

The Metamorphosis of Pictorial Space (As Experienced in a Painting Practice)

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Abstract

This practical and written research investigates abstract painting and its intrinsic relationship to pictorial space throughout the course of Modern Art. Influenced by the spatial and decorative qualities of Eastern art, the early Modernists made the discovery of several key concepts that culminated in twentieth century abstraction and the flattening of picture plane. Ambiguities between figure and field, depth and flatness, abstraction and representation continue to be ripe for exploration within painting and this research charts the development of several pictorial devices and how they began to metamorphose in practice.

A context is provided for the ways in which painting procedures may instigate doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity; and how materials can have implications for a painting's facture and imagery. There is often a refusal within contemporary abstraction to pin-point specific sources and a preference for imagery that evolves through an iterative process without pre-conception, naming and categorisation. Painting, in this case, begins as being *about* something and moves towards the consideration of painting *as* something.

Many contemporary commentators on art adopt phenomenological modes of inquiry that focus on intuitive knowledge, lived-experiences and sensations rather than an objective appraisal of the image. The slowness of studio production is also a factor in gleaning of this knowledge, as the passing of time heightens awareness of the ordinary objects, textures and events that surround us. These themes are explored in tandem with the project's own development and outcomes are evidenced in the documented paintings.

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A Context for Inquiry

It can be argued that origins of Modern Painting took root in the humanist philosophy associated with the Renaissance period, although it is more widely recognized as beginning in the latter half of the 19th Century. By the beginning of the 20th Century several concepts had been constructed in science and philosophy which posited the idea of a fourth-dimension. “Conceptual, infinite space was a consequence of the spatial illusion first realized by the artist; a new possibility then existed: to make space creation the sole criterion of art.”(Read 100) This idea revolutionised the way artists viewed the physical and psychological world and was an influential factor in the development of modernism and the phenomena of abstract painting.

One of the aspects central to Modernist painting was the flattening of the picture plane and the assertion of a painting’s material surface. The illusion of three-dimensionality in the lineage of traditional representational painting concealed the manner in which paint was applied to a flat surface. Painters began to question this representational illusionism as ‘trickery’ and artifice, instead placing their own perception as the subject matter of what is depicted. Their acknowledgment of this subjectivity was made tangible in the purposeful application of a gestural mark on a painted surface that they understood as inherently flat.

It was not until the advent of American Abstract Expressionism that the flatness of the picture plane became complete and a virtue by which a movement could define itself. Modernist Critic Clement Greenberg maintained that “Because flatness was the only condition painting shared with no other art, Modernist painting oriented itself to flatness as it did to nothing else”(Greenberg 755). As objects were no longer depicted, the need for linear perspective, shading and volume as devices to control the illusion of depth was eliminated. The process of painting on a flat surface was more important than the illusion, emphasising the *physical* construction of space and a *psychological* sensation of depth.

However, the Abstract Expressionists refused to come to terms with a singular self-critical doctrine that emphasised ‘flatness’ in painting. As a movement, it reacted against an either/or dialectic that promoted *either* the process of painting *or* the conceptualization of the image. Many Abstract Expressionists began to cross these critically imposed boundaries, some even reinstating figurative imagery into their work. These inconsistent objectives have become a feature of Abstract Expressionism and continue to be considered within Modernist critiques.

The question posed in the early stages of this project was one based on the formal implications of pictorial space in painting within the context of Late Modernism although it soon became evident that the complexities woven into Modernist discourse would reframe the nature of the inquiry.

With Abstract Expressionism as a principle point of reference, along with current practitioners of abstraction, the research question emerged from an interest in ways in which pictorial space related to and could determine abstract form. Its significance in the evolution of modernism warranted further understanding in both practical and theoretical terms and provided the framework to negotiate the following research project.

Question:

In what ways can conventions of pictorial space explored within late modernist abstraction be re-examined in a contemporary painting practice?

Aim:

To examine and test methods of activating two-dimensional space in abstract painting and understand how this may be interpreted within art theoretical contexts.

It became evident during the early stages of the project that limiting the inquiry to Late Modernist painting would exclude some of the most interesting aspects of its earlier development. Initial research took the project back to the late nineteenth century in order to understand the evolution of the picture plane and how early the early Modernists had begun to flatten pictorial space. These concerns were explored in conjunction with personal interests such as pattern and decoration and the desire to successfully integrate drawing into a painting practice.



Wall Drawing, 2002-2009
oil and enamel on Paper,
1900 x 1560mm

Starting Out

An interest in abstraction developed during undergraduate study in painting over a decade ago and had continued in the form of small A5 size drawings on paper that were serial in nature. These drawings were made primarily with oil paint, enamel and acrylic and became source material for the project, a starting point from which to proceed. They become a routine way to explore the infinite possibilities of abstracted patterns, colours, poured blobs, combinations of biomorphic or geometric shapes and landscape-like formations. There was a desire for the image to be dynamic in its relationship to the picture plane whether it was flat or illusionistic. The formal element of painting needed to combine with something more idiosyncratic, perhaps slightly unusual to develop a more personal painterly language.



Wall Drawing, (detail) 2002-2009, oil on paper, 205 x 145mm

Practical experiments with imagery began on canvas although it was not yet clear which path they would take. Complex all-over compositions were created using masking tape to create hard-edged trellis-like constructions and geometric designs although they had little variation of brush-mark and were severe in their handling of colour and design. This all-over effect was orderly and lacked that mysterious element to throw it askew. When adopting a more relaxed approach, patterns were sampled from the smaller drawings and combined with a looser and more natural style of brushwork to create curious figure-ground relationships.

