in the field. For instance, in the article ‘Not only the Economy that’s in Recession’ (SMH 01-02-92), McDonald invited readers to sympathise with his concern over the spread of banality in the Australian visual arts. He complained “there must be a lot of good artists more concerned with expression, than so called analysis”. This is a concern that refers to regional debates discussed in Part 1; moreover, I doubt if there is an artist, dead or alive, who has not shared a level of critical discernment over what a systematic approach implies to their practice, formally expressed or otherwise.

Another point of order is that Nixon is, very likely, a master of his craft who can boast a following of interested artists. Indeed, I wonder how many other Australian artists actually have a wide circle of younger artists interested in the currency of their practice. This is an especially meaningful matter, if it is acknowledged that Nixon has been less than universally acclaimed in the Australian press, despite receiving the prestigious 1999/2000 Clemenger Award. That cultural accolade, apart from being an accreditation of formal painting in more recent Australian art-historical terms, is significant because Nixon’s selection represents a public institutional acknowledgement of abstract and monochromatic painting within contemporary Australian discourse. Macdonald, however, is not alone in his scepticism about the Formalist painting practitioner’s intent, after Modernism. Likewise, Robert Nelson’s 1996 article ‘The Kommissar of Modernism’ more recently reviewed Nixon in an equally negative light, pronouncing towards the end of a slightly more informative, yet still dismissive piece, that Nixon’s paintings are “imperfectly crafted, and taken on their own, have little meaning or value”.

Alison Barclay for the Daily Telegraph in April 1999 described Nixon’s Clemenger Award in decidedly negative terms. The title of her article, ‘The Colour of Money – Orange Fetish Nets $A30, 000’, suggests that a hoax may have been orchestrated by a person with no fathomable reasoning. Barclay’s commentary on his winning orange coloured monochrome was likely a double entendre, where she notes, “For this man, there is just one colour worthy of his attention.” However, nowhere in the article is any evidence of real criticism offered despite Nixon supplying a prodigious amount of material to allay misgivings about his contemporary Formalist style. The offending work in this instance was the massive orange monochrome EPW 0111 of 1998 (Fig.171).

The only newspaper critic who seems to have spared Nixon a drubbing at that significant point in 1999 was Gabriella Costovich. However, she preferred to quote Mike Parr’s opinion. Parr stated, “Ours remains a fairly provincial culture that is frightened by that sort of rigorous commitment, and there is a sense that John has unnerved

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644 Op cit.
645 Op cit.
the audience for contemporary art." Parr emphasised his own agreement with the Clemenger Award committee's selection of Nixon, averning it was "John's work in this instance, that is the truly decisive work."

A photograph of Nixon's *Monochrome with Piano* installation from 1992 is shown (Fig.169). This is a type of work that had disturbed critics such as McDonald because of a sideways reference to Joseph Beuys (his piano and felt works, an avant-garde manipulation of the social contexts of art, and the idea of the recuperation of tradition within a performative expression that Beuys had defined as 'social sculpture'). For instance, McDonald's view is confirmed when he describes Nixon's oeuvre as a 'lifeless and repetitive body of work', a claim based upon a further assertion that he has produced "the scantiest crust of ideas borrowed from Malevich or Beuys".

On a far more complex level, the theorist Bois also tends to dismiss recent painting within his appraisal of contemporary art. He sees an ongoing production of painting after Modernism functioning like "absolutely interchangeable artefacts." It is in this discourse that it is clear that an exploration of the notion of artistic and theoretical interdependency is being thwarted by criticism. However, a narrowing or polarisation of formal and developmental painterly concerns hanging over Nixon's practice was addressed in part, by Daniel Kurjakovic, in 1994 in a review for *Flash Art*. That article concerned Nixon's *EPW: 1993* project held at Mark Muller Gallerie in Zurich (Fig.170). Kurjakovic more generously noted, "Nixon's work can be seen as an emblematic transition, a crossing-point, a metaphorical and real chiasmus, where the self-referentiality of Modernist aesthetics and the strategic approach of a committed Post-Modernist artist interconnect." In spite of criticism expressed about Nixon's art, his ethos, and relationship to certain traditions and legacy, it is reasonable to assume that for many contemporary artists a developmental approach to making art is considered a necessary process and a foundational idea. Similarly, most artists feel the need to make art, and if not, an outright refusal to do so can be one ethical response to issues. Another is to make art about art, in order to illustrate a difference in understanding by degrees. That last approach is not generally criticised for its relation or dependence on a host legacy, tradition, or style placed under scrutiny. Alternatively, there are many theoretical models available, just as there are digital works generated on the World Wide Web (Internet) that exist as infinitely reproducible interactive programs where replay occurs. However, newer technologies like the traditional technologies, are equally available for the manipulation and replaying of known concerns, whilst, similarly instituting cultural resistance in varying

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849 Ibid.
851 Op cit.
852 Op cit.
degrees of difference. In brief, the ‘please explain’ mentality applied by critics such as McDonald, to those who openly seek to participate in adding to a tradition, seems to be a weighted and strategic biasing of concerns.

There is a critical currency in Nixon’s art and the co-ordination of ‘issues and interests’ alluded to in the previous paragraph has been paraphrased in Kurjakovic’s subsequent observations on Nixon: “it is as though the autonomy of art were constantly defending its modesty against the advances of the everyday world. But we very quickly become aware – art enjoys these advances, allowing it to be seduced and bewitched. The meeting between aesthetic autarchy and existential effect is complete in Nixon’s developmental practice.”

In notes supplied for that exhibition, Nixon claimed the variously produced EPW series were “meta-paintings” produced in response to Greenbergian Formalism, and like McPherson, were “dealing with the specific qualities which constitute painting: colour, texture, brushstroke, size, thickness of stretcher, shape, design.” However, in the commentary provided by Nixon at the close of the passage, his qualifying phrase, “abstract problem solving” complicates the essentialist reductivist discourse on painting that Greenberg preferred.

This post-Greenbergian dilemma of sorts, with which Nixon and McPherson flirted in their separate practices, is diminished as an actual concern by the responsive discourse they used to clarify their practices. Nixon, as MacPherson has done, confounds the kinds of bold statement quoted above with more informal or, as he put it, “ad-hoc” qualifications. This device rescues and then refocuses his interest in Formalist painting into what he generally described in the above-mentioned text, as, “a lyrical approach to both art making and the expedient production of the paintings”, by finding “various materials for the support”.

What makes Nixon’s transitional art achieved, is as Kurjakovic claims? I have interpreted that Kurjakovic is asserting Nixon’s powerful personal expression poses a challenge to the currency of anti-aesthetic values established in the Post-modern period. Nixon’s developmental painting and installation practice tends to expose a concern for the existence of an art that would transpose traditional and contemporary values whilst uncovering a representational reality apparent in the conjoined objectness and evolving conceptualism of the works themselves. That is, cues and details are tantamount to the discernment of his particular interest in his ‘radical’ innovation.

It is important to note that the journalist Robert Nelson described Nixon in 1996 as “the Kommissar of Modernism”, pointing out to the readers of The Age that Nixon was “a modernist 75 years too late.” Nelson, however, was quoting from an earlier article written by the theorist Rex Butler for Agenda Magazine, Nixon’s
Watergate. Butler had questioned Nixon for "re-running the radical line at a time when the avant-garde had no hope of being radical in any sense". 861 Nelson indicated agreement with Butler’s critical interrogation by making a statement about his credentials as a contemporary painter, and by drawing the readers’ attention to the fact that he [Nelson] figured out that Nixon was not a Modernist or, even a painter, that “he is now a confirmed Post-modernist”. 862 It was concluded by Nelson that Nixon’s paintings were better understood in art-historical terms as a type of installation art and that Nixon was a Post-Modernist, therefore, not an avant-garde artist at all.

In the summer of 1995 Christopher Dean wrote the article ‘Nixon’s Watershed’. 863 This was published in the Australian newspaper Broadsheet. Dean in expressing a difference of opinion to those outlined so far makes reference to Rex Butler’s article, ‘Nixon’s Watergate’. 864 Dean responded to Butler’s assertion that the notion of ‘analysis’ was a flawed concern in Nixon’s art, and as John McDonald suggested that Nixon’s developmental nature was foisted, therefore provided as an irrelevance in his practice. 865 Dean argued against this, noting that Nixon “uses the language of minimalism to discuss the uncertain relationships of personal, historical and political experiences”, 866 and that “Nixon’s method involves a discussion of the relationships connecting formalism and experience”. 867

Thus Dean recognised what others may have overlooked, claiming that Nixon, “through a process of systematisation and a formalisation of subjective experience, establishes a theoretical testing ground from which a range of hypothetical propositions are developed [...] this form of critical reading of the processes of experimentation reveals the discursive”. 868 Dean concludes, “as a result the character and limitations of scientific notions of research, investigation and analysis are a part of the discussion of the larger EPW project”. 869 In this last critique of Nixon’s Critical Post-Conceptual practice, a reading has been elucidated in response to criticism of Nixon’s supposed lack of meaningful ‘analysis’ within the domain of contemporary art making.

Dean proposed that Nixon’s watershed was heralded by his production of a newer body of Non-Objective abstract paintings characterised by an “infusion of subjectivity into the vocabulary of Minimalism”. 870 In Nixon’s art, it is claimed, process ‘works as a diagnostic model’, where the monochrome, for example, “becomes a sounding board for a broad range of perceptual information”. 871 Dean concluded, “The semantic gap of nomination brings to monochromatic painting a much wider and more socially pertinent agenda, problematising the history of minimal art. These works consider the issues of cultural institutionalisation, the aesthetic legitimacy of popular culture and an ethical construction of self”. 872

861 ibid.
862 ibid.
863 Op cit.
864 ibid.
865 ibid.
866 ibid.
867 ibid.
868 ibid.
869 ibid.
870 ibid.
871 ibid.
Dean’s synopsis makes it obvious that formal and personal variegation of styles and forms of practice enter into Nixon’s ongoing EPW project. It appears as a marker, or a fluid system of signs available for viewing. Like MacPherson, and as Dean states, it is “through sub-titles, that Nixon becomes an interlocutor introducing inconsistencies, and a level of fictive openness to an otherwise formal practice”.873

John Nixon: Work

It is evident, from the foregoing criticisms and observations concerning the qualities and foibles of Nixon’s art works, that in the formalised practices of developmental art makers like MacPherson, Nixon and many others, there is a desire to qualify a range of formal and poetic ideas within current parameters. The process of clarification of relevant or meaningful legacy is a significant aspect of contemporary artistic productions. This clarification, necessary for the maintenance of a contemporary and equally critical position is a significant Post-Conceptual concern. For Nixon, this concern has been entwined with his identification with legacy, and has particularly involved a critical embrace of Constructivist, Minimalist and Conceptualist principles.

It was Camilla Grey’s publication on Russian Constructivism874 in the 1960s that re-opened a critical discourse on early Modernist ideas and an associated criticism of an avant-garde aesthetic.875 A re-investment by contemporary artists in this area has amounted to a productive discourse, and emerged as a motivational force for many art makers who have subsequently utilised a constructive concept in the elaboration of an art critical practice. As such, the architect Aleksei Gan, whose materialist vow was to become “an enemy of art”,876 or the Suprematist Kasimir Malevich, who provided the infamous “art into life” slogan, are found to be providers of meaning in an ongoing aesthetic that can enable authorial conviction in an otherwise relativised contemporary discourse.877

In this manner, Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism and Constructivism are understood by certain art makers as negotiable Formalist art historical movements that continue to generate a range of useful critical concerns in contemporary discourse.878 However, it is also a primary interest in being an avant-garde artist that appears to have attracted MacPherson and Nixon in the early 1980s while living and working on the Q-Space Projects in Brisbane. Defining an avant-garde aesthetic was important to John Nixon, whose hard-line stance on being ‘formally inventive’ and ‘ethically engaged’ as an art maker was necessary for his development. For Nixon, legacy provided an aesthetic platform from which he merged his interest in other iconic concerns, such as a critique of Duchamp’s idea of the

873 Ibid.
'readymade'. Nixon saw Duchamp’s retrospective at the National Gallery of Victoria, and similarly attended the equally influential minimal 1960s survey exhibition, Two Decades of American Painting.

Nixon has noted that when beginning as a practitioner of art he had no desire to “go into the bush where Fred Williams painted”. For Nixon there was “another path, one which has to do with Internationalism”. This early commitment to a diagnostic or analytic formalisation of a more cosmopolitan art-critical practice predominately emphasised the inherent viability of materials in a conceptual abstraction of art making processes. That critical interest in materials, also noted in my consideration of MacPherson’s relational practices (Chapter 6), has been profoundly expressed throughout Nixon’s oeuvre.

The idea of the ‘transitional form’ in contemporary art discourse has been discussed in Chapter 5, and that discourse is meaningful here. A ‘transitional form’ is a definition used to identify an artefact (artwork) having as much apparent newness as prior information to offer. Oldfield’s Mezzanine c.1968 (Fig.137) was considered in those terms. And as Kurjakovic claims, Nixon’s works display interconnectedness to Modernism and Post-Modernism. I would further claim Nixon’s work provides a Critical Post-Conceptual critique of the meaningful relationship between these art-historical phases. However, Nelson is not so generous, and rounded up his analysis by asserting, “the Experimental Painting Workshop is a joke. Nothing so sanctimonious as research using the principles of Minimalism could have credibility today. Nixon is a Konstructivist no more than he’s a con”.881

Nixon has tended to confound journalistic and speculative theoretical demands for a justification of his art in Post-Modern terms, by producing explanatory methodological accounts of his work. The text for EPW. OIII c.1998 (Fig.171), plainly lists in point form the relevant methodology used in the construction of his monochromes.

Point 5 simply states: “There are two groups of works within the orange paintings that of necessity are done over a few days, rather than by the simple application of one coat of paint. The first is the group of faktura texture paintings – those made using polyfex plaster, sand, sawdust, lentils, couscous, pasta etc. glued to a support to provide a textured surface which is then painted orange. The second group is the Hessian paintings which need many coats of undercoat in order to seal the surface before the orange paint is applied”.882

This description of work was provided by Nixon as an expression of artistic reasoning, not as a theoretical justification. It was a point of order. In that way, Nixon continued on with his formal referential approach, and his

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881 Ibid.
personally meaningful relationship to art making processes. This approach, or model of positive action, was made clearer with his testimony in the Gabriella Coslovich article, 'Telling Tangerine Tales'.

Nixon stated that the kind of artists that he associated himself with were "not doing it for the public; they're doing it for themselves and within a close body of contemporaries".

This position, however, does not exclude Nixon's engagement with others.

For all these reasons, and despite averting a rhetorical positioning of his work, Nixon's contemporary formalist approach amounts to a critically achieved Post-Conceptual practice. For example, a work Nixon made in 1991 from a farmer's hoe, a white painted Suprematist cross, and a 'found' piece of timber, shown at the Art Gallery of NSW (Fig.173), is emblematic of a type of interdependent presentation I have attempted to identify as significant. It reflects Nixon's choice of language. Its contents visually allude through a process of signification a specific relationship to the ideal of an artist having necessary work, and a contemporary practice emerge out of a process. In Nixon's case, this is an ethical relationship characterised by his interest in developing and combining the languages of Constructivism, abstraction, and Non-Objective painting into a socialised model of positive action.


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863 Op cit.
864 Ibid.
865 Op cit. John Nixon. Thesis. NB: The notion of "archive" is a terminology made interesting because of the efforts of the internationally recognised conceptual Art and Language group for example. Ian Burn was a member of this group. The archive idea was popularised within related museum based practices that have interested Australian artists such as Robert MacPherson, Peter Cripps, Mike Parr and Tim Johnson.
Curnow at Deakin University, that "within this total project there is an awareness of history, and a dedication to the idea of the archive". Fig.174 shows one of Nixon's studio locations in 1990. The development of practice within the studio environment is an important concern for Nixon.

*Tableaux*, is a significant booklet produced on Nixon's thematic approach to art. It is relevant to this consideration of his Critical Post-Conceptual practice not just because of the qualifications in Shanks' text. Its other value lies within the photographic record that illustrates the level of commitment directed by Nixon, over a 20-year period, to the systematic development of his self-proclaimed "critical, post-conceptual" processes and his elaboration of those within both discrete works or entire ensembles, as seen in Fig.174.

