

Abstract Realities: The MAG&M Project

Abstract art emerged in Europe in the second decade of the twentieth century, promising a new cultural order. While European in origin, its early protagonists framed its nature as universal. In grounding visual culture in colour, form, space, material, texture and technique, its originators saw abstract art as expressing values of truth and reason, driving artistic progress and becoming a marker of modernity. Its adoption would be irrefutable, any resistance being cast as traditionalism bound up in false consciousness.

Although the practice of abstraction never became ubiquitous, artists working in the field of abstract art are today dispersed internationally. Equally, the rejection of figurative subject matter combined with seeing artworks as constructed formal or material entities is the common framework for understanding abstraction, limiting attention to the concurrent situatedness and global diffusion of abstract art. In dedicating one exhibition room to the work of many different artists engaged in abstraction, Julian Goddard, Sarah Robson and David Thomas highlight this paradox while dispelling any perception that abstract art is a singular practice.

The matter of local specificity is a complex topic to unpack. For much of the history of abstract art, a centre/periphery model explained its spread. According to this account, artists in international art centres drove artistic progress, their innovations being transmitted to lesser, fringe cultures. Sometimes, abstraction was seen as a hegemonic practice that subjugated art in the rest of the world, the role of artists in the periphery being to produce hybrid or pallid versions of practices originating in Europe or North America. The curation of *Abstract Realities* suggests that far more complex and interesting modalities have spread abstract art within specific territories and internationally, the exhibition highlighting artists' active processes of appropriation and reception rather than a one-way cultural transfer.

By assembling a range of abstract works from their collections in addition to their own work, Goddard, Robson and Thomas show abstract art to be an open-ended system of artistic propositions that extend, reconfigure and maintain its practice across its aesthetic, material, social, perceptual and political aspects. Firstly, they demonstrate abstraction's nature to be contingent rather than innately universal. They show negotiability to be its main property, there being no recipe for its practice. Secondly, they suggest that the historical development and global spread of abstract art happened through multiple circulations across long- and short-range networks, many reflecting cross-cultural interaction and exchanges between generations of artists. Here, circulation implies an ongoing, back-and-forth process according to which abstract art continues to develop and expand, sometimes observing historical models, but not simply reproducing them across time and space.

The curation and installation of the exhibition allow the sense of circulation and divergence to be grasped intuitively through observation, although noting who the artists are and where they come from reveals a web of connections extending across Australia, the Asia Pacific, Europe and North America, some of which take important reconfigurations of the abstract back to its points of origin. The exhibition exemplifies the high degree of agency often exercised among those who make abstract art. In being organised by three artists, *Abstract Realities* reflects their recognition of the need for artists to collaborate to support their work since abstract art can still be poorly supported and understood.

The exhibition signals that for them, it is not enough to just hang a painting on a gallery wall or place a sculpture on the gallery floor. The context of an artwork needs to be made manifest. Most immediately, the gallery space and its architectural characteristics — down to the colour of the walls — are part of the works as the works are part of them. Then, there is the lineage of experiments in abstraction that generated new forms of art and terms for its practice, each one bringing abstract art a step closer to its present point. In the twentieth century, for example, there was the productive tension between Suprematism's development of non-objectivity to communicate spiritual content and Constructivism's alignment of abstraction with a new age of industry and technology, the medium specificity of mid-century formalist painting only for Minimalism's literal statements in geometric form to push reflexivity to the point where even the expectation for formal decision-making in art was refuted, or Asian artists' merging of abstraction with ancient metaphysical traditions. Today, abstract art is contextualised by twenty-first-century problems of culture clash, including the fraught relationship between the uses of culture for indigenous peoples and the economic and institutional operation of art worlds in settler societies such as Australia.

In the context of the exhibition, the works of Goddard, Robson and Thomas become detailed case studies in the practice of abstraction. Robson's work explores materiality, specifically the properties of felt in its raw and painted states, its surface qualities, density, pliability and weight. Her works inhabit an indeterminate zone between painting and sculpture. How they hang off the gallery wall or mould to the junction of the gallery wall and floor shifts the nature of the work of art from that of a pictorial entity to something reliant on its architectural setting. Her wall-hung works use weight as a force to produce their form, which brings in the dimension of time. They have a quality of the applied and temporary rather than the integral despite their strong and lucid forms. From which point they are suspended sees specific tensions and yields produce their shape. Other alternations — between painted and unpainted surfaces, and form and space — stress the interdependency of opposites in Robson's work. All harness the corporeal, kinaesthetic aspects of viewing, a single cord hung across a corner of the gallery creating volume and closing off space, the void produced by such an unassuming action creating an awareness of absence.

Thomas's practice is a composite of styles, mediums and methods that play off each other conceptually in circuitous ways. Some groups of work engage with painting as a medium, incorporating gestural techniques and the pure experience of colour and form. The juxtaposition and layering of colour in these works, combined with variations in the application of paint, especially the trailing brush strokes, introduce a sense of duration and movement. Thomas's coloured works become more vibrant for their contrast with the withdrawal of colour in his monochrome works. Black, white and grey paintings represent an important line of reductive art in the history of abstraction, the presence of coloured and non-coloured paintings in Thomas's oeuvre indicating both an affective and theoretical interest in the function of colour. His horizontal monochrome paintings, which can roll across the floor on their supporting castors, contrast the materials and practices of the artist's studio to a competing order of industrially produced, functional objects. Works that employ photography provide a key to the importance of time and memory across Thomas's practice. Similarly, the continuous line he has painted around all walls of one gallery foregrounds duration, thinking about the sustained physical action and time involved in painting it being inherent to its form. The line divides the space horizontally, drawing attention to what is above and below it and to what is inside and outside the gallery.

Julian Goddard's work rejects all models of contemplative specularly and aspirations to meaning often associated with abstract art. In their place, he posits literalist propositions in the form of paintings and sculptures that highlight, rather than divert attention from everyday experience and the perceptual, pre-cognitive basis of reality. As hybrid objects suspended between art and design, Goddard's stacked chair sculptures suggest how artists and designers mobilise forms and materials to produce aesthetic and perceptual experiences that are our point of access to the everyday world. His is also a hybrid practice, reflecting historical schisms in the field of abstract art. Some of his works echo Minimalism's uninflected aesthetics, others the visual overload of Op Art, although both movements were allied by a shared interest in human perception. In resisting meaning as an element of art, Goddard's work operates in the terrain Donald Judd circumscribed in his 1965 essay 'Specific Objects'. This argued that a work of art only need be interesting, by which he meant that it would command and maintain a viewer's attention, Goddard's works producing sufficient visual outcomes through their simple, repeated shapes to have us recognise them as artworks without the need for additional intent or meaning.

Goddard's, Robson's and Thomas's practices exemplify how abstract artists have worked experimentally and speculatively along multiple lines of research. In *Abstract Realities*, they collaborate to explore the experience of colour in two and three dimensions, transforming the walls across two exhibition rooms into a series of highly coloured monochromes in contrast to the white walls and tonal works in a nearby gallery. These painted walls underscore the perceptual impact of colour, its saturation, strength, relationship to light, purity and independence, as well as the interaction of colour with properties of space such as volume, depth and dimension. That these monochromes are temporary, highlights the transient, situational relationship of artworks to the gallery. For the artists whose work is represented in *Abstract Realities*, however, the process of invention within the abstract is an unfolding historical project that they add to daily.

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