PART ONE

Considering Figure and Ground

The concept of figure and ground is a formal concern within painting and the relationships between these dynamic components continue to stimulate various modes of investigation that are not limited to the two-dimensional image. The *contrast* between figure and ground creates meaning and according to Art-Historian James Elkins “Without a contrast between one thing and another, I cannot know anything....the most rudimentary way to speak about contrast is by speaking of figure and ground.” (91)

In the context of Art History, the figure-ground relationship in painting has been tested by way of integration, reversal, separation and elimination in order to change perceptions of pictorial space. When looking at a painting the first thing the eye does is attempt to distinguish figure from ground and this viewing is sequential with form usually recognized first. It was evident during the project’s early stages that figure-field distinctions were being made as several paintings featured isolated forms, often patterned, that appeared to float on top of indeterminate grounds.

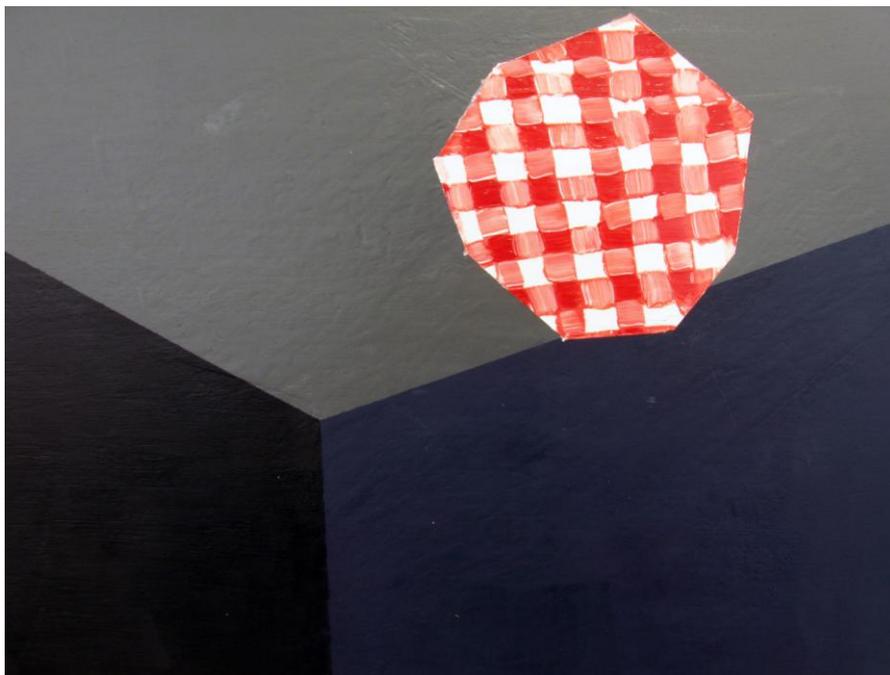


Plate 1 Gingham, 2010, Oil on canvas, 432 x 600mm

In Plate 1 an irregular patch of gingham tablecloth squares is painted on top of darker area that resembles the corner of a room (or is it the top of a box?). Due to its ambiguous perspective the

eye cannot decide whether the space recedes or advances, and the pattern hovers above the picture plane dangerously close to the painting's edge. This image seemed to have potential in that it connected two arbitrary elements to make a satisfying whole.

Many contemporary abstract painters exploit figure and ground relationships in their work. Yet for the project, a specific but as yet unnameable quality was sought and conveniently found with the discovery of American abstract painter Thomas Nozkowski (b.1944). Each unique, Nozkowski's small, mysterious and idiosyncratic paintings, depict unusual forms in an uneasy figure-field relationship and became a benchmark for the kind of sentiment sought in my own work.



Figure 1 Thomas Nozkowski, *Untitled (8-50)*, oil on linen on panel, 22 x 28in

Nozkowski's forms vary from unsteady organic and geometric shapes to thick calligraphic line and landscape-type formations. He sets up opposites in the work such as hard-edged and wobbly, opaque and translucent, patterns and voids. Distinctions between figure and field are disturbed as one element may morph into the other as a form of camouflage or visual 'hide-and-seek'. Without irony, these paintings are slow to reveal themselves, arriving at a juncture neither abstract nor representational. Nozkowski's work appears deceptively simple in its off-kilter but schematic-like approach, although at this early stage the more nuanced elements of his imagery and practice had only been partially absorbed.

More experimental irregular compositions with several elements were also fruitful and Plate 2 is an example of a more relaxed, improvised approach combining hard-edged shapes with irregular areas of freehand mark-making and paint application without a brush (pouring or splattering). The central shape appears to float through a dark, patterned and subtly contrasting space. An unknown black shape is visible through a mouse hole at the bottom edge. The reddish-pink area (similar in value to the other colours) flattens things again, interrupting the distinction between figure and ground as it attaches itself to the central form, destroying the illusion.



Plate 2 *Untitled*, 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas, 520 X 520mm

During this period the interest in the figure-ground dynamic was perhaps eclipsed by a conscious effort to create a sense of depth. In retrospect it seems the most interesting paintings were more spontaneous attempts with less regard to this illusion, and made effective use of a shallower space. Plate 3 employs a flat acrylic background in spearmint green with several arbitrary paint drips on it. Pink acrylic is poured onto this to create a thick imperfect balloon-like shape that cracks slightly on drying. A large dark icicle rises from the bottom of the painting just missing its moment to skewer the balloon. The elements in the painting seem to be held together in an awkward tension, with the eye trying somehow to link the two. This was a start towards making work where the elements were balanced visually but not regular; the dark triangle receding and the circle sitting defiantly above the picture plane.



Plate 3 *Untitled*, 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas, 450 X 530mm

Pictures of the Floating World

The exploration of Figure-ground relationship in my work led to a broader investigation of spatial concepts not limited to the tradition of Western Art. Interest in the Japanese print began when practical experiments with thin washes of paint effectively lightened the field in several works, adding a quality reminiscent of a Japanese print or screen. The comparison initiated the project to several Japanese pictorial techniques and revealed how they could be used to make abstract paintings.