*Tableaux*, is a photo-document highlighting Nixon's sustained interest in the display of his studio practices. That interest, like his concern for over 20 years with *faktura*, as evident in the many *Block* paintings such as *EPW: Orange monochrome* c.1998 (Fig.179) remains linked to his commitment to the development of "meta, or conceptual paintings about painting". This dedication includes Nixon's ongoing engagement with the responsiveness of the viewer, a concern evident in the presentation of both facture and objectness in his *Block Paintings* (Fig.175). In short, a great deal of developmental work is made apparent in *Tableaux* dating to 1968. An earlier relevant catalogue is *Song of the Earth*. Made in 1990, it appeared with bromide photographs only, there was no text, or any explanation other than a listing at the end, stating where four relevant exhibitions were shown. These visual documents, like Nixon's art practice, confirm each other in a style that underlies not just the conceptual and practical craftsmanship of Nixon's oeuvre, but also the extraordinary amount of related yet varied work Nixon has produced since the early 1970s; where a virtually unmediated experiencing of the work is paramount.

For instance, *Orange Monochrome Construction with Five Colours* c.2001 (Fig.176) is a recent example of Nixon's painting that simultaneously displays generic codifications (chevrons) and a confirmation of his earlier constructive practices. This recent geometric painting manifests his growing interest in the further development of a conceptual abstractionist vocabulary. In conversation with Kyle Jenkins and myself in May 2001, Olivier Mosset claimed that this particular work of Nixon's represents "a necessary loosening" of the languages of abstraction, whilst providing full recourse to his art-historical engagement with that. Seemingly, what Nixon's critics have sought to disavow is that such a relationship can be achieved after Post-Modernism.

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887 Op cit.
888 Conversational discourse that occurred between Kyle Jenkins, Olivier Mosset, and myself at Sarah Cottier Gallery. March 2002.
Janet Shanks expressed a similar opinion in her closing commentary in her essay for the *Tableaux* booklet, stating, "one of the main legacies of the 1970s and 1980s is arguably the heightened awareness of an artist’s control over their own 'history’". Earlier examples of this type of extended painterly work include the *Catalogue Raisonne* and *Archive*, both produced in 1981. The *Cabinet of Photography* (1990) is another example of Nixon’s extensive production and the way the idea of a self-compiled history developed as an entwined thematic enterprise.

The cataloguing and discourse provided by the artist, are single parts of Nixon’s overall desire to have his constructive concept perceived by the viewer as an art of critical worth or, developmental visual phenomenon in its own right. The storehouse of Nixon’s works amassed over the past 20 years amounts to an ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. An important aspect of this ‘total work of art’ ideal has been a critical concern of Nixon’s that invokes the notion of the performative aspect of painting. Nixon’s small painting entitled *Orange Monochrome Construction With Five Colours* c.2001 (Fig.176) is a concise performative presentation or, co-ordinate modelling of Formalist abstractionist concerns as much as the *Self Portrait (History Painting)* c.1998 (Fig.177) is an outright example of an installation work engaging with architectonic space. In both examples, the works have been derived from an expanded reading of what making paintings means to Nixon, a close body of associates as he puts it, and assumedly, a wider audience.

Consequently, objects found in Nixon’s art and installations are not simply indicators of Nixon’s confusion as suggested by Nelson, nor are they manipulated through an ironic or Duchampian ‘reading’ of the transgressive abilities of the displaced art-object. Rather, Nixon’s bicycle, and the carry-box seen in the *Potato Room* setting (Fig.178), like the piano in Figure 169, are simple visual references made to the changeable value of their use, to the ideal of making art and the dignity of labour as he understands it, within art making and its presentation. In this manner, it is possible for critics to read Nixon’s stance as a form of ethical pomposity, rather I feel it reflects his views and participation as a maker of art, in life.

In regard to the matters addressed in this section, Rex Butler has noted that Nixon’s approach stems from a “tradition of post-Beuysian European Modernism, in which we also find an aesthetic of small, generic advances within a pre-established field: Blinky Palermo, John Armleder, Olivier Mosset, and a host of constructivist inspired artists.” Expressed in different terms, this is primarily a shared politic that amounts to a socialisation or usefulness made of materials, and a particularised aesthetic derived from the viewing or experiencing of select objects, as a possible art. This constitutes an analytic and semantic device used by Nixon (and others) to signal the ethical and moral tone he is seeking to convey in his reductive presentations of monochromatic/installation works.

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800 Op cit.
801 Ibid. NB: *Gesamtkunstwerk* literally means in German, a total work of art. A Wagnerian term used from c.1900 via the activities of the Architect Adolf Loos, the Vienna Secessionist movement, and of the Wiener Werkstadt collectively.
In my understanding Nixon is not engaging in "the manipulation of found objects" in order to make his paintings function ironically, nor is he using these objects to "celebrate Modernism's 'cutting off' from tradition, or crude elimination of ornament". If so, the works would only need the context of "the theatrical concept of the installation" as Nelson wrote to provide a basic meaning. Nixon's presentation is often based on a manipulation of a Post-Modern model of practice, but it is also a radical art that involves a complex tension between known forms of expression and the management of everyday materials and objects in a 'contemporary' manner. Where, the fabulation of the viewer is paramount, just as it is in MacPherson's critically responsive painterly expression.

A Model of Positive Action

The previous discussion indicates that, like MacPherson, Nixon's use of objects is different from the ironic redirection associated with a Duchampian model and the voyeurism and spectacle linked to Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire's Flaneur figure. Nelson's Post-Modern preference is another argument, where Nixon's painting practice (inclusive of the painting as 'object') is itself strategically subsumed into installation practice. This marries with Butler's critique that Nixon is not able to be 'radical', and Bois' more general concern over the failure of painting. Nevertheless, Nixon has continued to make art that embraces legacy, traditions and influences, with or without the necessity of visual cues such as found objects. That suggests a contrary understanding of the intended purpose of the placement of objects in Nixon's installations such as Potato Room (Fig. 178).

Understanding Nixon's commitment to Critical Post-Conceptual painting practices is assisted by a set of commentaries. The first set of notes to be discussed were provided by Nixon for an exhibition and subsequent public lecture given in 1988 at the Villa Arson in Nice, where Potato Room was shown. The second text is by Laslo Reber, and concerns the 20 Years of Monochrome Painting exhibition held at Roslyn Oxley Gallery in Sydney, amongst other places. The third text is 'Art and Ethics', the John Barycorn account written and produced in association with the Potato Room work when it

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894 Ibid.
895 Ibid.
896 Hal Foster. Convulsive Beauty. MIT Press. New York, 1997. NB: I refer to the connections Foster makes in this text between Freud's 'Death Drive' theories, aspects of Surrealism, Duchamp's connection with the 'uncanny', and the development of the role of the found object. There is no account given for the made object in either texts.
898 Op cit.
was subsequently exhibited in Melbourne in 1988 (Fig.178). Importantly, this text clarifies what is implied by Nixon’s use of the terms ‘ethical’ or ‘moral’ in his art. The fourth set of notes contains a post-script of Nixon’s opinions directly.

I have reproduced these notes in their original form because they are succinct and informative, and because they are testimony of the opinions of colleagues directly involved in Nixon’s art making processes, and his own theoretical position. However, I will first outline what is occurring in the photograph of the Potato Room installation, shown in Nice in 1988 (Fig.178). This will assist in understanding the tone of the texts that follow.

The reductive Untitled Black c.1968 is a block painting-monochrome featured in the Potato Room installation (Fig.178). In Potato Room, the small monochrome made in 1968 is repositioned near a wooden box of the kind that is still used for carrying farm produce. The proximity of this particular ‘found object’ establishes a narrative relationship with Nixon’s idea of working in the field of monochromatic painting. In Nixon’s practice, found objects such as the hoe, or the worker’s box, are triggers that assist in exhibiting a critical performative aspect of Nixon’s installations. Once again, as with MacPherson’s crafting of such concerns, various objects are engaged via their “epistemological mobility”, as Christopher Dean described it. Or as Tony Bond put it, they are displaced as fine art objects in a free form of “poetic reverence”. That is an important Critical Post-Conceptual distinction that leads the viewer towards what Ingrid Perz describes as the “viewer’s own fabulation” to occur. This meaning can also be construed as a narrative “free play” of associations, as Marco Fusinato’s current works also suggest (Fig.146). In the text below, Nixon outlines his own reading of concerns relevant to his practice.

FROM A PUBLIC LECTURE BY JOHN NIXON, NICE, 14 OCTOBER 1988

The historical avant-gardes of the first decades of the c20 produced a platform of theoretical principles. The foundation of these guidelines (models for action) represents an active field for continued vision.

In my work and practice as an artist, there is an understanding of what has come before – the reaffirmation of a creative methodology based on the knowledge and complexity of an historic memory (with the intention of developing experimental, spiritual, poetic and material consciousness in art). From this position I aim to make and develop radical work within the field – the field of work (discussion/labour), which directly engages in critical dialogue and which values ideas and ideals.

The works are rooted in a common practice of critical post-conceptualism; if they teach anything, it is a way of analysis rather than style/look. The work itself functions as an action/an intervention. The work represents a model of positive action – John Nixon.

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688 Op cit.
690 Op cit.
691 Op cit.
692 Op cit.
In this testimonial document of 1988, evidence is presented verifying the claim that a specific genre of painting practices, first described by Terry Smith in Bernard Smith’s 3rd Edition of Australian Painting as “post-conceptual painting”, has been specifically qualified by Nixon within an influential oeuvre. In this lecture, Nixon identifies his practice as being representative of “a model of positive action”. That is, he expresses intent to work within set terms and conditions, a specific formal genre of practice. And, moreover, this intent is to make his interpretation of contemporary painting a valid form of critical engagement within an expansion of that former process, a positive developmental expression of artistic intention in the domain.

With his 1988 tour of the Twenty Years of Monochrome Painting, Nixon made it clear to an international audience that his approach to painting and installation was to be considered entirely, as a viable contemporary position. His interpretation of a positive form of action, likewise, conforms with Tatlin’s decree that art making should be necessary form of work for the artist; that ethic remains to this day in unambiguous terms representative of Nixon’s ongoing personal engagement with making contemporary formal painting-based works of art.

For reasons made obvious in Nixon’s declaration of intent in the Villa Arson lecture, I have selected him as a leading and influential example of an established Australian painter who, like MacPherson, remains affirmatively engaged in Critical Post-Conceptual painting-based practices. There are few art makers in Australia or elsewhere who have so efficiently declared their affiliations and intentions as Nixon, especially with his statement that his works are “rooted in a common practice of critical post-conceptualism”. This ‘commonality’ was qualified by a further explanation of his practices in the Villa Arson lecture when he stated, “it is a way of analysis rather than style/look. where the work itself functions as an action/an intervention. The work represents a model of positive action”. In 1995, Christopher Dean put it another way, writing, “Nixon’s infusion of subjectivity into the vocabulary of Minimalism works as a diagnostic model, within this particular history of ideas”.

Nixon and MacPherson’s oeuvres are both, in fact, exemplars of the model of Critical Post-Conceptual practice I have been elaborating. In short, it is where the work of an artist, even when it is as deeply embedded in legacy and tradition as that of Nixon or, drifts into enigmatic reverie with MacPherson, sustains a form of critical practice that can provide a positive paradigm for others to engage, to observe, and critically debate.

Subsequent to these clarifications, I now present the Laslo Reber extract (June, 1989), as found in Thesis. This again refers to works Nixon made for the 20 Years of Monochrome Painting of 1988, and the links Reber makes to a wider art-historical context for Nixon’s formalised style of painting and/or installations:

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903 Op cit.
904 Op cit.
905 Op cit.
906 Op cit.
907 Ibid.
908 Op cit. Christopher Dean.
909 OP cit.
TWENTY YEARS OF MONOCHROME PAINTING

John Nixon’s research into the reductive (the monochrome) began in 1968 and has played a consistent part in his ongoing oeuvre. This research shares the same historical period as the experiments with the monochrome by Knoebel, Palermo, Ryman, Richter et al and stems from the pioneering work of Malevich, Rodchenko, Klein, Manzoni, and Reinhardt.

In these paintings there appears a longing for an absolute (here a ‘standard’ for painting) – of what painting can be and continues to be. Although ostensibly ‘simple’, the activity is diverse, poetic and critical. The conceptual texture of these paintings and cloth pictures is rich. Here within the ground rules (painting/room) of the exhibition, Nixon offers us a display of critical/dialectical experimentation that presents us with a ‘standard’ (i.e. a moral option) for the deconstruction and reconstruction of both painting and its display – (room for painting)

– Laslo Reber.

This summation of Reber’s, coming a year after Nixon’s Villa Arson lecture/testimony, is important for a reading of Nixon’s approach to contemporary painting-based practices. It locates and underlines the moral context and ethical tone that is addressed in the John Barlycom notes to follow. Reber pointedly states that within Nixon’s extension of definably Modernist practices, activity is “diverse, poetic and critical”. 910

Whilst “ostensibly simple,”911 the Barlycom account points out that a pared-down or minimal reading of art making has been functionally redefined by Nixon and this claim is consistent with assertions made throughout this thesis that the contemporaneous role of abstraction, as an available language, is a significantly negotiable concern of recent Australian art making. A process specifically identifiable within the nominated genre of Critical Post-Conceptual painting-based practices that provides a positive paradigm in Australian and International art.

The expressed characteristics identified by Reber marry Nixon’s art with a current re-evaluation of ‘advanced’ abstract painting.912 Further, Reber’s “critical/dialectical”913 defining of Nixon’s Radical Modernist or possibly Post-Modem practice, verifies that a reconsideration of ethics and the moral tone found in Nixon’s critical art does not contradict Hil Foster’s critique of relativism that can occur in uncritical aspects of Post-Modernism. Foster wrote on trends in contemporary thinking and certain artistic practices in 1985, defining his concern for an exponentiation of equivalence and relativism in the visual arts, advertising, media etc, as, “uncritical post-

910 Op cit.
911 Ibid.
913 Op cit.
modemism. Likewise, the Barlycorn account in January 1988 takes up the issue of intentionality in artistic production in relation to Nixon’s monochromatic painting practices:

ART AND ETHICS

In his work, painting (art) as we “know” it to be – “pictures, things, people, landscapes” – is criticised and a Utopian alternative developed as a model. It is here that we must learn from history. Nixon’s works are prototypes of (belief) – of having a model, and idealism (beyond pictorialism). This thesis functions both as a vehicle for the production of art and the social role of the artist – a direction – something to struggle and hope for.

The monochrome presents the spiritual and emotional effects of pure colour and form as well as poetic and pragmatic solutions to the possibilities of painting. Utopia is an ethic ideal. The value of ethics transforms life. This dedication, this commitment to essentialism and to ideas (in times of the promotion of the excessive”/the “picture of the thing”? the aberration of “nature” / the plea for the “figurative”)
- John Barlycorn.

These pivotal extracts from 1988 and 1989 represent in my opinion a recovery of a view, one that is critical of the notion of relativism, and that which Foster associated with “uncritical post-modemism”. The contrapuntal views expressed in the Barlycorn extract allows for a sardonic reading of the significance of Nixon’s essential commitment to “radical work”. An aesthetic approach that has regardless, sought distance from the “promotion of the excessive”, “the plea for figuration”, and “the picture of the thing”.

Despite of the variety of rhetoric used to describe Nixon’s practice so far, it is considered in this study relevant to the claim of an emergence of an important genre of contemporary formal Australian painting. The extract that follows is from Nixon’s own ‘Notes on Production’ (March, 1992), and concerns the Object Room installation shown at Roslyn Oxley’s Gallery 9 in Sydney, and Gallerie Christine et Isy Brussels. These last notes highlight the importance of everyday materials and the functional approach to making that Nixon and many others have continued to demonstrate is critically viable:

574 Op cit. Hal Foster. Refer to the Chapters ‘Against Pluralism’ and ‘Re-Post’.
575 Ibid.
576 Op cit.
NOTES ON PRODUCTION

The works in this exhibition have been painted in enamel using the colours blue, red, black, brown, yellow, carmine, orange and pink. The paintings are both reductive and material.

I am interested in the difference between a painting on Hessian, wood, Masonite, plywood, metal, cloth, cardboard, poster paper and on the wall. These various materials are only the supporting structure for the poetry of the paintings and one material is not valued over another - each is equal to the ideology.

The size of the works in this exhibition are the norm, whilst larger and smaller works are produced these works here are 'classic' to the oeuvre. The enamel paints and materials used, masking tape and house painting brushes employ a tradesman-like approach to the making of art. The materials and paints are from the wider world - John Nixon.

Formal Painting: Its Everyday Usefulness as Art

in reviewing these various notes and critical commentaries, it is apparent that they are consistent with Nixon's earlier testimony given at his Nice lecture in 1988.\textsuperscript{618} There his art-critical intentions and formalist affiliations were laid down. With his opening claim in those notes, that, "the historical avant-gardes of the first decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century produced a platform of theoretical principles",\textsuperscript{619} Nixon's belief in working energetically in the present whilst maintaining a selective mindfulness of what has already transpired, illustrates his leaning towards an avant-garde aesthetic response to current concerns. That process is affirmed by Nixon's concept that "a model of positive action" is representative of an "active field for continued vision".\textsuperscript{620} Putting aside Nixon's perception of himself as a radical Modernist and Critical Post-Conceptual art maker, he is equally perceivable as a Post-Modernist as Robert Nelson and Rex Butler would prefer to have it. Either way, Nixon's practice as an art worker continues to be read as a credible engagement with the usefulness of materials and substances found in the everyday world. Yet, Nixon's art is neither banal nor mundane, and like MacPherson, Oldfield, and Burn, is recognised here as far more meaningful than those terms may currently imply.

\textsuperscript{618} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{619} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{620} Ibid.
Nixon stated in the *Villa Arson* lecture, "In my work and practice as an artist, there is an understanding of what has come before." He qualified that with the assertion, "The reaffirmation of a creative methodology is based on the knowledge and complexity of historic memory (with the intention of developing experimental, spiritual, poetic and material consciousness in art)." The compressed but meaningful manifesto of the *Villa Arson* lecture raises the real significance that legacy continues to play in Nixon’s practice.

These comments outline as much as anything else a longstanding defining characteristic of behaviour, model, or structuring of his personal intellecations on art making. For example, Nixon began his painting practice with the constructive concept of making monochromes, like *Block Painting* c.1968 (Fig.175). This object/painting encapsulates praxis as a central thematic. Furthermore, by later describing the work as being embedded in a "critical post-conceptual" framework, Nixon has positioned the 'idea of praxis' within an extended context for his constructive concept of painting.

The early block paintings are important for two further reasons. Firstly, their radical appearance in Australian art-historical terms sets up a discursive model that Nixon has employed with conviction over the last 20 years. Secondly, as ‘transitional forms’ (they are painted objects) these were conceived by Nixon as expressions of "critical post-conceptualism", indicating changes occurring in the regional field. This process can also be scrutinised in the terms that Nixon later used to describe his more recent *Orange (EPW)* paintings (Fig.179), that is, as "meta, or conceptual paintings about painting." In 1998, Nixon showed some of his collection of *Orange EPW Monochromes* at Gallerie Mark Muller in Zurich (Fig.179). These were a set of interrelated works that grew directly out of the developmental character of the critically responsive block paintings produced from 1968 onwards.

Carolyn Barnes, in the catalogue *John Nixon – 1990*, considers why Nixon “does not read Modernist culture as a failure”, or “in the rhetoric of *Post-modernism* ... as burnt out in the interiority and sterility of high art, *Hard-edge Formalism*”. She claims, that in Nixon's art “the path of utopian *Modernism* is not seen as exhausted”.

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921 Op cit.
922 Ibid.
924 Ibid.
925 Ibid.
927 Ibid.
himself has averred, "Radical Modernism (the historical avant-garde) is an incomplete project, representing a longing for experiment and the history of that experiment. My concerns are not merely with a return to history but a development of that history. I see my work as furthering the project of Radical Modernism".  

In light of Nixon's considered positioning of a meta-style, and his expression of philosophical and theoretical interests in a current context, Barnes takes issue with the kinds of concern raised by Nixon's belated Radical-Modernist assertions. Summoning Bois influential essay 'Painting: The Task of Mourning', Barnes argues that Nixon must address Bois theoretical appraisal, particularly because of the claim that the decline of abstract painting had generally achieved an oblique relativism were the idea of development was problematic. Consequently, there is automatic failure of representational models, especially when posited as developmental forms of critical enterprise. Barnes points out that Bois promulgates a particular position over the failure of abstract painting in Painting as Model, where he asserts, "it has never been more evident that most paintings one sees have abandoned the task which historically belonged to Modern painting, of working through the end of painting".  

After that claim, there is little possibility of difference being acknowledged within the post-condition of such a "pathological mourning".  

To summarise the claims of Bois, the act of making a painting after Modernism was emblematic of a rather pointless production of "artefacts created for a market and by the market (absolutely interchangeable artefacts created by interchangeable producers)". This is an accurate understanding in one sense, but I cannot conclude that critically engaged contemporary Australian practitioners such as Nixon, MacPherson, Burn and Oldfield, who all showed a considerable interest in related formal painting practices, have read the situation in such a conclusive way.

The concern of Bois for a widening of generic readings of painterly concerns is possibly right, but in my opinion, that concern could be considered as an engaging contemporary development. It is further suggested that practitioners of abstraction, in the domain of contemporary painting, may have invoked an open reading of that language as a flexible, useful, and, therefore, discursive form of expression, not a closed argument as Bois theory suggests. I base this counter-claim on my research into Australian art-historical figures, but equally importantly on my own practical involvement in current exhibiting practices. These include the 'Collective' and 'Blue Lotus' art groups, active in Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle since 1997 comprising over 50 members. From research and experiences in the field I would respectfully disagree with the central proposition of Bois about the automatic failure of developmental painting practices in the domain of contemporary art making, or that it is driven by financial reward.

In Bois model there is little availability for development in the realm of abstraction or painting either way. As Barnes illustrates in her discussion of the appearance of difference in Nixon's abstractionist work, Bois draws a dividing line between past (Modern) and present (Post-Modern) forms of abstraction. In response, and from my
interpretation of Barnes' critique, she rhetorically asks Bois what is there to be read by the contemporary formalist art maker as available within the vicelike logic of a theoretically limiting position. For that reason I concur with Barnes, because as much as Nixon seeks to establish a critical and ethical avant-garde position in 'contemporary' terms, Bois theorem can only provide a narrowing of those concerns. What the four case studies I have undertaken confirm is that there are such things as 'alternative character' and viable and achieved expressions of 'artistic difference' to be found in the field, regardless of critically expressed opinion to the contrary.

For instance, Christopher Dean has written of the functional co-ordination occurring between the 'personal' and the 'formal' in contemporary art making. From my understanding Dean sees it as evidence of "a much wider and socially pertinent agenda" of contemporary art makers. That perspective has in fact been made evident by most of the art makers discussed in the thesis, particularly Burn, Dawson, Oldfield, MacPherson, Nixon, Nolan and Fusinato. A clear separation sought by international theorists like Bois, in psychological and theoretical terms, appears at odds with these artists' intentions and regional outcomes, and ultimately as informed art makers interested in interdependent aspects of painting. There is a parallel to this concern with Olivia-Bonito's claim discussed in Chapter 2. Olivia-Bonito identified the many links and associations to the developmental language of abstraction he found in Italian Modern art, had similarly concerning the interrelatedness of abstractionist discourses that emerged in his research into later Trans-Avantgarde and Arte Povera movements.

Like so many of the individual EPW paintings, such as Orange Monochrome (for Emma) of 1999 (Fig.180), Nixon's work is fundamentally representative of a rich vein in Australian art that illustrates the significance of alternative character in recent formal painting. Furthermore, it highlights just how readable and cohesive the language of abstraction can be, when also expressed as bearer or envoy of personal meaning. Rex Butler's recent theonisation that the subverting and conspiracy laden Post-Modernism of Michael Stevenson can be defined as 'radical' and suitably engaged with as a contemporary critique, whilst the ongoing radical Modernism of Nixon possibly can not, illustrates the vitality of contemporary critical discourses on an interpretational level.

These kinds of debate on the ongoing significance of Nixon's art, regardless of the perceived limitations and disputed validity, generally serve to confirm his Formalist model of painterly practice as having cogency. Putting aside conjectural psychological interpretations of these matters favoured by critics such as Bois and later, Foster, formal art makers such as Macpherson and Nixon contradict Bois theory of representational exhaustion in the domain of painting. These art makers, in a real and committed sense, attempt to reverse what I consider to be relativist, heavily ironic, and over-predicated outcomes, by overturning theoretical constrictions in current artistic practice. They have produced in its stead comprehensive oeuvres that express meaningful aspects of their separate painting-based

935 Op cit.
projects, all within a specific field or genre of practices that are rationally located in the wider domain of recent Australian art making.
Part 3  Conclusion: Painting the Object

Above: Fig.161  Jacky Redgate. *Untitled*, 1991.
After the general orientation of recent Australian painting given in Part 1, four case studies were discussed in Part 2 as seminal to the emergence in the 1980s of an innovative genre of interdependent formal Australian painting styles. Specifically, it was proposed that periodic works of Burn, Oldfield and associated artists prefigure the maturing of contemporary abstract styles of painting, object making, and/or installation art practices, prevalent in Australian art of the 1990s.

The latter case studies of Robert MacPherson and then John Nixon's self proclaimed Critical Post-Conceptual oeuvre spanning from 1970's to the present, bridged issues and concerns raised in the first studies. The first Chapter of Part 3 is set out in two parts. It begins with a survey of what I have technically defined recent Critical Post-Conceptual works, relevant theoretical positions, legacy and influences, and informing discourse associated with an active field of formal engagements. The Chapter closes with an examination of curatorial activity that began in the early 1990s.
In the 1990s, a process of assessment of remaindered Modernist concerns in Post-Colonial environments such as Australia or New Zealand, continued to involve a critical questioning and revision of conventions, and the uses that critical practitioners have made of available resources.

These issues concern the ongoing transposition of remaindered Modernist styles into critical visual meta-language. In the 1980s, the American art critic Rosalind Krauss first described a general broadening of interests for those working in the domain of sculpture, when considering why it was that contemporary sculptors found their practices converging with the field of painting and installation. Krauss described that transformative process as "working in the expanded field." 

In a comparative manner Julian Dashper’s installation of abstract style rugs from 1999 (Fig.185), evinces Hard-edge abstraction as meta-subject keyed to an everyday aesthetic. That is where his ‘made objects’ function as envoi in the field of Formalist painting and/or sculpture. In short, various formal painting styles have continued to provide art makers with meaningful discourse, especially during the advent and dissemination of the international art movements of Minimalism and Conceptualism.

Richard Dunn’s Line c.1969 (Fig.186) is a periodic installation/object work that the viewer was intended to manoeuvre around. This example of an Australian conceptuel/minimalist work illustrated a convergence of various protocols, whilst the specific relations of the work made tangible newer conventions of ‘formal reductiveness’ and ‘spectatorial participation’. Importantly, it also invoked the formal language of conceptual abstraction. Thus, an effect of discursive difference was increased by Dunn’s subtle allusion to the representational refusals of monochromatic painting in a co-ordinate expression. More recently, Dunn has shifted ground from an ambiguous representational terrain within the production of his more traditionally achieved yet personally expressive Blaakje series of paintings.

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941 Sherman Gallery and Sarah Cottier catalogue files. Sydney.
In Figure 187 a 'Blokje' pattern sourced from Dunn's Scottish clan's tartan fabric design, has in a semantic manner, been formally merged into a' contemporary' abstract style of painting.

Richard Dunn is an active, acknowledged Australian art maker, who has within what I define a Critical Post-Conceptual confrontation, worked the language of abstraction and the negation of Modernist painting into a formally achieved individual expression that has been evolving since the late 1960s. As a Post-Modern discourse, that meta-expression is, however, closely associated with a regional legacy of formalist painting. Like many others in Australian art, Dunn sought out a critical approach to painting during and after the Conceptual Art movement, steering a path through the quagmire of recensions associated with late the 20th century period. Regardless of how a definition of formal contemporary painting practices is located in a more recent Australian context, regional art makers interested in the forms of painting discussed in this Chapter have, in general, arisen from a specifically problematic era in the history of painting. Art makers like Dunn have traversed the Late-Modern and Post-Modern periods by adopting a positive meaning in Terry Smith's claim that Australian artists must, "adapt, expand, and extend". 942

Max Delaney has alluded to Terry Smith's sentiments claiming that some art makers have made a logical response, "representative of cultural practices undertaken by settler colonies in relation to imperial frameworks. The same may be said for the relations of margin to mainstream, region to metropolis, and periphery to centre". 943 An important aspect that the previous case studies have indicated is that the idea of formal painting is now a critically active and a discursively cognisant field, and when regarded in regional terms, has generally not been overridden by a critique of prior concerns for earlier formalist and later formal styles of painting. Clearly, personal narratives have been made evident in the kinds of painting practices I have associated with innovative aspects of contemporary formal Australian painting, which Terry Smith defined in Australian Painting as, "Post-Conceptual". 944

The current abstractionist oeuvres of A.D.S. Donaldson (Fig.184), Julian Dashper (Fig.185), Richard Dunn (Fig.187), Debra Dawes (Fig.189) and Matthys Gerber (Fig.191) are but a few contemporary formal Australasian painters sharing a positive framing of known representational concerns, where the notion of personal expression remains a significant idea that operates within a complex of formally achieved co-ordinates; in a field governed by limit conditions and as many challenges. The nomination of the value of personal expression is then, a significant Critical Post-Conceptual indicator within revisionist processes. And one that registers in contemporary artistic environments as a meaningfully apprehended trope. A defining 'personally expressive' geometric or, Op art abstraction of Debra Dawes entitled Between Certitude and Flux of 1994 (Fig.189) is shown.

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944 Op cit., Chapter 16. P 524
As briefly discussed in the opening, during the early 1990s the New Zealander Julian Dashper adopted an approach to remnant Formalist representational concerns, and in utilising a classic Conceptual Art move, had a simple striped generic formalist style of painting manufactured (Fig. 183). The original work was not intended for direct public viewing. What was shown in its stead was a set of identical slide-film reproductions of the original work. With a performative act of separation replayed (after Modernism and Conceptualism), the ritualistically depleted original ‘Modernist’ work was transformed into an imminently replicable capitalist commodity, as an image of image. The irony was broadened by Dashper’s presentation of a multiplicity of slides of the one real object. Therein, the subject of the transposition of Modernist painting set up as an ironic conceit, by extension, was contemporaneously objectified as a highly replicant prototypical idea. Therein, a ‘generic aesthetic response’ was engaged.

A second important concern raised in this particular Critical Post-Conceptual process work made by Dashper, like Burn’s earlier Yellow Premiss (Fig. 114) installation of Formalist abstract paintings that Burn also had independently manufactured in London in the mid-1960s, is they essentially proclaimed to have “taken advantage of distance and made a crisis pertinent” as Francis Pound put this matter. In a personal testimony on this work Dashper clarified with comments made on the regional specificity of critical notions like ‘distance’ and ‘crisis’, claiming, this ‘is no longer an excuse, but instead has become an introduction’. NB: The topic of crisis, delay and distance traditionally effecting rates of development in Australasian art have been discussed in Chapter 1 and 4.

“An introduction” to what one might ask? The answer is found in what may be expected from the current reception of an inversion of an anti-aesthetic within a replicant, citational, painterly-style of generic production. Here I am referring to the peripheral artist’s response to the collapse of art-historical concerns associated with the overall project of Western painting. As discussed earlier, this is an especially significant matter concerning the production of art regionally, especially whenever the idea of personal difference, otherwise defined as the observable specific characteristics that art makers present within a field, are going to be made publicly visible as the defining aspect of a meta-critical dialogue. Above all else, it is the subjective concern of ‘intentionality’ of the art maker, or the desire to communicate, that is revealed in this process as another key aspect of what I have been defining as a Critical Post-Conceptual painting-based form of practice.

The generic model espoused by Dashper in the presentation of Untitled (1992) c.1992 (Fig. 183), demonstrates a discourse on artistic ‘difference’ within a formal system, and with it the radicalised appearance of an ‘alternative’ form of contemporary artwork appears out of a Post-Minimalist model of practice cognisant of the past and of the reappearance of relevant concerns. This implies, that like Dunn, but in a different mode, Dashper presented a discursive and conceptual ‘picturing’ of concerns through the guise of presenting a multiplicity of envoys.


Ibid.
and the work was achieved through a formalised approach to the expanded field of contemporary painting, itself. In that conceptual system and artificial ordering of perceptions, a Modern style of painting was not collapsed in its replay, but was modulated and transformed. In this instance, an interested art maker has made a supposedly defunct style of painting into a personal formal expression, occurring within a critically acceptable and affirmative paradigm or, an aesthetic.