When European painters in the late nineteenth-Century began to take interest in the Japanese arts it became known as *Japonism*. The interest in Far Eastern wares began to flourish as renewed trade with the West saw the influx of Japanese arts & crafts, textiles, prints and bric-a-brac to Europe and Britain. *Ukiyo-e* or 'pictures of the floating world' are wood-block prints that began in the early 17th Century as black and white line drawings and continued to the late 19th Century where the benefits of technology were demonstrated in their use of vivid and contrasting colours. These prints became especially popular when introduced to the West and depicted an extensive range of scenes and activities, from daily work, leisure and the Kabuki (theatre), to landscapes or historical events.



Figure 2 Kuniyoshi, *Women*. Date Unknown, Woodblock print

The popularity of Ukiyo-e prints peaked during the 1890's and among the many well-known European painters to be influenced by them, was the group of painters known as the Nabis. They became interested in Japanese pictorial devices such as parallel perspective, flattened space, asymmetry and cropping, vertical formats and the use of decorative motifs. Ukiyo-e and other forms of Japanese art and design provided significant spatial and decorative concepts that would influence the course of early twentieth-century Modernism. My interest in the impact of Japanese art on the Western tradition, led to an interest in the intimate works of the Nabi painters, and their ambition to align these Eastern spatial principles with decorative painting.

Setting the Tone

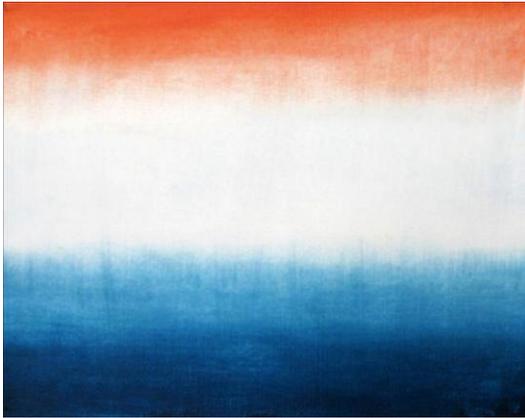


Figure 3 Utagawa Hiroshige, *Iris at Horikiri*, 1857

Space in Ukiyo-e is made up of flat areas of colour and line rather than three-dimensional illusionism, volume and shadow to depict a sense of depth. A sense of atmosphere is created by tonal bands of colour that run horizontally across the image invoking the sea, sky or overall mood depicted scene. Vivid and contrasting cloud bands were used to separate aspects of the composition from other elements in the fore-ground and to enhance the effectiveness of the design.

Practical experiments with these atmospheric tonal bands began by using oil on paper to make quick studies. Later, on the more resistant surface of canvas, several shades of oil-colour were rubbed and blended with a rag to achieve a subtle graduation of tones which were placed along the top and bottom edges and faded towards the centre. These thin paint applications could be manipulated with relative ease and were a departure from previous paintings which had less

variation in opacity. All-over colour fields were created with washes of thin paint in pale colours which were then sanded back to achieve a subtle faded quality and provided an unobtrusive field on which to place other imagery. This method of applying paint continued throughout the project and was reformatted to suit different aspects of design.



Plates 4 & 5 *Painted Fields*, 2010, Oil on canvas, 508 x 609mm



Plate 6 *Drawing*, 2010, Oil on paper, 150mm x 209mm



Plate 7 *Drawing*, 2010, oil on paper, 205 x 145mm



Plate 8 *Drawing*, 2010, oil on paper



Plates 9 & 10 *Drawings*, 2010, oil on paper



Plate 11 *Drawing*, 2010, oil on paper.

Solids, Voids and the Silhouette

In the Ukiyo-e print, sharply contoured dark shapes are simplified and their simple graphic quality stands out on lighter backgrounds. These shapes usually depicted parts of the figure or costume, particularly the *Nihongami*, a traditional Japanese coiffure from the Edo-period. The Nihongami are stylised and when positioned next to larger areas of detailed pattern or ornament such as a kimono or folding screen become a primary compositional element. The Japanese had begun to abstract their forms although they were still recognizable and did not strive towards pure abstraction. (Wichmann 210) The silhouette device and its breakdown into separate shapes influenced the European painters and they began to incorporate flat, abstracted areas of colour and form to their representational images.



Figure 4 Utamaro, *Woman in Bedroom on a Rainy Night*, Oban, Mid 1790s

Dark contoured shapes had begun to develop in my own work and were painted over the atmospheric fields. They were opaque and their crisp edges, created with masking tape, emphasized the contour of the form and had the appearance of a cut-out hole or negative space in the painting. Drawings on A5 paper were a way of experimenting with forms which could then be translated to larger paintings.



Plate 12 *Untitled Drawing*, 2010, oil on paper 145 x 205mm

Plate 12 is a drawing created by pouring thick acrylic paint onto a thinner wash of paint and manipulating the paint flow to create an interesting organic shape. The dark wash of background colour denotes depth and is framed by a loose pattern that provides a portal through which to view a hovering alien form. Plate 13 is the following painting which depicts a clean edged form that acts as a negative shape and cuts into an atmospheric void. The irregular marks in the field are created by sanding off small areas and appear to be floating in front of the field.

These paintings and drawings began to consider abrupt shifts in space. The soft graduated fields create a floating limitless atmosphere while the black silhouettes confuse distinctions between solid and void and de-stabilize the picture plane.



Plate 13 *Untitled*, 2010, oil on canvas, 508 X 609mm



Plate 14 *Untitled*, 2010, oil on canvas, 508 X 609mm.