The art makers mentioned so far in this Chapter have dealt, in one way or another, both critically and subjectively, with remaindered Modern painting styles, and a conflict over how an aesthetic, anti-aesthetic, or convergent and assimilative generic aesthetic, is portrayed. This must now include developmental regionalist theoretical associations,\(^\text{949}\) which have through the 1990s often involved the incorporation of a Post-minimalist\(^\text{950}\) sensibility in Australian art. Yet it is Dashper’s 1990 staged production of a slide show, concerning the prospects of a formalisation of abstract art and of Formalist painting styles in a particular manner, that is by its very stock in trade a Critical Post-Conceptual act. This markedness is especially apparent when Dashper’s act of differentiation is again compared with Burn’s earlier conceptually achieved late-Modernist art-critical Formalist works (Fig.114), of Chapter 4. A resemblance occurs on a practical or visual plane of signification, and on the level of performative ability of each work. In Dashper’s more recent installations a level of semiotic ideation similarly appears, yet it is claimed, “irony distances the sublime.”\(^\text{951}\) Albeit, and in summary, within Dashper’s generic modality of expression, a formal understanding of painting and its practice has likewise been exemplified by a revisionist production of conceptually expressive works (Figs.183 & 185). In clarifying, a critique is paradoxically raised, wherein the physicality of painting is acknowledged as it was with Burn. For that reason this allows the idea of formal painting to be read as the significant aspect of a practice that has strategically utilised a secondary replaying of Formalist concerns. In brief, tradition plays a leading role in the conceptual abstractionist expression.

It is important to further note that, just as Mel Ramsden had read a criticism into Burn’s conceptual and performative interest in Formalist painting practices in the mid to late 1960s (as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), similarly Pound has recently posited Dashper as a regional art maker possibly attempting to have his cake and eat it too. That is, by simultaneously “making paintings that come into being at their reproduction’s behest”.\(^\text{952}\) One could assume by Pound’s tone that this was a presentation of an almost naïve methodology by Dashper, and that it could be perceived as an attempt to recoup an irredeemable periodic version of Formalism. But I have not heard a single art maker interested in current and related Formalist painting practices elaborate that as a discourse or, concern informing their work. However, from Pound’s enquiry into Dashper’s art, a generic approach to Formalist painting is able to be associated with debates concerning peripheries, centrism, and replay. For me, reference to these ideas

\(^\text{949}\) Refer to the regional advent of the Asian Pacific art fairs, such as the Brisbane Triennial for example. Here a confluence of regional influences have been codified and assimilated into a broader cultural framing.
\(^\text{951}\) Op cit.
\(^\text{952}\) Ibid.
has been visually established in Dashper's practice in a co-ordinate enterprise, and as a factor not overlooked by the art maker.

From the foregoing, it appears that a formalisation of cogent strategies is a norm operating within the domain of contemporary formal Australian or Australasian painting. As stated, I believe that this was first established by art makers like Burn within his mid-1960s practice of Formalist abstraction (Fig. 114), and then codified and ratified in later practices such as Dashper's de-constructed contemporaneous activity in the field (Fig. 183). Interestingly, in both instances, it seems safe to assume that the idea of "popular styles of European and American art", had as Dashper claims, been "sent back the way it came". And possibly just as critics such as Michael Fried observed in Burn's time, as, "an image of itself". However, it keeps returning, as a productive discourse for certain art maker's.

In the present, Rose Nolan's Banners c.2002 (Fig. 182), and A.D.S. Donaldson's Untitled c.2002 (Fig. 184), like Dashper's various works, are contemporarily representative of divergent aspects of a field of formal Australian painting-based practices. Their aesthetic fits with ideas involved in the productive transformation of a range of supposedly irredeemable Modernist art styles and associated language forms that, regardless of various concerns, have been utilised in the formal process of making paintings or painted works in an extensive art-critical milieu.

The kinds of defining Critical Post-Conceptual processes that have been outlined in this Chapter are located within an array of known responses, and are representative of a contemporary thematic the organisers of the 1999 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award recently acknowledged, as, significant discourse in Australian art. Max Delany, in an essay for that prestigious award, stated, "The work of the distinguished Australian artists whose practices issued from the late 1960s milieu of conceptualism, minimalism, and feminist, collaborative and process-oriented art" have evolved "to find maturity, elaboration and revision in the late 1990s". These comments highlight the fact that the Clemenger Award was a cultural ratification of the field of formal Australian painting at the end of the 1990s. The Clemenger Award was also an acknowledgement of the significance of discretely achieved works of many critical makers from the early 1990s onwards, such as Rosalie Gascoigne, Howard Arkley, Emily Kame Gngwarre, Vivien Binns and Elizabeth Gower, Peter Cripps and Sue Ford, to mention only a few nominees.

The acceptance of an emergent genre of contemporary formal Australian artistic practices is, in part, associated with the topics of abstraction and non-representational painting, and the way these dialogues have been made over as critically acceptable. An acceptance of formal approaches to painting has occurred because they provide a critical significance that has continually surfaced in the works of a variety of art makers; as considered under the auspices of the association of the National Gallery of Victoria, Heide Modern Museum of Contemporary Art, and Clemenger's Agency as the primary sponsor.

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954 Ibid. Julian Dashper.
955 Ibid.
956 Op cit.
The conferring of the Clemenger Award on John Nixon (Fig. 171), at the very end of the 20th century, acclaimed what had in effect been theorised as a growing tendency in the 1980s by Paul Taylor and then Burn, Lendon, Merewether and Stephen. That is, a seemingly necessary engagement with art-historical revisionism in the Australian context had provided a shift in critical emphasis. That is, from a model of artistic ‘dependency’ to an interdependent model. In short, the fin de siècle approach of the 1990 Clemenger Contemporary Art Award was an acknowledgement of a curatorial tendency concerning newer and inclusive styles of painting, abstractionism, object making, and installation practices in contemporary Australian art. This shift in cultural perspectives on formal or purist styles of art, since Bernhard Smith elaborated a complete negation of abstraction in the mid 1940s as a regional calamity, is no small feat. Especially considering the antipathy expressed on the subject of abstraction in Australian painting since, and its often deeply questioned status in deference to anonymous forms of formalist or international styles of art (As detailed in Chapters 1, 2 and 7).

The German artist Eva Hesse and her Washer Table c. 1967 (Fig. 2) has been discussed in the Introduction as Post-Minimalist in context with Yurek Wybraniek’s painting/installation, Untitled c. 1998 (Fig. 1), an Australian Critical Post-Conceptual work that revisited Mondrian’s pan-aesthetic envision of Neo Plasticism. Significantly, Hesse produced The Washer Table at the behest of Sol LeWitt as a non-literalist critical response to the limit conditions of Judd’s ‘specific object’ theorem, and his influential apodictic minimal aesthetic. For that reason The Washer Table is a type of Formalist work that Robert Pincus-Witten associated in the 1980s with Maximinimalism. This matter concerns dissimilation, or works that develop by critiquing a field. This introduces two topics. First, formal artists are critical of each other and of encapsulating conventions they engage, and this implies that aside from critics expressing critical views, artists generally evolve discourses that are critical of the tendencies they have engaged. A fact that Australian historians such as Bernard Smith have traditionally tended to either ignore or have had little interest in investigating. Second, terminology is similarly evolved. For instance, the term Post-Minimalist was utilised by Richard Dunn in the 1990s in an Australian art-critical context. Dunn used it to describe the divergent and evolving critical activities of regional abstract artists he admired. Despite differences in opinions, and a variety of uses of terminology at different times and places, I argue that the radicalising of legacy, tradition, movements, styles or even personal practice, is a common feature of recent formal Australian painting-based practices.

The point of this discussion is that Dunn made use of the term Post-Minimalism in the mid 1990s when discussing likeminded local artists and critics working in ‘post’ modalities of reductive formalist engagements, to similarly evoke an impression of a developmental approach exhibited by a range of contemporary artistic practices.

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569 Op cit: Bernard Smith.
570 Op cit.
573 Ibid.
Likewise, and regardless of considerable variation, what I have elaborated as the critical notion of 'co-ordinance' in the argument is directly related to a process that continues to involve art makers defining their specific practices regionally. The idea of 'co-ordinance' was discussed in Parts 1 and 2 as an artistic balancing act, between what is known and what is offered as a harmonious development. Importantly, that open-ended concern toys with limit conditions, and pertains to a local art-historical convention associated with Post-Colonialism.\textsuperscript{964} The implication is that many Australian art maker's specific or personal preferences are regularly merged with one or many, often generically derived influences, and other important informing cultural discourses.

This is a convergent topic that can be discussed straightforwardly, as a matter affected by a use, the current artists I have placed under discussion, have made of semantic devices on a structural level. On this, the semiotician Frederick Jamison generally defined a semantic discourse as, "a structure of intellecction".\textsuperscript{965} Therefore, it is equally reasonable to assume that when semantic tools are utilised by visual art practitioners, for instance, in relation to interrelated art-historical concerns of their own choosing, their designed discourses can be seen to be operating as 'a structure of intellecction'. As an example, Dunn's Untitled (The Name) c.1998 (Fig.187) is again useful. This series of works is interesting because he orchestrates a co-ordination of generic artistic influences and specific backgrounds, and those are entwined with a personal discourse in a definably newer visual meta-dialogue.

In a different context, Douglas Fogle, the curator of Minnesota's Walker Centre recently asked, "Why is the status of painting living or dead, so important to us?"\textsuperscript{966} In speaking for myself, the purpose of listing various artists' works and anecdotal references in this argument is to point out tendencies observed in specific painting practices of the early 1990s. Therein, evidence of generic and personally specific artistic activity is made plain. The current art makers mentioned share significance for the thesis, not only because I find them interesting since they have participated in what Fogle describes as "the Lazarus effect"\textsuperscript{967} of painting's almost unbelievable survival, but in a more pedestrian way, it is because of the conflict between the art makers conceptual intent and a new literalism (banality) occurring in complex revisionist styles of formal painting, object making, and installation.

Overall this amounts to a productive tension apparent in A.D.S. Donaldson's expression of generic 'banal' works (Fig.193), just as it is in Rose Nolan's art-historically referential constructivist painting/installations (Fig.182). Moreover, I claim the significance of having a defining discursive thematic is a powerful notion that has been carefully worked through by these and other Australasian artists, such as Dashper, Dunn, Dawes, Burn, Paramour and so many others who are not possible to individually mention here. It is this idea that also confirms that a formal genre of painting-based practices continues to find voice, regionally. And like Dunn, I find this an important matter.

\textsuperscript{964} Rex Butler 'Australian Art History and Revisionism'. A Secret History of Australian Painting, Craftsman house. Sydney, 2002.


\textsuperscript{967} Ibid.
For instance, in a set of recent works made by Debra Dawes, such as *Afterthought* of 2001 (Fig. 189), it can be observed in her minimal expression that a discretely achieved type of conceptual abstraction and reductive Hard-edge or Op art work has been systematically evolved. In a recent article, Keith Broadfoot described Dawes works as maintaining a very personalised dialogue, and having a "lasting silence" about them. Broadfoot is inferring that Dawes is an art-historically neutral presentation. That is, a confident personal defining of flexible stylistic interests within a formal abstract painting practice has been combined, in this instance, with an expression of a Feminist narrative.

It is that type of co-ordination of issues and interests, that verifies considerable variegation and development continues to occur within a specific genre, regionally. In response to that claim, Debra Dawes' intricate approach to the field of formal painting practices (Fig. 189) provides an example of how an acknowledged Australian art maker has carefully utilised available information in the process of clarifying a much newer form of artistic expression, whilst making clear a response to legacy that possibly includes Bridget Riley, Max Bill, Leslie Dumbrell or John Vickery. From this I feel it is reasonable to claim that a substantial growth in what Terry Smith called "The Problematic Practice", has in fact been worked through in an affirmative fashion during the 1980s and 1990s, by as many Australian and other significant regional art makers.

There are other critical approaches and foreign influences that have come to the fore, some of them anti-aesthetic responses applied to problems associated with being a contemporary art maker. Paul Thek, for example, managed a form of counter-painterly production by generating intentionally underachieved paintings. Further, a 'punk' staging of minor position taking has figured in recent decades as another prominent international strategy, often defined as an aspect of the earlier movement of *Transavantgarde* and later Post-Minimalism, and an aspect of local contemporary artistic production otherwise called Grunge Art.

A Grunge anti-aesthetic has appealed in the 1990s because of the growing necessity for regional artists to realign with expressive acts of making, like making a painting or a sculpturally expressive form out of any kind of material. There are many other factors informing this topic that could be further outlined. However, Hany Armanious is an example of an acknowledged artist working in this area, producing intriguing and sophisticated paintings and

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971 Op cit.
972 Op cit. NB: Locally, Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy are practitioners of a Trans-avantgarde style.
installations such as Elvis c.2000 (Fig. 190), which have developed from a grunge style. On this, Fogle has pointed out that "a sweet revenge for painting itself" is provided by such art makers re-posing their own notions of what art could be like.

John Young's painting style, begun the 1980s, is a different regional example, with a clever mixture of realist and abstractionist elements (Fig. 75). A difference apparent between the works of Thek and Young is that whilst Thek's are actually intended as 'bad' paintings, Young's are exceptionally crafted works yet similarly convey a disconcertingly pleasurable appearance, evincing both irony and a genuine interest in figurative expressiveness.

In the present Australian context there are a number of derivations that could be further discussed, as exemplified by Matthys Gerber's critical engagement with Psychedelic art and related abstract styles of painting (Fig. 191). In summarising, what these formally achieved works, and the many other Australian works discussed in this argument paraphrase, is an ongoing, divergent, yet interdependent aesthetic concerning painting-based works of art, whilst remaining related as innovative formal practices occurring within the wider domain of contemporary Australian art making.

Curatorial Subtext

The next section introduces a series of regionally important curated exhibitions devoted to local productions of formal painting-based practices, and to what I have defined in the thesis as co-ordinate expressions of 'contemporary' abstraction: An available art-language. I claim that took on greater critical significance in Australia at the beginning of the 1990s. These various curatorial engagements represent a radicalising and contextualising of narrations on what has been perceived by many, since the 1970s, a critically diminished field.

It is my intention to illustrate that the public curation of recent formal Australian painting is prefigured by the kinds of committed formal and developmental practice discussed in Parts 1 and 2. Important figures in that regard include Ian Burn, Janet Dawson, Alan Oldfield, Wendy Paramor, Sydney Ball, Harald Noritis, Roland Schlicht, and Dick Watkins in the 1960s, and especially, Robert MacPherson and John Nixon during the 1980s. With the impetus provided by these and many other local practitioners, a form of curatorial activity emerged in parallel to various practices.

In addition, these researches have been led by the conceptual logic provided by the imprimatur of Ian Burn's approach to both formal painting and contemporary art making since the mid-1960s. The gallery directors Nick Waterlow, from Ivan Dougherty Gallery, University of NSW, Sydney, and Nicholas Tsoutsas, from Artspace, Sydney, and the theorist Rex Butler, also deserve much credit for the development of this discursive activity in the 1990s. Without their critical support and enthusiasm much of the discourse that ensued through the presentation of various shows might not have occurred.

It is appropriate to note that this important set of curations first came to my attention as an interrelated enterprise through researching Burn's last curation *Looking at Seeing and Reading*.\(^{675}\) I found that I was an engaging, academic, and discursive phenomenon. The activity surrounding Burn's curation can be interpreted as a dynamic subtext in recent Australian art critically informing directions taken in the 1990s. From this activity a new set of names joins an Australian legacy, including A.D.S. Donaldson, Dale Frank, Elizabeth Pulie, Aida Tomescu, Stephen Bram, Rose Nolan, Liz Coates, Tony Clark, Stephen Little, Nike Savvas, Christopher Dean, Gary Wilson, Marco Fusco and Kyle Jenkins, and others anonymously involved with 'The Collective' and 'Blue Lotus' groups (Fig.206). All these artists represent a maturation of critical, Post-Conceptual practices, in the late 1990s and 2000's. See Appendix A.

In the process of conducting my research, the increasing appearance of related contemporary formal painting practices, was revealed by a growing number of group exhibitions. It became apparent that a widening circle of practitioners interested in Formalist painting had been inspired by the direction provided by the critical practices of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and inclusively an earlier Australian legacy Bernard Smith had defined as having problematic dependent relations with international influences.\(^{676}\) Significantly, these important survey exhibitions of recent abstractionist painting from the early 1990s, took up key issues. These events, and their curators, are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Exhibition, Artist(s)</th>
<th>Venue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 1993</td>
<td><em>Looking at Seeing and Reading</em>, Ian Burn</td>
<td>Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW, Sydney.(^{677})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 1998</td>
<td>True Colours, Christopher Dean</td>
<td>Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following is an examination of each of these curations in chronological order, whereby their relationship to one another and to the thesis proposition is examined.


\(^{676}\) Bernard Smith, 'Modernism and the Contemporary Situation'. *Place Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788*. Ure Smith and Oxford Press, Melbourne, 1945, P 211.

\(^{677}\) Ian Burn's curation also travelled to the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane and Monash University Gallery in Melbourne in 1994.
Much of the research for this thesis has been guided by insightful commentary made by Victoria Lynn in her 1990 art-critical essay provided for the Abstraction exhibition, held at the Art Gallery of NSW. Lynn’s remarks directly concern what I consider to be a development in recent Australian art. With that, a particular discourse ensued from Lynn’s timely reading of recent occurrences. For this I owe a debt for the information and ideas raised.

Lynn’s insight was to locate and encapsulate issues, and put them in a meaningful dialogue within a critical public sphere in Australian art in the early 1990s. She defined aspects of recent formal Australian art as “eccentric”, and that a non-literalist, yet, Formalist tendency in painting, amounted to an “aberrant excursion”. In this she was referencing Lucy Lippard’s notion of “Eccentric Abstraction” from 1966, and Robert Pincus-Witten’s notion of “Post Minimalism” from 1986. I claim, however, that the characteristics Lynn hesitantly called “independent qualities” make these recent formal practices and engagements with abstraction stylistically and theoretically homogeneous.

Lynn highlighted the fact that Lucy Lippard had coined the term “eccentric abstraction”, stating, “Lippard was referring to a tendency in American sculpture which saw a rupture with the modular, minimalist sculpture of the day. This break within the work of artists such as Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier and Eva Hesse was not a complete rejection of Minimalist abstract sculpture. It drew on Minimalism but it also introduced ‘impurities’ to the accepted direction of Minimalist abstract sculpture. A similar insistence of an expanded though aberrant excursion into ‘abstraction’ is evident today. While the specific features of this eccentricity differ from artist to artist, the sense of a largely undefinable artistic modification of established forms of ‘abstraction’ is prevalent.” Here significant issues are immediately exposed.

Lynn’s ambivalence about whether an actual non-literalist minimal painting movement was occurring in formal Australian painting was unnecessary. The evidence provided in Lynn’s own discourse reveals that she must have understood that there was more than “an aberrant excursion into abstraction” occurring in a number of related areas, within a regional field. This inconsistency does have an explanation, which is borne out in a series of comments made by Lynn in the same essay. These tend to verify the appearance of a growing, innovative field of activity in formal painting practices in recent Australian art. Moreover, the different artists Lynn curated, such as A.D.S. Donaldson (Fig.193), John Nixon (Fig.192), Debra Dawes, and Stephen Bram, had all been involved with developing formal painting practices over a considerable length of time. Here I speculate that the phrase ‘significant emergence’ could replace “aberrant excursion”.

977 Ibid.
983 Op cit.
985 Ibid.
986 Op cit.
In the catalogue essay Lynn provided a context for contemporary painterly practices, stating, "sources of inspiration for their abstract approach often lie outside the logic or traditional trajectory of the abstract avant garde". In making this claim, Lynn must be inclusively referring to a legacy of significant Australian artists who were an "abstract avant garde" and who had also operated outside "traditional trajectories". An Australian legacy of an "abstract avant garde" need not be positioned as dissimilar to current trends in order to justify recent differences in approach, style, intention, etc. In fact, as Burn, Lendon, Merewether and Stephen described a revisionist interest in this matter in *The Necessity of Australian Art*, the dissimulative idea of 'divergence' or 'difference' long apparent in a wide legacy of Australian practices appears to have consistently run in parallel to mainstream concerns.

Lynn also states in her second paragraph that "the fifteen artists in this exhibition, who have come to the fore at varying stages over the last fifteen years, reveal differing relationships to the notion of 'abstraction', they have all been working in and around 'abstraction' for some time". A 15-year engagement qualifies as a commitment in my opinion, especially when working at the critical level of these artists. Moreover, Lynn had claimed, "they do not represent a new clique or cult which responds to the current resurgence of abstract art". In this last statement one position is countered with another, where it is stated that these artists are collectively engaged in contemponising the known language of abstraction, yet, they are not participating as a recognisable milieux within a specified field of activity.

The defensive curatorial position, whilst politically astute given the prevailing hostility to developmental reading of Formalist painting practices in particular, was also unnecessary. The practices of these 15 artists were as stated, mature, and the critical concerns raised by their activities, were, likewise, accepted as credible by their peers, critics, etc, and only needed to be ratified on an institutional level. To Lynn's credit, that is what she achieved overall despite the hesitancy of the announcement. In short, Lynn greatly assisted in qualifying the idea of abstraction in recent Australian painting as a significant and, therefore, relevant discursive aspect of recent Australian art.

However, matters were complicated when she discussed Stephen Bram's (a work similar to Fig.202) abstract painterly practice in critically ambivalent terms: "for Bram this [interest in the language of abstraction] is perhaps a reflection of the position of 'abstraction' in history, in the sense that one can no longer be the originator of a style, but can only endlessly merge with the ambit of 'abstraction' itself, shifting between origin and influence, between silence and communication". This is an incisive theoretical account of how present day 'revisionism' operates, but it also reveals my criticism of an account subservient to a style of rhetoric that privileges a Post-Modern model of relativity, comparative circularity, and/or dependency. Indeed, Bram's painting is specifically engaged in architectural concerns, and for that and other reasons has not been embedded over time in a predicted torpor of...
equivalence, as suggested at the close of Lynn’s argument. Bram’s oeuvre is identifiable as a developmental practice, occurring within the contemporary vista of Australian and international art. This point is worth making, because Lynn had herself likely selected Bram for the high profile Abstraction survey because his work is a bearer of difference. Moreover, I have shown in Parts 1 and 2 of this argument, those interdependent notions such as ‘difference’ and ‘alternative’ character within formal painting-based practices had already become significant in Australian art before ‘responsive’ 1990s practices appeared.

Lynn worked around this matter by stating that these artists “exhibit a freedom with ‘abstraction’ engendering a vitality rather than a repetition”. In one regard, this statement imputes a legacy of practitioners had not manifested ‘differences’. On the other, her overall tone tends to support the thesis argument about development in the field of recent formal painting in Australian art. Furthermore, I would claim Lynn’s analysis provides a discourse on works that fit into an extended legacy of an abstractionist avant-garde. A point of clarification is that I would claim many of the artists in the Abstraction show derived a responsive non-didactic legacy directly from such regional practitioners, a point not openly suggested by her when noting a demarcation of credible avant-garde attitudes in the field.

Lynn’s claim that the artists represented in the Abstraction exhibition provided “a similar insistence on the expanded though aberrant excursion into abstraction” is also problematic, and the subsequent qualification that it is “evident today”, complicates matters in Lynn’s somewhat estranged Post-Modern envisioning of painting. This critical unease is further elaborated with the claim, “whilst the specific features of this eccentricity differ from artist to artist, the sense of a largely undefinable artistic modification of established forms of abstraction is prevalent.” One could ask how a supposedly “largely undefinable artistic modification of established forms” can be left in limbo when the enterprise is also described as “prevalent”? If it is prevalent it is an operational discourse.

Lynn’s assertion is that despite the existence of a clear, widespread engagement with abstraction, and with painting especially, it was best described as a non-specific art form made by artists who “predominantly create two dimensional work on a wall”. The rhetoric is baffling unless we consider why it was necessary to redefine an expansion of painting in a pedantic fashion. One explanation is that this description would maintain the focus of prevailing contemporary discourse about the supposedly critically endangered act of making a painting, which Bois defined as the “Task of Mourning”. Recall that it is claimed throughout the thesis that formal painting practices had been dismissed by many in Post-Modern terms, as being a critically diminished field of practice. Despite this, and to Lynn’s credit, her essay is also full of affirmative dialogue in other respects, and it is that which makes it an important transitional critique of recent formal Australian painting. Statements such as “painting cannot always proclaim its

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995 Stephen Bram is represented by Anna Schwartz Melbourne, and P.S. Gallery, Amsterdam.
996 Ibid.
997 Ibid.
998 Ibid.
999 The meaning of the word “prevalent” may also be defined as common, rife, rampant, ubiquitous, established, customary, and most importantly of all these synonyms, widespread.
1000 Ibid.
context” and, “it is hoped that the differences between artists in this exhibition will be seen to imply different contexts” reveal Lynn’s deeper convictions masked by Danto-ish commentary.1002 Just as Lynn’s keen interest in the field of abstraction is divulged because of her critical engagement with the field, as a public commentator.

A noted differentiation of these 15 Australian artists interested in formal aspects of abstract painting is qualified by Lynn’s claim that, “they derive inspiration from the tenets of Conceptual Art, Art Povera, Minimalism, Pop-Art, Feminism and, for the aboriginal painters, the language and the symbols of an indigenous art practice”.1003 This is an exclusive definition of legacy. Despite this, it is primarily a homogeneous viewing of contemporary interests that are informing, and therefore, aligned with a Critical Post-Conceptual model that emerged out of the divergent practices of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Thus, Lynn’s assertions in the Abstraction essay, culturally authorised by its publication in an Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition catalogue, although differing on an interpretational level from my own, are generally consistent with the thesis proposition.

The points of agreement in this brief synopsis appear in Lynn’s opening paragraph, where she states, “the break within the work of artists such as Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier and Eva Hesse was not a complete rejection of Minimalist abstract sculpture. It drew on Minimalism but it also introduced impurities to the accepted direction”.1004 This marries with claims in the thesis introduction, where Hesse’s Washer Table c.1967 (Fig.2) is utilised to exemplify an art historical moment where a genuine difference in perception developed in critical response to Donald Judd’s apodictic ‘specific object’ theorem.1005 It is at that point that a non-literalist and neutral position was sought by another generation of reductive critical art makers, whose aim was to make use of available information for a more personalised and less heroic reading of then contemporary art making.

An art form like Hesse’s The Washer Table (Fig.2), or alternatively Nixon’s Self-Portrait Non-Objective Painting in Red, Black, and White c.1983 (Fig.192), is recognisable as one art that assumes traditionally readable formats, whilst allowing the personally meaningful to be envisioned within co-ordinate modes of image construction.

The style of art making highlighted in Lynn’s Abstraction exhibition was a wide-ranging presentation of a regional shift in emphasis, away from dependency, towards interdependency. And is one possible reason why the idea of formal painting assumed a position of critical significance in Australian art during the early 1990s.

In the closing paragraph of the Abstraction essay, Lynn claims it is the independent qualities of the artists’ work that characterise their involvement. I fully agree with her appraisal of what I would technically define as a select range of mature, Critical Post-Conceptual painting-based practices. She closes the essay writing, “abstraction” does not operate within a closed circle of predetermined sources and influence: rather, as these contemporary

1002 ibid.
1003 Op cit.
1004 Op cit.
developments show, 'abstraction' engenders perpetual expansion'. This supportive claim of a meta-stylisation or contemporary form of abstraction, operating outside of a theoretically closed circle of limit conditions, implies that the reading of such information has been thoroughly investigated. Thus, a once limited availability of stylistic influences and related theoretical concerns is a convention that Lynn shows had been radically transformed by the artists selected for her survey of recent Australian abstraction.

In recapping, the inherent significance of Lynn's astute critical presentation was threefold. First, she announced the idea that a formal approach to painting could be a viable and credible form of artistic expression in current terms. Second, her focus on the selected artists formally aligned the central topic of abstraction with newer, critical and reductive practices within a revision of Post-Modern conventions. Third, she established that clear differences are achievable within a unique emerging genre of practices, and within the strictures of Post-Minimalist and abstractionist styles of formal painting-based practices.

In this manner she illustrated that predicated concerns were not necessarily as conclusive as they had appeared during the 1970s and 1980s, and that the ongoing manipulation of formal practices enabled the artists in the Abstraction survey, for example, to provide meaningful personal expressions of apparent difference and alternative character. In Lynn's own revision of the problem of rhetorical Post-Modern vision, the idea of regional formal painting having an innovative aspect was openly suggested. This allowed for further interpretation based on the personal engagements, and the co-ordination of relevant legacies and influences by the artists nominated. See John Nixon's Self-Portrait Non-Objective Painting in Red, Black, and White c.1983 (Fig.192) and, A.D.S. Donaldson's Banal Painting (Grey) No.4, c.1990 (Fig.193).

Lynn's essay confirms claims made in the thesis about the emergence of an important genre of formal painting in recent Australian art. It also verifies that the conceptual and practical frameworks that enabled that process to function (in innovative ways) were critically recognised, moreover, acknowledged as significant attributes in Lynn's curatorial envisioning of what was then occurring within Australian painting. I claim that Lynn acknowledged and appraised a meaningful tendency in Australian art, even though I subsequently claim she was off target with regard to the denial of formal painting having any real cogency in terms of contemporary homogeneity or, reaching art-historical continuity: an issue that would be taken up by other curators and theorists to be discussed. Perhaps if the use of the terminology 'developmental genre' had been taken up, this hesitant analysis may have been a more decisive affirmation of formal painting and related practices at the time.

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1006 Op cit, P 11.
1007 The artists in Victoria Lynn's curation entitled Abstraction are, Marion Borgelt, Stephen Bram, Liz Coats, Debra Dawes, A.D.S. Donaldson, Clinton Garofano, Emily Kame Ngwarreye, Janet Lawrence, John Nixon, Carole Roberts, Peter Skipper, Rover Thomas, Aide Tomescu and John Young. Art Gallery of NSW. Sydney, 1990.
In April and May of 1991, a second important curation independently occurred, which I associate with a further public accreditation of the field of contemporary formal Australian painting-based practices. The Australian theorist Rex Butler, at Artspace Gallery, Surry Hills, Sydney, curated a show featuring the work of Janet Burchill, Dale Frank, Robert Hunter, Jennifer McCamley and Elizabeth Pulie, and again A.D.S. Donaldson. It is significant in that like the *Abstraction* show it focused on local practitioners engaged with formal painting-based practices, and ultimately represents a development from Lynn's presentation a year earlier. Rex Butler's curation and catalogue essay *Banal Art*, theoretically solidified ideas Lynn raised. Butler, however, was especially interested in the ideas made apparent in the works of Donaldson (Fig.193), who had discussed in Lynn's earlier essay "the mundane expectations of abstraction".\(^{1006}\) That rhetoric was specific, and ran in contradistinction to artists such as Nixon (Fig.192), whose ethically charged Radical Modernist approach had already been attracting the attention of theorists and critics alike.

Butler begins his *Banal Art* catalogue essay by investigating a similar kind of commentary that Donaldson had provided for Lynn's *Abstraction* show, and where Butler appears to question the veracity of Donaldson's aesthetic or, non-ironic interest in an abstract styles of contemporary art making (Fig.193). He asks, "what is it about Donaldson's *Banal Painting*,\(^{1009}\) which "certainly looks ordinary enough... [that] ...invites, even demands, dismissal?\(^{1010}\) Butler utilise this critique as leverage to begin a more thorough investigation, not only of Donaldson's gesture towards the "modular and the anonymous"\(^{1011}\) in contemporary painting, but also to find a way into the topical field of 'banality', and Bois 'endgame' scenario. Donaldson's *Banal Painting (Grey)* No.4. c.1990 (Fig.193) is shown.

For myself, there is a connection between Lynn's hesitant consideration of the contemprosining of the language of abstraction in recent Australian art, and Butler's separate treatment in the *Banal Art* catalogue essay that was more inclusive of current international trends. Butler's specific interest in the topic of 'banality' in regional discourse is confirmed where he discusses how the viewer might comparatively and analytically consider the use value of Donaldson's monochromatic 'poured'\(^{1012}\) paintings, in international art-historical terms. Butler writes, "we might speak of the monochrome being not as predicted the beginning or end of painting, but quietly assuming its destiny somewhere within it. The monochrome is hardly that *tabula rasa* Malevich wanted it to be, but is already an 'image', and precisely what a true abstraction would have to escape from".\(^{1013}\)

\(^{1006}\) Op cit.  
\(^{1010}\) Ibid.  
\(^{1011}\) Ibid. Rex Butler.  
\(^{1012}\) These works have paint poured on them in a controlled exercise.  
\(^{1013}\) Op cit.
In this questioning mode or, of theorising on the limit conditions of recent art, Butler interrogates Donaldson’s approach to the contemporary in a similar manner that Terry Smith has redefined its’ meaning,\textsuperscript{1014} yet within a fundamentally generic monochromatic and abstract-style of painterly art making. Butler underlines his focus on lost representational values, a meta-critique of representation, and Donaldson’s discourse of the negation of Modernist painting, by de-classifying Donaldson’s post-formalist works as image-based. Butler reveals an apparent contradiction of the ‘banal’ theorem: a non-representational art involuntarily transforms into a representational form of expression, an aspect that I also associate with the notion of ‘pictorial illusionism’ (As discussed in Chapter 2). Here the process of an inversion of ‘dissimilation’ is raised. This occurs in current painting practices, for instance, when use is made of a meta-discourse about a lost or forgotten language. In this fashion, a revisionist formal abstract-style of language used by Donaldson is allegorical, and that had been excavated from the “monster field”\textsuperscript{1015} of Modernism as Donaldson later put it. This last matter is discussed further in the next section.