Plate 15 *Untitled*, 2010, oil on canvas, 508 X 609mm

Format

Format was an important consideration in Ukiyo-e, as it was in centuries of Asian art preceding it. The prints were usually strong verticals partly determined by paper sizes but more importantly to create a particular pictorial balance and capture a fleeting glimpse of another time or place. The use of a strong vertical format was a new pictorial device in the west and painters like Vuillard began to use this format to enhance their predilection for spatial distortion. By “stacking objects upwards in tall compositions under the influence of far Eastern models, European painters introduced a clarifying element with either brings all the forms forwards to the surface of the picture plane or momentarily allows them to float in an ‘unspatial space’...” (Wichmann 10)

The Japanese choice of format is another way in which the relationship between form and space can be manipulated. In my own practice A5 size paper has provided a readymade format for drawing that is used both vertically and horizontally. A uniformed size enables familiarity with its limitations and imagery can be approached with this in mind. A similar method was needed for paintings on canvas so that imagery could begin to coalesce with familiar boundaries.



Figure 5 Hiroshige *Cartwheel on the Seashore* (c1857), Colour woodcut.

A small format at roughly 500 x 600mm was chosen to create a series of works, most of which were landscape with the exception of a few verticals. Changes at this size could be made relatively quickly allowing the whole painting to develop cohesively. Imagery could be constructed with attention to detail as smaller brushes and tools can be controlled to create fine compact areas of interesting textures, patterns and subtle qualities. These can then be juxtaposed with areas of looser more gestural brushwork. At this size the viewer can see the overall image from a distance but is invited in to observe the finer nuances of the painting.

Cut off or truncated objects were a device used in Ukiyo-e to cause the eye to look beyond them in order to create a sense of distance. These cut off objects such as boat sails or cart-wheels appear to be captured in motion, as if by chance, interrupting the contours of objects perceived to be further away. Many of my own experiments made use of cropping as a device. Placing forms at one edge of the painting often means they appear to continue existing somewhere beyond its edge. Plate 16 is a

drawing on paper where an angular form appears to rise up in front of an atmospheric background. The slim black triangle appears to indicate the folded interior of the shape or a possible exit in the picture plane. The detailing on the shape is ambiguous and does little to determine its specificity. Other examples, Plates 17 and 18 combine the truncated shape with pattern to obscure the nature of its form.



Plate 16 *Untitled*, 2010, oil on paper, 300 x410mm



Plate 17 *Gingham II*, 2010, oil on canvas, 508 X 609mm



Plate 18 *Tam-o-Shanter*, 2010, oil on canvas, 508 x 609mm

Japanese Textile and Style

The decorative aspect of Ukiyo-e was influenced by a Japanese culture rich in textiles that were transposed to the pictorial surface to function as an integral spatial device. (Wichmann 206) The use of textile pattern and ornament was influential in a wide range of Japanese Arts and everyday items such as fans, screens, kimonos and various costumes were decorated to enhance their beauty and to be effective as individual areas of design within an overall composition. The Japanese artists were instinctive with pattern and knew how to maximise its effects. They contrasted small intricate detailing with larger areas of stylised patterning and juxtaposed them at oblique angles to delineate form and create rhythm. They used pattern in both figure and field while maintaining a sense of space in un-patterned areas through the use of flat shapes and silhouettes.

European painters benefitted from the Japanese impulse to decorate and it introduced them to the decorative as a specific pictorial device. The wider reaching consequence of this influence would see pattern and decoration influence the path to abstraction and almost a century later, become a movement for its own sake, known as Pattern and Decoration.



Figure 6 Edouard Vuillard, *Vallotton and Misia*, (1899) Oil on Cardboard, 720 X 533mm

Edouard Vuillard and the other Nabis developed an affinity with the ornate style of Japanese textiles, costume and interiors as they began to employ pattern and decorative devices in their own paintings. This added a sense of intimacy, and often claustrophobia, to the domestic interiors they depicted. They simplified figurative elements to their essentials, effectively flattening pictorial space so that depth “became a decorative oblique without any illusionistic effect of distance.” (170) In Vuillard’s *Vallotton and Misia* (1899), the interior remains on a single plane and unity is achieved by the combination and division of flat and patterned areas which extend to the figures themselves, uniting them with the pattern-ground. (211)

Alternative Perspectives



Figure 7 Harunobu, *Evening Bell of the Clock* (c1765)

The Ukiyo-e print was not designed with traditional Western perspective and its single diminishing viewpoint in mind. Although the Japanese were aware of vanishing points, where objects diminish in size the further back they are, achieving a satisfactory composition was more important than scientific accuracy. (Bicknell 102) Many early Modernists began to adopt the Japanese use of axonometric or 'parallel' perspective that was first used centuries earlier by the Chinese. In parallel perspective things further away or in the background of the image are at the same scale as things in the immediate field of vision. A higher viewpoint is created as a result of the perspective and this adds to the sense of an expansive space.



Figure 8 Paul Cezanne, *Still Life with Commode*, (1883-87) oil on canvas.

Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) avoided sole use of traditional perspective and his work favoured Eastern parallel perspective and aerial viewpoints. One of the problems posed by Cezanne was how to achieve more authentic depiction of space and sensation in his paintings; and he began to reconcile this through combination and distortion of perspectives.

In the painting *Still-life with Commode* (1883-7) it is difficult for the eye to settle due to the shifting perspectives. The objects appear precariously balanced on the table which is tipped forward, even though the drawers remain at eye level. The table cloth is unnaturally scrunched, becoming a solid mass and the eye is repeatedly pulled back to the pattern in the top left corner which denies any sense of gradually receding space. The painting becomes less certain the longer it is looked at and the tension created provides movement from which a peculiar harmony is achieved.