In a critique of Donaldson’s \textit{Banal Painting} (Fig.193), Butler identifies a meta-stylistic approach described as “a device that A.D.S. Donaldson has used before”.\textsuperscript{1016} To Butler, this “indicated that the monochrome is not a virginal surface but already marked, second hand, touched (and indeed, on closer inspection, the monochrome here does reveal signs of its facture, the artist’s hand)”.\textsuperscript{1017} The radical Modernism of Donaldson is interrogated and made significant within a theoretical construct of what painting could possibly be like, in supplementary revisionist terms. Regardless of what this meta-critique of Donaldson’s \textit{Banal} works reveals (i.e. is it an anti-aesthetic or an aesthetic?), it is important to note that a critical debate began at this stage.

This discourse on what the spread banality in art implied developed considerably in the emerging field of recent Australian formal painting practices (refer to John Macdonald’s commentary in Chapter 7). However, Butler refers to developments elsewhere in the \textit{Banal Art} catalogue essay, when he comparatively focuses upon Sherrie Levine’s discursive feminist \textit{Knot} paintings, and Blinky Palermo’s Post-minimalist engagement with formal painting. These international artists apparently shared a similar and ironically mundane sentiment towards Modernism on a broader stage.\textsuperscript{1018} After a brief discussion of these influences Butler queried, is, “...the ambiguity of \textit{Banal Painting} [Donaldson’s work], the difficulty we have in reading it. Is it commenting on the history of the monochrome or somehow wanting to escape from it, to repeat that inaugural gesture of \textit{Modernism}. Is it Post modern or Modern\textsuperscript{1019}...

Butler clarifies his own opinion of the kind of works produced by Levine and Palermo, and by inference Donaldson’s work. He claims they are works ‘that in some sense were meant to be understood as new objects...

\textsuperscript{1014} Terry Smith, ‘What is Contemporary Art?’ Artspace publication. Lecture Series 6. Sydney, 2001. Here the descriptors Modern and the Post-modern are both eclipsed by the use of Contemporary as a significant descriptor of current stylist difference.
\textsuperscript{1016} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{1017} Ibd.
\textsuperscript{1019} Op cit.
[whereby] ...a conscious return to the hand made art and the possibilities for subjectivity and the signature that this opens up.\textsuperscript{1020} Butler explains, "there is an awkward, repetitious labour about them". Here he is talking about the return of the artist's hand in works that "suggest a certain lack of training".\textsuperscript{1021} To Butler, this appears as an affirmative gesture in contemporary art making, as it "indicates they were exactly what they seemed to be: beginners' exercises in painting".\textsuperscript{1022} Thus, they were at a remove from Appropriationism, and problems associated with copying or with somehow using another artist's images. Here a generic theoretical acknowledgement of the possibilities of a conceptual abstraction began to organically appear by reading contemporary Formalist painting practices in a citational way; a critique that opened up the supposed "endgame"\textsuperscript{1023} as astutely posited by Bois.

That subtle shift highlighted an affirmative form of practice that art makers had assumed in the 1990s: a desire to produce works based upon an authorial level of presentation, of harmonious, socialised, and discursive works of contemporary art, albeit governed by a circuitousness or, revisionism, as limit conditions. As already noted, this is a modelling of a co-ordinate style of contemporary practice; one that I feel represents a consolidation in Australian art of Critical Post-Conceptualism for the want of a better term. A relevant installation by Donaldson is illustrated in Figure 195, as shown at the Sarah Cottier Gallery in Sydney in 1995.

The rest of the Banal Art catalogue essay is as Butler put it, a discourse full of "abstract speculations".\textsuperscript{1024} whereby, "taking up the very essence of the abstract as the passage from the contingent to the necessary, the real to the model, remains to be explained is a certain shared temperament".\textsuperscript{1025} These key points made by Butler add meaning to the discourse about how a developmental genre of formal painting practices came to make theoretical sense in the early 1990s.

Moreover, Butler claimed, "the best and most suitable readings of Levine's later work, and here we return to what we were saying about Donaldson's interest shown in a banal expression of painting by proxy, is not to see it in terms of an alternation between quoting and not quoting [here abstraction in contemporary art making is the topic] but as a quotation of the very gesture of quotation. It is neither simply critical nor collusive, but about this very alternative itself",\textsuperscript{1026} and in adding weight to this speculation Butler further claimed, "simultaneity, the logic of this simultaneity, would be the very end of criticality".\textsuperscript{1027} For Butler, this rhetoric on a different mode of appropriation, and a subsequent level of theoretical criticality that may accompany it, is both a compelling and a conclusive aspect of his

\textsuperscript{1020} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{1021} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{1022} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{1023} Yves-Alain Bois. 'Painting the Task of Mourning'. Painting as Model. MIT Press. New York, 1993.
\textsuperscript{1024} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{1025} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{1026} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{1027} Ibid.
discourse. He writes, "it is this logic, which is henceforth irrefutable that exhausts the works in advance".\footnote{1028} I assume that in assessing a contemporary theoretical status quo, for Butler the project of painting can be seen from that one perspective, as having failed in advance.

After acknowledging this problematic periodic matter Butler counters by mounting a recuperative and alternative argument by speculating, "quotationality could never finally upset the canon of images or destroy the notion of the author; its critical force will always be parasitic upon them, just as they will never be free from the indeterminacy introduced by the possibility of iteration. But it might be this logic itself, which puts an end to quotationality as a strategy, which reduces quotationality to banality, everywhere and nowhere at once".\footnote{1029} It is for this reason that I believe Butler finds Donaldson’s refusal to be ironic, compelling. As do I.

Here, in a roundabout fashion, and despite talking about the dependency of quotation on the 'history of images' and the critiqued role of the author, Butler is establishing the edges of a different art ideal. One that has its aims and ideas sorted into order. This last point relates directly to statements made at the beginning of this thesis about the simultaneous emergence of alternative readings in the domain of formal painting. In particular, it echoes my discussion of the notion of citational art developing out of the Appropriation Art of the mid- to late 1980s, and a difference to be clarified when considering the citational character of the Critical Post-Conceptual art making processes placed under scrutiny herein. Jacky Redgate’s painted-object and critically relational Untitled c.1991 (Fig.181) is shown as a recent manifestation of the ‘Painting the Object’ claim.

Importantly, Butler also addresses a Greenbergian dilemma of pictorial negation in the Banal Art catalogue essay. He does so by focusing on a differentiation of the aims of Formalist painting, through a reference to Jean-Francois Lyotard as way of making a considered evaluation of Greenberg’s terminal and literalist ideal, therefore, representational crisis.\footnote{1030} Lyotard expressed a desire to have an avant-garde assist in recouping notions of artistic enterprise within capitalism systems by claiming, “there is no end point in the process”\footnote{1031} of making representation. In the light of this, Butler stated, “for Greenberg, art is essentially a reflection upon itself, the end of art would occur when it is perfectly reflexive, could entirely speak of its own premises, could finally answer the question what is art? But as we know art did not end with flat two dimensional colour field painting, Minimalism, Conceptual art, etc. And it is true that art can never end, for there would always have to be another end for this end to be remarked upon”.\footnote{1032}

This circuitous argument masks a cultural demand, a concern noted by Butler for all who seek to be contemporary art makers. It seems art makers must not only address the entire history of art, and simultaneously divine a rational forecasting of their interests for expression to be understood as having meaning, as an art of its time. However, I concur with Lyotard and Butler’s implication that the avant-garde remains a possible and logical place to
seek out new meaning in the visual arts, especially when it occurs as a form of resistance within a field that for all intents and purposes, had been critically evaluated as obsolete. It is clear that Butler’s interest as a theoretician in the implicit banality of late twentieth century formalist painting, is a search for meaning in radical practices or processes that could somehow unravel certain paroxysms of Post-Modern theory. Butler’s *Banal Art* catalogue essay, despite further reservations, is an accreditation of a newer form of formal Australian painting that has at the very least responded to the Greenbergian Formalist rhetoric, Post-Modern equivalence, and the notion of a circuitous revisionist replay. However, it is not my aim here to prove or disprove theorists’ positions, rather to ratify the thesis claim that a genre of formal Australian painting matured in the 1990s.

* A.D.S. Donaldson, *Monster Field*

Three years after Lynn’s *Abstraction* exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW, and two years after *Banal Art* was held at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery at the University of NSW, Butler wrote in May of 1993, a smaller but no less significant catalogue essay for A.D.S. Donaldson’s curation of object-based art at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery. Donaldson’s *Monster Field* curation is important, in that many of the ideas that informed a widening but still specialised range of contemporary practices were put into an explicit context, whereby, the ‘objectness’ of painting was suddenly paramount, and when an anti-aesthetic painting theory was converted into a transitional theoretical enterprise or, an aesthetic.

Although the works produced for this exhibition were generally characterised as installation based, they nevertheless maintained a close association with innovative formal painting-based practices. The artists included John Nixon, Hany Armanious, Tony Clarke, Mikala Dwyer, Cathy Temin and A.D.S. Donaldson (Fig.196). By this stage Donaldson was gathering confidence, and in the ‘Introduction’ of the catalogue Donaldson claimed that his project was representative of a newer concern. He supported this assertion by making reference to an intriguing story written by Paul Nash, who had seen large fallen trees lying in a field that had been transformed by undergrowth into monsters, and had “passed on” and “become alive in another world”. Donaldson aligned his

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1033 Op cit. Yve-Alain Bois.
1034 Op cit.
1035 Op cit.
1037 Op cit.
1039 Op cit. ‘Introduction’.
thinking with Nash’s allegory, stating, “it is to the possibility of this new life, this other world, with its implication that through change new worlds appear, that the Monster Field attends”.1040

Donaldson made astute use of a literary reference that illustrated, albeit indirectly, a complex of issues associated with what Donaldson identified as emergent practice in his curation. The trees observed by Nash as benign monsters, are analogous to the fate of Modern painting and sculpture, and are read by Donaldson as becoming something else. Likewise, fallen or lapsed traditions for Donaldson have “passed on... and become alive in another world”.1041 I too agree with the sentiment and implications of the Nash allegory, which implies that there are always new ways of reading the language used in contemporary art-critical practice.

In the more recent Australian regional context, the types of practice that have emerged and were presented through the Abstraction, Banal Art and Monster Field exhibitions share legacy, critical influence, modalities of expression, and as such the contemporarising of the language of abstraction and a convergence associated with both late-Modernist minimalist painting and sculpture within a regionally expanded field.1042 Equally, they were party to the refreshed Post-Modern vision of theorists and artists such as Lynn, Butler, and Donaldson that fitted well with the ‘monster-field’ allegory. Here, the genre defined in this thesis as Critical Post-Conceptual reaches fruition. It becomes an art that is recognised on a technical level and where there is little need in denying its influences and drives or, to insist that they are only remaindered aspects of Modernist painting and sculpture. In short, a positive paradigm emerges out of the ‘monster field’ proposition where ongoing justification appears pedantic and redundant.

In Butler’s catalogue essay ‘To Express the Object’ written for the Monster Field curation, he writes about how the thematic issue of ‘objectness’ is to be equated in Donaldson’s presentation. This was achieved by making a distinction between the ‘made’ works in the Monster Field curation, and Duchamp’s earlier transmutational ‘found’ objects. Importantly, Butler assists by refuting the Duchampian redirection of the ‘found’ object, stating, “it is the mere fact that it was exhibited in a gallery that makes it art”.1043 Like MacPherson, Butler tends to reject the ongoing validity of Duchamp’s idea, because the act of artificially ‘reordering’ the signification of ‘objects’ is a non-transmutable idea.

NB: Establishing orders of perception is a subject clarified in the study of Burn’s ‘systemic’ productions in Chapter 4.

1040 ibid.
1041 ibid.
In clarifying, and making sideways reference to the different kind of almost artisan-made 'object works' present in the Monster Field exhibition, Butler asserted that the 'found' object works of Duchamp had "no power of personal association"\textsuperscript{1044} and "it is in fact the institutional power of the gallery that is made manifest".\textsuperscript{1045} The 'made objects' of the Monster Field curation were, according to Butler, "not simply effects of the gallery space, but occupy or inhabit that space". Adding, "there is a certain illusionality about them... a sense that we are not to come too close to them".\textsuperscript{1046}

In other words Butler is implying this is readable as an autonomous art, and certainly representative of a tradition of finely crafted art making, an idea that makes exhibition spaces simply that. The photograph shows Nixon's Untitled Square (cardboard) and Temin's DSA Sculpture c.1993 (Fig.196), amongst other works. At this point issues made obsolete decades earlier, returned to taunt those who would critique the authorial position of maker's of fine art objects that continue to make representation. This is a possible explanation for a new significance found in the flexible language of abstraction in the early 1990s. Moreover, Butler noted that Donaldson's curation of 'object works' had "come from the studio, and not the factory". This comment re-emphasised the 'un-found' and subsequently testimonial and fine art qualities of 'made' works. As if forecasting a shift in aesthetic emphasis, Butler's earlier Banal Art catalogue essay similarly closed with the sentiment that "a sense of contingency hangs over these works", and as Butler further observed, "we are like guests in the artists' house".\textsuperscript{1047}

Butler makes further connection with these 'made' art-objects from the 1990s, querying, "If we ‘get’ the work in the Monster Field, it is as a recollection or memory of something that has already occurred".\textsuperscript{1048} I believe that here he is not only addressing revisionism or replay, but also the growing generic character of recent contemporary art. And as I argue, this ambiguous aspect is at the same time a significant characteristic that underpins and informs current production. This idea of a 'generic aesthetic' response emergent in contemporary art is only briefly considered by Butler in the Banal Art catalogue essay, but there it is suggestively defined as an innovation of appropriation, an ensuing notion which developed out of the critical problems of revisionism,\textsuperscript{1049} and its influence since the 1980s in Australian art.\textsuperscript{1050}

Because of the growing significance of this concern, I feel Butler was compelled to discuss the personalisation of formal styles of art making, and the return of the artist's hand in making art in the 1990s. This topic was rightly related to the notion of a "second hand" or "used"\textsuperscript{1051} quality that the Donaldson monochromatic works illustrated. Therefore, as Butler suggests, the monochrome was read not as a tabula rasa that could be aesthetically manipulated as a banal objectification, but was more likely to be an 'image structure' bound by personalised

\textsuperscript{1044} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{1045} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{1046} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{1047} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{1048} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{1050} Op cit. Joan Kerr.
\textsuperscript{1051} Op cit. Rex Butler. Banal Art.
authentication's caught within an inverted "process of dissimulation".\textsuperscript{1052} Robert Hughes in 1961 described a similar problem when discussing the limited legacy that informed the antipodean's concern for the presentation of a mystagogic, Indigenous-Modernist, and often Neo-Romanticist Expressionistic representational imagery.\textsuperscript{1053} Butler's implication is actually a more difficult concept, but primarily amounts to an assertion that the reductive formalist principle of representational negation, deconstructed at the end of the Modernist era, can generate newness through other levels of repetition (i.e. the similitude of Post-Modem monochromatic styles of painting).\textsuperscript{1054} Butler identified this redirection of the notion of 'dissimilation' in contemporary art as a defining concern.

The synesthesia of forms in the \textit{Monster Field} curation by Donaldson\textsuperscript{1055} is also somewhat typical of the period, and characteristic of a growing sense of generosity, flexibility and critical mobility in the Australian visual arts. This mobility, or sense of what could still be done, registered in 1993 as an 'impure' yet 'fluid' interaction between readable 'sign systems' in the field (As first discussed in the study of Alan Oldfield in Chapter 5).\textsuperscript{1056}

\textit{Ian Burn: Looking at Seeing and Reading}

The \textit{Abstraction}, \textit{Banal Art} and \textit{Monster Field} curations, illustrated in different ways, how the manipulation of abstractionist language provided a 'break through' for certain art makers, and that made their discourse cogent, whilst often making painting the object of a considered, generic aesthetic response.