PART TWO

Space-Time and the Concept of Ma

The Ukiyo-e print has a unique pictorial quality that is influenced by the Japanese concept of *Ma*. With *Ma*, space in painting is full - not empty, and is of equal importance to the objects it surrounds. The large, empty areas present in the Ukiyo-e print are important as they allow the objects to relate to one another in the composition. The viewer's awareness of the 'non-form' or space is experienced in their imagination as a passing of time that occurs between objects and events. Cheryl Stock outlines in her paper titled *The Interval between.....The Space between* that:

“This space-time of ‘pregnant nothing’ or the ‘interval between’ allows the passage of a creative/energy flow ch'i (ki) of being and non-being, traces of which infuse the experience of both creator and receiver with intuitive understandings about themselves and the world.” (Stock 15)

The concept of *Ma* extends as a philosophy for the Japanese way of life and is a relationship between parts of a whole rather than the whole itself. This way of thinking operates pictorially as in the Ukiyo-e prints where the 'birds-eye view' aerial perspective allows the viewer to navigate through the image to the farthest point, weaving through the different parts of the design.

The Japanese Ukiyo-e artists were careful in the design of their compositions in order to provide a sense of interval and achieve the greatest flow of energy between objects. In my own practice this concept has changed the way forms and elements are placed in relation to one another to create a sense of time flow, and how, when viewing a painting the eye and mind work together to 'complete' the overall image.



Figure 9 Moronobu, *Cherry Blossom Time at Ueno*, (1680-90) Folding Screen.

A Unique Sensation

Patrick Heron claimed in his essay *Solid Space in Cezanne* (1996) that painting serves as a function to depict our experiences in the world which in turn are projected back into our perception of external reality. He wrote:

“The actual ‘objective’ appearance of things (of anything and everything) is something that does not exist – or rather it exists as data that is literally infinite in its complexity and subtlety, in the variety and multiplicity of its configurations.” (17)



Figure 10 Paul Cezanne, *Mt Sainte-Victoire, seen from Les Lauves*, 1895-6, oil on canvas

During the late nineteenth century, the paintings of Paul Cezanne rejected the Impressionist pre-occupation with capturing fleeting moments of ever-changing light, shadows and colour in nature. Cezanne was in search of more authentic means to depict solid form *as it was experienced* optically and through the act of

painting. His unique pictorial logic grew slowly and was founded on the eye’s inability to adhere to a fixed viewpoint long enough to ever produce a true likeness of the original sensation.

Cezanne’s innovative use of perspective, which created an unusually high view-point, was locked in tension with the material surface of the painting which continuously sought to assert itself. His perception of space was built up through individual areas of uniformed directional brushstrokes that abutted one another to create and emphasize the gradation of parallel planes and unify the surface. This surface acknowledged its flatness in the glimpses of unpainted canvas and the physical evidence of each mark made. Specific colours strong in intensity but close together in value also created distinctions of plane that did not recede naturally as in traditional representation. Historian Richard Shiff writes of Cezanne:

“Every brushstroke was responding to its immediate conditions, either in relation to the sensation it was recording or the sensation it was generating. Every brushstroke was what it was and neither categorically representational nor categorically abstract.” (Shiff 96)

As though constructing with bricks and mortar, the pictorial devices that were distinct to Cezanne's overall motif had begun to break down the image plane by plane - as it was experienced - into smaller abstract units which made up a unified yet variable motif. More specifically, through perception and a pattern of making he had created an abstract entity that existed within the perceived reality of representational painting. This innovation provided the starting point and stimulus for Cubism and subsequent developments within twentieth century modernism. It was made explicit by materials and how thinking and perception concur through *the act of painting*.

The Cubist Effect

The Cubist still life paintings of Picasso and Braque provided direction in terms of their use of pattern and multi-faceted arrangements of space. Taking Cezanne's innovation to the next level; Cubism- according to Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*: "kicked aside the whole tradition of faithful vision and tried to start again from the 'real' object which they squashed against the picture plane." (Gombrich 217) The cubists used everyday objects that were fragmented to create a sense of multiple view-points where the eye moves around unable to settle on a single pictorial plane. Space was constructed by overlapping and abutting these planes that remained essentially flat as individual areas. (Green 89) These areas were often made up of repetitive patterns which unified objects and the spaces between them.

My own paintings experimented with this multi-planar effect particularly through the on-going use of triangular forms. These were now made without the use of masking tape, giving them an irregular appearance that destabilized their geometry. Plate 19 is a drawing where a faceted diamond is made up of individual directional brush strokes and imposed on a dark field. Plate 20 is a later work where the scale has been amplified and each individual facet is made up of different patterns or brush treatments. The object fills the shallow space awkwardly, appearing to swell out of the picture plane as it is pushed forward by the contrasting diagonals behind.



Plate 19 Drawing, 2010, oil on paper, 142 x 205mm



Plate20 *Razzle Dazzle*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 609 x 508mm