In the prevailing mood of availability and flexibility in Australian art, Ian Burn's \textit{Looking at Seeing and Reading} curation following two months after Donaldson's \textit{Monster Field}, two years after Butler's \textit{Banal Art}, and three years after Lynn's \textit{Abstraction} curation, was held at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery at the University of NSW.\textsuperscript{1057} Burn's \textit{Looking at Seeing and Reading} curation is central because it identifies the relationship of the critical field of formal painting-based practices with various local traditions and legacies in recent art-historical terms. He also offers a far reaching definition of contemporary Australian art making that had necessarily become inclusive of 'object' making, and current international discourses of the early 1990s.

\textsuperscript{1052} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{1055} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{1056} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{1057} Op cit.
This consideration of Burn's catalogue essay 'Looking at Seeing and Reading', assists in clarifying the meaning of the recent flurry of critical essays and exemplifying works, and the significance of their interrelationship. Burn queried at this time, "Seeing, looking, perceiving. I read the words, recognise the meanings for the words. But how does my reading relate to the processes that the words refer to? How do I make sense of what I am doing when I am not-reading seeing?"  

This direct questioning of rhetorical vision, where text is critiqued because of its predominant ability to figure in the 'seeing' of recent art, essentially characterises the tone of Burn's 'Looking at Seeing and Reading' catalogue essay. It also references terminology used in the 1990 Abstraction curation. Lynn had claimed that the artists involved in that exhibition had shifted ground in their interpretation of what formal contemporary painting was about. She had also outlined that select practices could be read as 'object-based' by asserting they "created two dimensional work on a wall" instead of making pictures. A slightly later Kerrie Poliness installation c.1993 entitled Untitled (pavilions) (Fig.197) is a work that provides a commentary on this matter by a further inversion of norms or, conventions.

In the 'Introduction' to the Looking at Seeing and Reading catalogue, the director of the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Nick Waterlow, discusses this issue and the relationship to Butler's Banal Art exhibition. Butler had defined a gradual shift in emphasis, stating that in some sense the works are to be understood as new objects. Then in the Monster Field catalogue essay he further redefined the critical focus on the objectness of Donaldson's selected artworks, as an attempt at a negotiated "passage between the readymade and assemblage". For instance, in John Nixon's EPW (Fig.171) this 'made' work fits the description. Here Nixon used standard Masonite panels roller-painted with 'off the shelf' paint of Nixon's preference (usually orange, as this colour provided a positive effect, amongst other formal concerns of interest to the artist).

This monochromatic (EPW) work is typically anti-compositional, and absently reflects upon the Abstract expressionism inherent in the critical Modernist negations of Colour-Form or 'Field' painting, whilst directing the viewer's attention to the 'objectness' of its constructive concept. From that vantage point vision is further directed towards relevant minimal, conceptual and abstractionist heritages. I define Nixon's EPW installation work (Fig.171), like the Kerrie Poliness Untitled (pavilions) c.1993 (Fig.197), Elizabeth Gower's Genera installation c.1993 (Fig.205) and Donaldson's Banal works (Fig.184), as contemporary conceptual abstractionist painting. Other interpretations are, however, possible in a Critical Post-Conceptual model of "positive action", as Nixon described it.

1058 Op cit.
1059 Op cit.
1060 Op cit. Rex Butler. 'To Express the Object'.
In this way, a prior reading of what a painting might be about today is elevated to a meta-concern, yet that level of discourse also seems to be made virtually redundant in an expanded field of equally available interpretations. The discourse presented here, for example, attempts to present a broader reading than would have historically been allowed. However, there are still clear relationships to painting, and to the wider field of formal painting, and thereby, a co-ordinate relationship to the expressed physicality of the object works or “meta-conceptual” paintings, as Nixon wrote. In this Critical Post-Conceptual model of recent formal Australian painting practices, the above-mentioned argument is subsumed in the rhetoric of what Nixon defined in 1988 as “critical post-conceptualism” in the ‘Nice Lecture’ given at Villa Arson. Nixon’s EPW (Fig.171) and the Kerrie Poliness Untitled (pavilions) c.1993 (Fig.197) are two clear examples of that formal developmental logic found in contemporary practice.

However, of immediate interest is the art historical and methodological focus provided by Burn’s analysis, generated in part from a critique of the Banal Art curation. Burn’s curation of July 1993 effectively broadened and ratified the ongoing discourse outlined in this Chapter. That broadening was achieved by including a wider art-historical viewpoint or focus. Burn summarised the central critical concern of his essay by stating that the 1960s was a “time when the object seemed to theorise itself”, as opposed to the 1990s, “when the tendency was for theory to be objectified”.

For instance, Jasper Johns’ Target c.1970 (Fig.198) is described by Burn as a work that focuses the viewer’s gaze upon the complex perceptual subject of representation. That subject is a model of the “object theorising itself”, as Burn liked to express it. In comparison, Imants Tillers’ simulation of Johns’ Zero Through Nine c.1961 (Fig.129) is a theoretical appropriation work made of small panels entitled Counting (0-9) II c.1987 (Fig.199), and that further examines perceptual ordering in a semantic context. This illustrates Burn’s claim that theory tended to become objectified in Post-Modern rhetorical vision. Thus, the Looking at Seeing and Reading curation engaged in developing a position of critical significance in relation to locally expressed ideas. Nevertheless, it also stands out as an object lesson in various ways of viewing contemporary painting overall, in late-20th century terms.

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1064 Op cit.
Nick Waterlow's summary found in the 'Introduction' to *Looking at Seeing and Reading* catalogue essay comments on the issues raised by Burn. He writes, "He [Tillers] examined the process of looking at Jasper Johns painting *Zero Through Nine* in front of which the more you looked... [at the work] ...the more you learned about your looking (but not about the picture)." Waterlow added, "Burn referred to the engagement with perception of the late 1960s in contrast to there being in much theory and critical writing today a disregard of perception."  

Burn claimed, "The contemporary or Post-Modernist tendency is to read pictures, rather than to look at them". To only read pictures, he added, "is to rely on a rhetorical vision which treats the picture as nothing but a rhetorical surface". That topic was also raised by Butler in his 'To Express the Object' essay by stating there was "a certain illusionality about them" and, "there is also a sense that we are not to come too close." After a forum immediately held for the *Banal Art* curation at Artspace, Burn introduced his own analysis of the issues by interrogating Donaldson's work (Fig.193). Burn wrote, "it imposes a particular kind of structural and categorical ambiguity on the viewer's perceptual experience, which underpins its rhetorical manoeuvres, importantly something happens when we look at it." This ambiguity is amplified in the process of dissimulation, as discussed previously. Waterlow considered that this was an observation that "seemed to be of fundamental importance" to an ongoing discourse on contemporary art.  

The *Looking at Seeing and Reading* catalogue airs a range of fascinating perceptual and art critical concerns, all of which have to do with how art and its making could be apprehended in a contemporary regionalist sense. In a nutshell, Burn highlighted the current practices of Jacky Redgate (Fig.181), Mike Brown (Fig.76), Aleks Danko, Richard Dunn (Fig.186), Robert Hunter (Fig.39), Narelle Jubelin, Tony McGillic (Fig.35), Bea Maddock, Susan Norrie, and Imants Tillers (Fig.199) against the background of international artists such as Ed Ruscha, Carle Andre, Terry Atkinson, Lucio Fontana, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, Michelangelo Pistoletto (Fig.98), Mel Ramsden (Fig.83) and Ad Reinhardt (Fig.28).  

Burn's comparison had two purposes. It illustrated that the personal reading that Australian art maker had developed was a meaningful and credible formal style of practising, being interdependently stylistically associated with the works of international art makers. Second, it showed that the critical or theoretical ideas of those international art makers were understood by Australian art makers engaged in similar practices. In this way, the 'Looking at Seeing and Reading' catalogue essay, and exhibition, was a commentary and analysis announcing that not only had a wide range of critical Australian art makers matured and that a developmental genre of practices had emerged, but also, a
milieux was related to a number of internationally relevant concerns, both in an historical and a contemporary sense. In short, the activity of local milieux marked the emergence of a new tendency in contemporary Australian art. As such, Burn’s curation verifies the claims about congruent artistic developments considered in the case studies of Part 2. Moreover, this normalising, and Burn’s longstanding engagement in formal conceptual artistic practices, was incorporated into an account of the importance of legacy in Australian painting.

Burn’s regional influence in this regard should not be underestimated. He is notable as an artist and curator who offered a useful and credible account of a still underestimated historical reading of recent Australian art, and also of speculative theorising. It is the latter aspect that I claim has assisted in driving the proposed emergence and maturation of an important genre of recent formal Australian painting-based practices, technically described here as Critical Post-Conceptual. Burn’s argument about seeing work without the burden of overt explanation is a characteristic Critical Post-Conceptual idea expressed in the ‘Looking at Seeing and Reading’ catalogue essay.\(^{1073}\)

Tragically, Burn died a few months after the opening of the Looking at Seeing and Reading curation, but his influence has continued. The last two curations to be discussed flowed out of the kind of cogent focus he added to the significant Australian art-historical discourse that began with Lynn’s hesitant acknowledgement of the emergence of formal painting, and Butler’scontemporising of meta-languages (such as abstraction) in recent Australian art.

Richard Dunn: Looking at Seeing and Dreaming

In the Looking at Seeing and Reading catalogue of 1993, Burn also raised the regional historical significance of Richards Dunn’s minimal reductive painterly style (Fig.186). In a comparative evaluation of newer Post-Minimalist works, such as Jacky Redgate’s Untitled c.1991 (Fig.181), Dunn’s formally achieved work likewise illustrated the idea that a critical mobility had been occurring in Australian art for quite some time. Burn noted that the ‘ordering’ of perception, and the responsiveness of the viewer were related ideas that had been carefully explored by artists such as Dunn and Redgate; a matter therefore that remains an active concern in recent Australian art.

Burn had stated, “Perception is never fixed and cannot be understood without taking mobility into account. A work of art which makes no extra-ordinary demands on visual competence is preconditioned by the idea that the corporeal viewer is in the same physical space as the work, that the viewer is not separate but co-extensive with the object of perception. Standing in front of a ruptured flat surface (Fontana) I feel an urge to move around and look at it from the back. Twenty four capstones arranged in a row (Andre) or an elongated rectangle marked out with tape on

\(^{1073}\) Op cit.
the floor [Dunn, (Fig.186)] contrive the viewer’s mobility by both endorsing and denying the appropriateness of every single viewpoint”.\textsuperscript{1074}

Here, Burn identified still emergent concerns by paraphrasing a range of commentaries made by Bois in ‘The Limits of Almost’,\textsuperscript{1075} about the significance of Ad Reinhardt’s black and mysterious paintings. In that fashion, an intriguing contemporary discourse on the conceptual abstraction of representation brought into focus by Bois was resumed by Burn. And in response to Burn’s discourse, Dunn likewise curated an exhibition three years later, in 1996, at the Sherman Gallery in Paddington, Sydney.

Dunn made the point that his Looking at Seeing and Dreaming curation was titled “by the four young artists”\textsuperscript{1078} in the exhibition, and was derived from Burn’s and Waterlow’s earlier enterprise. Dunn wrote, “Burn’s curation was an inspiration for these artists. For this curator, Ian Burn’s intellectual focus on visuality, the viewer/object relationship and the relationship between objects and in the limited physical space of the gallery was enlightened and continues to have meaning. It is also a reminder that the lessons of the 1960s have currency and that a few of us still have that coinage. This exhibition [Dunn’s] seeks to extend a language articulated by Ian Burn without his imprimatur. Whether he wished it or not Burn’s shadow is inevitably cast in this room”.\textsuperscript{1077} In these remarks the seminal role of artists/curators such as Burn, in bringing into contemporary discourse not only invention but also a growing appreciation of Australian art-historical concerns in a Critical post-conceptual environment, was again ratified by an acknowledged senior figure in Australasian visual arts.

Dunn’s catalogue essay paid homage to Burn with a personal acknowledgement: “Looking at Seeing and Reading brought work together from different generations and continents as if the world were one and time no obstacle”, displaying “an ability to create an exhibition that was deceptively open and resolutely knowing.”\textsuperscript{1078} But these remarks also harboured a critique of Burn; Dunn’s commentary revealed that by a later stage, a secondary form of revision had occurred within the field of recent formal Australian painting-based practices.

The development of criticism internally is natural and to be expected in the field, and Dunn quickly highlights Burn’s critical enterprise before moving on to the opinions of a newer group of artists more concerned with how things were then developing. He sought to establish a distance and difference between the groups of artists in these related shows. That distance was based upon their shared but diverging interests in reading into the subject of formalism, as much as how formalist inspired styles of painting are to be further interpreted in Post-Minimalist terms. In short, Dunn devoted his energy into clearly defining what Greenbergian Formalism then implied, and what a Post-Greenbergian involvement in painting, for example, might suggest to currently engaged art makers.

\textsuperscript{1074} Op cit. Ian Burn, ‘Looking at Seeing and Reading’.
\textsuperscript{1077} Richard Dunn (Curator), Looking at Seeing and Dreaming. Sherman Gallery exhibition catalogue. Sydney, February, 1996.
\textsuperscript{1078} Ibid.
Dunn established differences by explaining, "any further comparison with another exhibition is not relevant here. Conceptually, these are artists, born at the time of these debates, who admit to be Formalists, although this preference could be said to be focused on the 'look'. What is the difference between this 'formalism' and its narrow Greenbergian prescription in terms of opticality, flatness and colour in the autonomous artwork articulated in the 1950s and 1960s? These are artists who have replaced the rigour of a linguistic signifier of 'reading' with the standards of visuality and the imagination. In this exhibition, the term 'reading' has been replaced with the word 'dreaming', and the work of Christopher Dean, Kate McKay, Stephen Little and Nikke Savvas privileges self-conscious vision".\(^{1079}\) Dean's slightly earlier painting Las Vegas c. 1994 is shown (Fig. 200).

In closing his essay Dunn provided his most interesting speculation, iterating, "it is in the zone of relative clarity of subject/meaning that a closure of reading or of simple meaning is thwarted. This is precisely the zone where dreaming is paramount". What I feel Dunn was claiming is that another shift in critical and perceptual emphasis had occurred, in that these contemporary artists had begun to discursively elaborate complex artistic concerns through Formalist engagements within what they considered to be open or, non-problematic systems of painting. In other parts of the essay the radical appearance of the works produced by these younger artists is described as an engagement in a marriage between Pop Art and Minimalism, ergo, Post-Minimalism.\(^{1080}\) However, my preferred description is that they are participating in what Nixon defined in 1988 as "critical post-conceptualism", with each having his or her own sense of what "a model of positive action"\(^{1081}\) in the field might imply.

By 1996 another generation of art makers had completed studies at various universities, and taken up committed practices associated with the genre of formal painting-based practices that I claim began emerging during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As this Chapter has outlined, this evolving genre of innovative and inclusive formal practices appeared out of a diminished state of affairs but was considerably expanded in the hard-line theoretical 1980s, and was then brought to maturity by a wide range of interested practitioners in the affirmative 1990s.

The final curation to be considered, which participated in this legacy of formal concerns informing the emergence of a curatorial subtext during the 1990s, involves some artists who had participated in the exhibitions discussed already, and who have come to represent a new lineage of regional formalist painters who I feel can be contemporarily aligned in art-historical terms with the thesis proposition.

\(^{1079}\) Op cit.
\(^{1080}\) Op cit.
\(^{1081}\) Op cit. John Nixon, 'Villa Arson' or 'Nice' Lecture.
Christopher Dean: True Colours

In 1998, the artist, curator, academic, and writer, Christopher Dean, curated an interrelated contemporary art exhibition that I associate with development in the field. Like Dunn’s 1996 Looking at Seeing and Dreaming curation, Dean’s 1998 True Colours curation further defined a tendency in recent formal Australian painting.

Dean’s participation in his own curation is important for two reasons. Like Burn and Donaldson before, he engaged the field utilising the critical idea of participatory curation, and in so doing carefully aligned the formal artistic concerns of others with his own practice. This rationale for interdependency was made clear by highlighting appropriate legacy, underlining and then requalifying important developmental experimentation in the ongoing field, as a maker of art. That developmental participatory curatorial approach is a process that I have also embraced in yet another series of contemporary painting-based curations undertaken as integral research. A list of supplementary curations is provided in Appendix A.

Burn, Nixon, Donaldson, and Dean amongst others, have participated as artists in important recent curations of contemporary art and then developmentally and discursively curated shows themselves that suited their specific purposes, seemingly as a matter of necessary consequence. This is a fascinating subtext in Australian painting, and points to the fact that many artists prefer to lead the way in terms of curation, apparently in order to establish the most relevant discourses worth enacting within what I have claimed throughout the thesis is, an homogenate field.

Dean’s True Colours curation is significant for a number of reasons. The main being the artists in that exhibition had taken a radical and Post-Minimalist approach and had worked collectively on the development of a critical format for their presentation. The opening page of Dean’s catalogue announces that each artist agreed to choose a single colour to be associated with. For example Dean, who had exhibited in Looking at Seeing and Dreaming, chose pink. Bram, who had exhibited in the first Abstraction exhibition, chose brown. Donaldson, who exhibited in Abstraction, Banal Art, and Monster Field, chose green, and Nixon, who had exhibited in Abstraction and Monster Field, chose orange.

This formalising of associated practices featured as a convention of the show and augmented the architectonic display of mostly wall painting works. In this presentation of contemporary art, the objectness of the previous few shows transmogrified into a display of spatial imaging, in a manner that pictorially subsumed one’s understanding of sculptural form. This is a factor that the artists showing in the True Colours exhibition may have

108a Op cit.
wished acknowledged. For instance, Bram’s three-point perspective drawing/painting exercises are typical of the
type of this presentation of a formal, architectural painting. Similar works by Bram, such as Someone Else’s Studio
c.1997 (Fig.201) and Untitled c.1993 (Fig.202), are shown.

Here, towards end of the 1990s, Dean declared that the many
misgivings and false claims about the supposed failure of formal or
reductive forms of painting had amounted to a kind of furphy. On the
subject of faltering ‘negation’ of contemporary formal painting concerns,
Dean wrote, “the distinct and sporadic phases of interest shown in
Australian ‘abstraction’ has since the late 1960’s generated a substantial
number of exhibitions, however almost no monochromatic painting has ever
been included. A reason for this is that the survey shows have
depended almost entirely on an iconological understanding of Non-
objective art as a style rather than as a system of interpretive strategies
or methods”\textsuperscript{1064}

These various points are brought into focus with Dean’s further
clarification that “True Colours aims to correct what might be described as
a commonly held historical error which maintains that both reductive and
one colour art can only be perceived in either the singular or as a dead
end. As a consequence the primary aim of True Colours is to present the
work of nine contemporary Australian artists whose methods contradict
this popular art historical myth”\textsuperscript{1065} Fusinato’s constructed panel, Painting
10/1 c.2000 (Fig.203), from this period, is shown. A slightly later
monochromatic work by Gary Wilson, Untitled c.2000 (Fig.204), is also
illustrated. Wilson participated in the True Colours exhibition and in the
subsequent David Pestorius Monochromes show of 2001.

In closing the True Colours catalogue, Dean claimed that the
variously achieved formal approaches the artists expressed were best
defined as a kind of “personal minimalism”.\textsuperscript{1066} I support this claim
because as illustrated in this Chapter on a sequence of related curations,
many informed and credible people have, as Dean suggests, chosen -

\textsuperscript{1064} Op cit.
\textsuperscript{1065} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{1066} Op cit.
to view the supposedly diminished field of formal painting in an affirmative and engaging manner. In short, recent formal Australian painting is understood contemporaneously as providing a positive paradigm.

I feel these researches have more than adequately shown that I have identified a field of innovative enterprise that is as varied as the practices that continue to characterise it. That is, as vital aspects of contemporary Australian art. Elizabeth Gowers’ systemic wall work Genera c.1999 (Fig 205), is another example of that claim, and a work participant in a genre that is no longer emergent but mature in expression.

Other significant curations have taken up themes located in these curations of the 1990s, such as the David Pestorius Monochromes show at the Queensland University Art Museum in 2001. In the next and final chapter I summarise and theorise upon the overall implications and ramifications of this visual arts study on recent formal Australian painting.

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Chapter 9  Post 20th Century Formal Painting

Fig. 209  Blue Lotus Group. 'Section 4'. Firstdraft, 2002.

'Painting the Object' is an argument concerning how formalist approaches to painting emerged in the later 1960s were expanded in the 1980s and then grounded in the 1990s, as a significant genre of recent formal styles of Australian art. The argument began with the presentation of an orientation of leading figures and associated concerns dating from the early 1960s. It was proposed that the divergent ideas, complex artistic situations, commentaries and critiques unearthed in rare catalogues provided by artists (including personal discussions), and other obscure texts such as Jennifer Glenn’s 1976 BA paper on the ‘Central Street style’ from the Power institute archives, prefigured the appearance in the 1980s of a genre technically defined for the purposes of this study as, Critical Post-Conceptual. That claim was supported by the four case studies provided in Part 2.

I further argued that the appearance of a specific genre of recent Australian formal painting-based practices had not been properly considered. In brief, after a lengthy period of critical activity in the 1970s and early 1980s, subsequent practical formal engagements in the early 1990s were relegated to the position of aberrant phenomena in a critically diminished field. I countered that institutionalised claim by working through the ramifications and implications of my research. When viewed from a post 20th century perspective, the considerable array of issues and concerns arising in recent decades has produced a situation that confounds accepted views. Further, the ongoing innovation in the field, the critical discourse and influence that this genre of practices has generated, suggests that

the genre is better understood as a significant regional expression of formalist painting, as well as related object-
works, convergent installation practices, and any combination of these when regarded as interdependent practices.

I have emphasised that critical debate has often overlooked what has actually occurred in the field, regardless of responsive criticism. Figure 206 is an illustration of the Blue Lotus Group’s 2002 collective installation entitled Section 4. This is an example of committed milieux of newer practitioners working in this field, where all the critical factors and influences are observable in current practices. Moreover, this one example illustrates that an inclusive and interrelated painting-based practice is a viable approach route into the production of contemporary art; and the art-historical subject of painting continues to provide a positive paradigm with which to engage. Therefore, this regional study, ‘Painting the Object’, is less a contemporary justification of theoretical opinions, and more an actual responsive phenomenon within an active field.

This last claim has ongoing significance for two reasons. First, it provides relevance for those generally interested in the field: Academics, writers, artists, journalists, and so on. Second, it illustrates that at an institutional level there is value in reconsidering prior and current fields of formal Australian art making practices that have, to all intents and purposes, been undervalued since the later 1960s.

Over the last forty years lingering doubts about the cogency of the subject of formalist styles of painting has amounted to a generalised complex of assumptions or, meta-discourse, which, although adding cogency to a specific argument, has generated more confusion than clarity. This study has attempted to redress that imbalance by illustrating that the massive critique of painting and remaindered aspects of Modernist painting still under investigation, involves an area of criticism that has been necessary but inconclusive in regional or peripheral environs like Australia. This has led to an underestimation of the ‘real’ value of both the subject and the artefacts produced in the field. A poignant illustration of that claim is that I recently bought a David Aspden painting at auction for a frugal sum. This shocked me, because Aspden is a leading Colour-Form painter who deserves to be properly recognised as a significant Australian artist in art-historical terms, and whose works should be valued accordingly. A point driven home by the fact that his most significant works were likely produced thirty years ago.

To review the argument, 1960 was calculated as an effective starting point for the art-historical account in Part 1. This marked the time when, for example, Australian artists such as the Annandale Imitation Realists diverged from local polarised interpretations of Modernist conventions during the so-called collapse of Modernism. These issues were associated with the variety of innovative expressions of formal painting that have since occurred. Closely linked to the subject of the collapse of Modernism, the argument included a debate on Bernard Smith’s comparative model of dependency, the modulation of the language of abstraction, a periodic convergence of forms of

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cosmopolitan expression, and the regional impact of the art-critical idea of representational negation. The latter topic is a longstanding Western discourse that was discussed as being complicit with a variety of forms of Late and Post-Modern formalist styles of painting. I concluded however, that critique should not be allowed to overshadow an appreciation of development in the field.

In Part 2, selected artworks and specific methodological approaches were examined in four case studies of acknowledged practitioners of associated formal styles of painting. The collective activities of the four artists are seminal to responsive experimentation and the development of formalist painting approaches regionally, and to the crucial emergence of a genre usefully defined as Critical Post-Conceptual. The first and second case study demonstrate that prior to the 1980s abstractionist painters and sculptors formed a vital legacy to which later practitioners attended. The conceptual and formally achieved paintings of Ian Burn made between 1965-67 were analysed in terms of a systemic repetition of conceptual themes and models of innovative practice, such as the viewer's choice between 'natural' or 'imposed' artificial orders of perception, as well as the artist's own investigation into personal expression within a Formalist discourse. I claimed these matters emerged as cogent concerns out of Burn's practice. A second analysis followed, of equally seminal work produced by Alan Oldfield in 1968. Like Burn, Oldfield's painting style was identified as a co-ordinate and transitional model of systemic painting, albeit expressed within the 'impure' codification of a Hard-edged format of painting. These studies identified Burn and Oldfield's experimentation with the fluidity and interactivity of sign systems, a discursive matter worthy of further acknowledgement.

The third and fourth case studies incorporate the findings of the first two studies. Robert MacPherson and John Nixon are contemporarily acknowledged formal art makers, publicly active since the 1970s. They presented as leading practitioners producing a massive body of work. I claim that MacPherson and Nixon's oeuvres certify the emergence and maturation of a specific genre of formal painting, just as in one form or another, the constructive concepts of all the artists discussed in Part 2 are considered illustrative of the emergence of Critical Post-Conceptualism in formal styles of painting in the 1980s.

The grounding of that claim was followed by an evaluation of other current paintings, related object-works, installations, and critical essays, made by a variety of relevant figures. That examination and general survey of more recent practices provided clear examples of innovative responses to the central claim. For instance, I argued that the art-critical notions of 'interdependency', 'apparent difference' and 'alternative character' outlined by Burn, Lendon, Merewether and Stephen in 1988 were important indicators of a newer type of art making occurring within more recent formal Australian practices; and those had historical links. Further that criticism provided by theorists such as Terry Smith, and later Rex Butler, added cogency to the field.

Moreover, it was argued those specific attributes assisted with locating the idea of contemporaneity in the nominated field.\textsuperscript{1092} For instance, the notion of ‘apparent difference’ was developed to clarify the significance of often very subtle personal expressions that I acknowledge are meaningful in much recent formal painting. The notion of an art maker’s personally derived sense of ‘alternate character’ (interdependent response to en-framing discourse, stylistic convention, etc) was posited as a second defining factor, observable within a specified genre of practices. This critical characterisation of the formal methodological concerns of select recent formal Australian art makers was further associated with more contemporary forms of Australian painting.

That clarification establishes that developmental aspects or, innovative formal styles of painting, need to be acknowledged as an active field of critical engagement occurring in Australian art. Evidence for this claim involved a wider examination of important essays that were issued as supportive texts for relevant survey exhibitions from the early 1990s (Chapter 8, Part 3). These curations were organised as local critical public exhibitions that were directly engaged with the emergence of an expanded and inclusive genre of regional formal painting-based practices. This curatorial activity provided the necessary recognition and ratification of the field at an institutional level, thus supplying conclusive relevance for the argument.

‘Painting the Object’ has shown that an extended discourse, sustained throughout the 1990s by leading Australian curators such as Victoria Lynn, Rex Butler, A.D.S. Donaldson, Ian Burn, Richard Dunn and Christopher Dean consecutively, centred on the importance of the contemporisng of the formalist language of abstraction amongst other concerns, both in the development of recent Australian art and as a new level of personal expression occurring generally within the field. I have argued that the presentation of such activities highlights the fact that discursively connected curations of recent formal Australian painting-based art works amounts to a considerable yet undervalued curatorial subtext of the 1990s. These activities in their turn led to the development of related critical exhibitions in the post 20th century environment.\textsuperscript{1093} The very existence of a significant field of abstract painterly engagement in the current Australian context further verifies the claim that the language of abstraction, for instance, was contemporisng and made useful in the 1980s and 1990s. I argued that this is a variegated expression of generic or familial language productively utilised within the ongoing production of contemporary Australian art. The works of recent art makers like Matthey Geber (Fig.191) and Mikala Dwyer (Fig.77) exemplify that last claim.

This research has confirmed that significant developments have occurred within the maturation phase of the proposed genre of formal painting-based practices, and that an active field of critical engagements has correspondingly developed during the early 1990s into a recognisable, innovative aspect of recent Australian art. Finally, it is claimed that the specific type of public curatorial presentation discussed in Chapter 9 has transformed an art once described as dependent or as “an aberrance, occurring in a diminishing field”\textsuperscript{1094} into an acknowledged.

\textsuperscript{1093} Appendix A.
critically and culturally acceptable format of contemporary painting-based art. I originally defined regional milieux, and their activities, as an engagement in the 'Post-conditions' of recent formal Australian painting. However, it is shown in this thesis that it is more accurate to state that a legacy of critical formal engagements once considered diminished, has come to represent an unheralded set of innovative diversifications from convention. From a revisional perspective, current formal styles are considered relevant and informing in post 20th century terms. In this manner an array of styles are shown to constitute an interrelated phenomenon that is in alignment with associated painting-based practices maintained since the 1950s by a range of art makers, critics, curators and historians interested in innovation and inclusiveness within the field. Therefore, it is claimed overall, that a recognisable genre of formal painting and associated variegated practices consistently developed from the later 1960s, and is now a specific subject that I believe deserves to be firmly embedded within the domain of critical contemporary art making and its criticism.

Moreover, a redefining of a narrow Post-Modern 'envisioning' that perturbed regional writers and theorists such as Rex Butler and Ian Burn during the late 1980s and early 1990s,\(^{1095}\) has in post 20th century terms, become identifiable as a dominant revisionist concern for the subject of formal painting. In that regard, Richard Dunn's desire for a thwarting of simple readings, through his denial of 'non-possibility' in the field of contemporary formal painting-based practices is, likewise, substantiated in the current Australian regional environment as an equally credible concern. Today the meaningful generic character of formal painting is widely accessed as an interdependent metacommunications, allowing a nuanced model of artistic dependency to be re-evaluated in Australian art-historical terms.

This visual arts PhD thesis has provided a comprehensive discourse on the development of what John Nixon defined in the 1980s as "critical, post-conceptualism".\(^{1096}\) However, this discursive analysis was not intended to rely upon a strict reconstruction of an art-historical genealogy, a determining chronology of Australian characters or events, or a labelling of a supposed movement. Rather, the real importance of the thesis resides in it being an initial informing study that provides a map or guideline to the wide range of aspects informing a now complex production of recent formal Australian painting, and related painting-based practices.

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\(^{1095}\) Op cit. Chapter 9.
\(^{1096}\) Op cit.
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Catalogues


Appendix A: Sphere Post-Graduate Group Exhibition Research Project, 1998-2002

The exhibitions listed below were curated by myself in association Kyle Jenkins a PhD Candidate from SCA. As contemporary art makers, Kyle Jenkins and I were participating curators of these exhibitions that were conducted on a local and national level in order to generate and develop research material. Many of the concepts used in the thesis had been generated and tested in this program. As such, they provided significant input into the research. The participants in these curations where generally postgraduate art makers from the University of Sydney, with the exception of those participating in the five Further and Constructed Colour exhibitions. Those curations also featured invited European and American Post-Graduate art makers.

This independent program remains ongoing, with selected works from the Further and Constructed Colour projects having been collected by the Musee Beaux Des Arts, Zurich. The newer Group Project is the main activity scheduled for ongoing activities in various institutions during 2003/4. These research-based activities have been gratefully supported by NAVA, SUPRA and SASCA organizations, and Sydney College of the Arts.

Select list of related exhibitions

2002

'Section 5'. Blue Lotus. Bus Gallery, Melbourne.
'Modes of Practice'. Group 3 Special Project. Imperial Slacks Gallery, Sydney.
'Section 4'. Blue Lotus. Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney.
'Further 2'. IDspace Gallery, Melbourne.

2001

'Further 1'. Newspace Gallery Sydney, and NEA Gallery, Newcastle.
'Section 3'. Blue Lotus. Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney University. Sydney.

2000

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1999


1998


1997


Publications

2002

Billy Gruner. 'Introduction to the Further Shows'. Further II. IDspace exhibition catalogue, Melbourne.

2001


2000

APPENDIX : B

CD File of illustrations 1 – 209

NB; illustrations in colour when available.