Plate 21 Drawing, 2010, oil on paper



Plate 22 Painting, 2010, oil on canvas

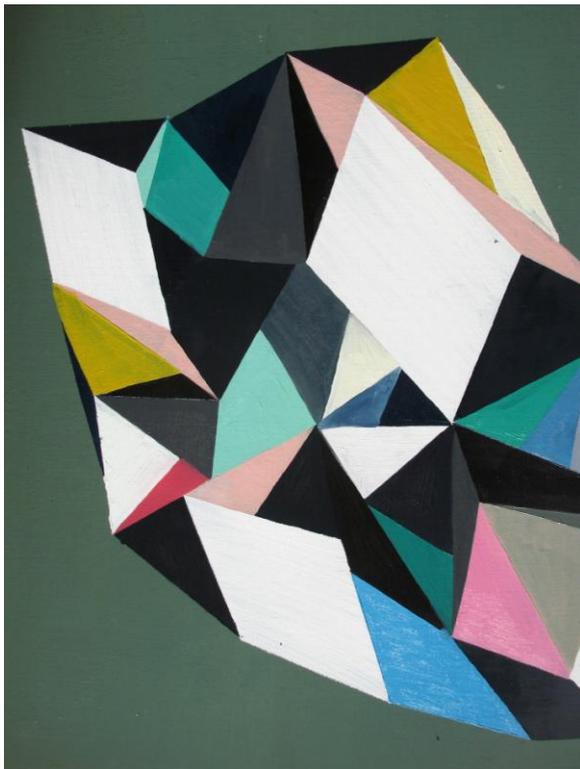


Plate 23 Painting (2010), oil on canvas



Plate 24 Painting, 2011, oil on canvas



Plate 25 Painting, 2011, oil on canvas, 609 x 508mm

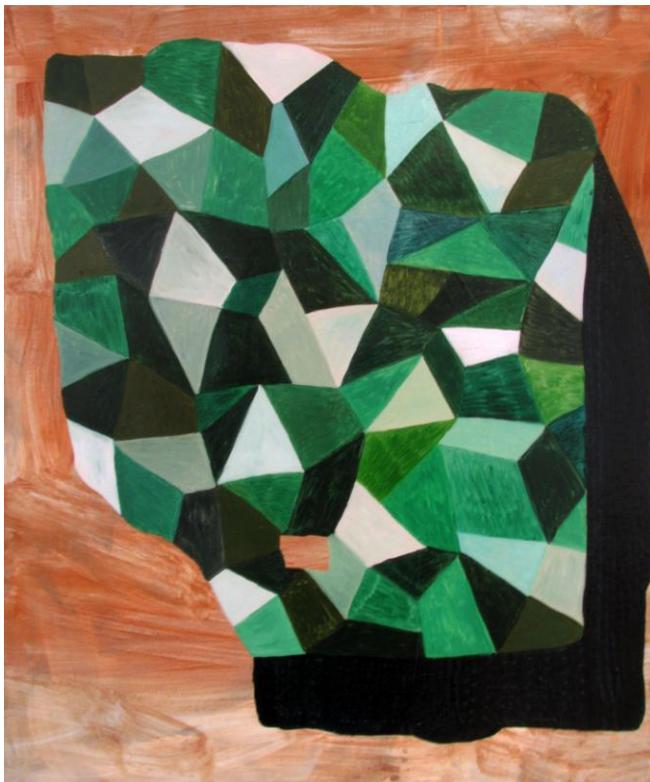


Plate 26 Painting, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 609 x 508mm



Plate 27 Painting, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

My research into Japanese Art and *Japonism* was becoming concerned with the way in which pattern could be activated in abstract painting in relation to other elements of design. As in Ukiyo-e patterned forms were considered in relation to the field and how these elements could be connected.



Plate 28 *Untitled*, 2010, oil on canvas, 540 X 430mm

In Plate 28 a pale tangerine coloured background contains a ghost-like imprint of a former blob of paint. Underneath the balloon-like shape, a textured dark blue stalagmite form rests on camouflage style paving which is abstracted and painted with care, not showing evidence of the brush mark. The spiky form appears on the verge of bursting the bubble as it hovers precariously overhead, while a few arbitrary paint splatters dance, as if tossed up by the central motif. The camouflage

pattern used had been stylised with 'filled-in' areas with colour, hiding the nature of its making as the splashes of paint in the background gave consideration to a more immediate style of mark-making.

The use of repetitive pattern and decoration has persisted successfully throughout my studio practice through the serial drawings on A5 paper. The immediacy of the paper does not lend itself to laborious designs and marks are made with expedience and economy. Drawings on paper enabled some of the greatest advances in terms of pattern as particular motifs began to take shape and become utilized for the purpose of painting.

Patterns were now taken from a myriad of everyday sources but did not replicate specific designs such as the use of floral patterning on a Japanese kimono, or the styles and motifs of a particular era. Occasionally patterns were constructed using masking tape to achieve hard edged shapes that would sit atop an atmospheric field; others were painted onto existing imagery. Through this repetitious nature of drawing original sources were gradually obscured to create more personalised designs.



Plate 29 *Drawing*, 2011, oil on paper

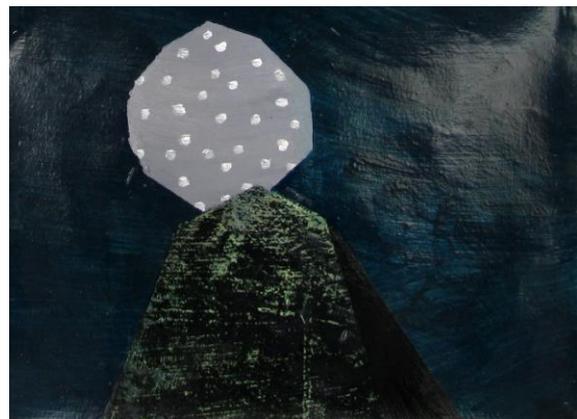


Plate 30 *Drawing*, 2011, oil on paper

Often discontinued patterns were later revisited and reconfigured to form integral parts of a painting. In Plate 31 the hard edged diamonds inspire the more irregular chain-links in *Ovarus* which are painted without the use of masking tape and most likely stimulated by the similar coloured ground. The more improvised pattern was a way of further simplifying a system so it could be executed with directness and confidence.

The marks were now made, not by filling in areas, but with direct brush marks of various sizes. The drawings became looser and improvisational, combining squiggly lines, dots, chequer-board

squares and textures scratched in paint. This attitude was transferred to paintings where imagery was situated in a much shallower space and flattened by pattern-ground techniques.

Painting patterns is a repetitious act of mark-making and in my practice, it functions mysteriously and while not possessing an overtly decorative sensibility, the paintings seek to find beauty in areas of odd juxtapositions and the abstraction of decorative elements.

“Pattern is physical evidence of abstract knowledge, material evidence of the oscillations of the world.” (Jefferies 2)
Pattern-making becomes a systematic way to interpret visual information, although within this order is the freedom to subvert regularity, to veer from the original and to create new systems and patterns. Pattern here becomes “method and object simultaneously.” (4)

There is often a feeling of familiarity and comfort in the regularity of the method; and creative satisfaction in the way it can be altered and re-constructed to form an image.



Plate 31 *Drawing*, 2010, oil on canvas, 508 x 609mm.

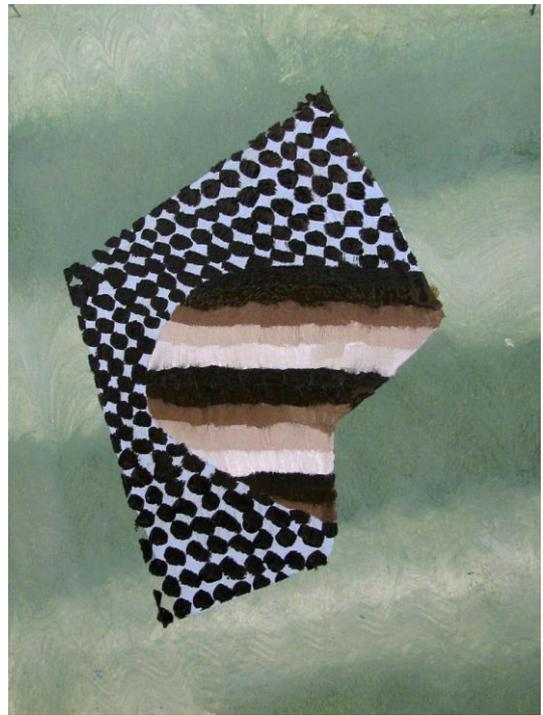
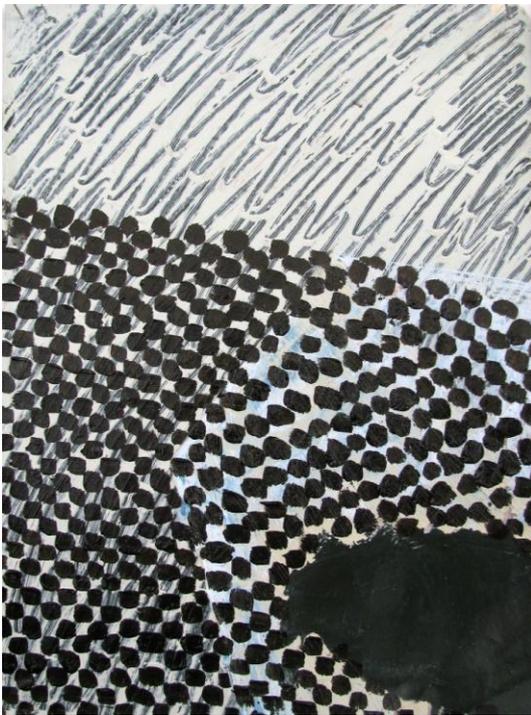


Plate 32 *Ovarus*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 508 x 609mm



Plate 33 *Plyx*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 508 X 609mm

In *Plyx* an irregular form has alighted on an unstable semi-translucent ground of scrubbed brushwork. A school of directional squiggles move in over the top of ground and appear to disappear behind the object. The white highlights of the marks lift them above the ground to exist independently on a separate plane. Pattern continues onto the form which on the front side is made up of two-tone dots and on top a series of cut-away triangles that follow illogical perspective lines. The background is made up of lighter colour which provides the sense of depth, remaining the only un-patterned area. The top left hand corner ensures that the space remains shallow denying clear foreground and background distinctions. The composition is hinged on the balance between patterns and their relationship to figure and ground.



Plates 34-37 Drawings, 2011, oil and enamel on paper 205 x 145mm



Plates 38-41 *Drawings and Collages*, 2011, oil and enamel on paper

An Unusual Palette

One of the more notable changes in the project is the use of colour as this occurred as my concern with depth moved towards a shallower pictorial space. There is no doubt that individual colours have specific optical effects when placed next to others; however, my choice of colour was more an intuitive sensibility that developed and changed as a result of experimentation with different combinations and intensity of hue.

Early work gave priority to structure, figure-ground relationships and spatial depth with the role of colour more of a secondary concern. Paintings featured saturated, highly contrasting colours and a reliance on deep blue/blacks to create depth. Large areas of dark and thickly applied oil-paint used in a painting's early stages change due to the influence of Ukiyo-e atmosphere which necessitated a lighter palette that could be applied in thin veils. A lighter and more luminous field made decision-making easier in the early stages particularly when editing became a critical part of the emergence of the image. Brighter high-key colours made a good base to begin a painting and they could be toned down gradually as the painting revealed itself.



Plate 41 *Studio Shot*, August 2010



Plate 42 *Painting*, 2010, oil on canvas, 495 x 582mm



Plate 43 *Klume*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 508 x 609mm



Figure 11 Thomas Nozkowski, *Untitled (p- 19)*, 2007, oil on paper.

Rather than attempts to glean the scientific and optical effects of colour, research turned to the palette of other painters to determine colour relationships of specific interest. As practical experiments with colour have progressed, the paint began to vary in its thickness rather than maintaining the all-over

opacity of earlier work. Unusual colour combinations and patterns are made by under-painting that is visible under paler or darker colour; scumbling and glazing to build a more diffused hue or by adding tinges to existing colours to darken or lighten them incrementally.

Nabi painters Bonnard and Vuillard were both masters of colour and pattern, conjuring the unusual. Vuillard had the ability, as critic Karen Wilkin puts it “to weave sharply noted particulars into fields of close-valued, rich, but severely disciplined colour.” Bonnard is perhaps more difficult for the viewer; the diffused, ethereal atmospheres are constructed with a tapestry of complementary colours which seem to de-stabilize the cloistered spaces they makes up. Thomas Nozkowski has been influenced by Bonnard in terms of his slightly disturbing colour relationships. He creates similar atmospheres using colour in his paintings; each with their own mood that can range from a peculiar sense of malaise to obsessive devotion.

In later works there is less contrast between colours which made spatial relationships more ambiguous. There is a natural inclination in my work towards a slightly unusual or skewed colour palette which, without becoming austere, demonstrates restraint as well as inducing subtle moments. A more rhythmic dispersal of colour and pattern was sought without lapsing into uniformity or the over-familiar. Rather than arbitrary fields of colour or large flat areas of colour, relationships between colours were beginning to construct the overall image by building smaller areas of closely related tones and juxtaposing them with other areas of greater contrast and variance of hue.

Ruz, (2011) has many unusual elements including a palette significantly more off-key. The painting contains a central void, or undulating shape which was created by blotting the paint with a rag to create a subtle graduation. The area is translucent in places hinting at what might exist underneath; the colour a dull, slightly dirty greenish-grey. Above this an area of patterned squares partially intersects a background of pale pastel triangles. Subtle monochromatic shades of black and grey

make up the imperfect squares that appear to tumble around the bottom of the painting. The pastel shades mixed with white seem to work harmoniously with the plainer colours creating an overall rhythm, albeit a mysterious one.



Plate 44 *Ruz*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas 609 x 508mm

PART THREE

On Not Thinking about It

Pre-reflexive thinking occurs day to day without immediate or specific reflection and informs the nature of a painting practice through a tacit, but indescribable, accumulation of knowledge. When utilising different materials and procedures in studio it is not always immediately clear why they are used or what the implications for the image may be. A phenomenological-based method of inquiry tracks the nature of this sensuous aspect of knowledge - acquired as a result of direct first-hand experience - without concern for a painting's objective reality (Wentworth). The process of painting may fit with this approach as artists consistently experiment with ways to manipulate the medium of paint and other various materials.

To make a painting is to put thought into an object and hope that it will be expressive in some way. As different materials are explored they leave physical evidence of their use either directly or indirectly through the way in which they are used. Materials alone may have specific qualities but it is not until they are used and experienced in the process of painting that they can be contextually understood.

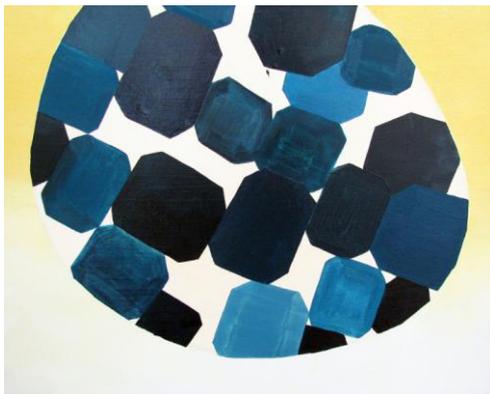


Plate 45 *Painting*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 508 x 609mm

Oil-paint has been the preferred material in this studio practice and its possibilities can be rewarding. As experimentation has proved; it has mutable properties that enable it to be thinned, thickened and mixed with other materials to suit its objective. In his book *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting Using the*

Language of Alchemy (2000) James Elkins remarks:

“It is no wonder that painters can be so entranced by paint. Substances occupy the mind profoundly, tethering moods to thoughts, tangling stray feelings with the movements of the body, engaging the full capacity of response and concentrating it on unpromising lumps of paint and colour.” (192-193)

Changes in the way materials are used are usually gradual and difficult to pin-point. At times a more immediate action is required when procedures or ‘lumps of paint’ seem to refuse intervention or have become stultified. It may mean introducing or substituting a new material to reverse this lapse and maintain engagement with the activity of painting. Even if materials are conventional they can be successfully applied in a number of unconventional ways.

Ways to Proceed

The oeuvre of Willem de Kooning (1904-97) remains significant, fertile ground for painters in the 21st century and demonstrates how change can occur and inform a painting practice through the use of materials as well as the procedures in which they are used. De Kooning's relationship to his materials was, quite literally, imbedded within his paintings by way of his painterly procedure. As Cezanne had represented an *optical* interpretation of space through his unique pictorial organisation of painted marks; the art of de Kooning seems to represent the *physical* embodied space between painter, materials and the act of painting.



Figure 12 Willem de Kooning, *Painting*, 1948, oil and enamel on canvas, 108 x 142.6 cm

In 1948 de Kooning painted a series of black and white paintings with household enamel paint. The shapes in these paintings were abstracted from a variety of everyday forms and are interlocked and jostling for position in a shallow and ambiguous pictorial space. These paintings have an X-ray quality (Gaugh 25) and it is possible to make out certain shapes although they never completely reveal themselves due to abrupt ruptures of silhouetted form and rhythm.

According to the authors of *de Kooning - An American Master* (2008) “The physical world was palpably present, both in the thick gritty surfaces and in the elliptical glimpses of a figure or landscape.” (Stevens, Swan 249). De Kooning’s use of enamel blacks mixed with ground pumice and grubby zinc whites made ambiguities more articulate via the simultaneous awareness of figure and ground. As the paint dried quickly he was able to hack at shapes with a brush alternating layers of white and black. Colour was absent in most of these early works as it interfered with spatial ambiguity, changing and distracting from the urgency of the forms.

Drawing within Painting



Plate 13 Willem de Kooning, *Attic*, 1949, oil, enamel and newspaper transfer on canvas

My own work had begun to develop procedures using enamel paint and de Kooning’s early abstract paintings provided an entry point in terms of procedure and materials and elicited interest in the activation of spatial ambiguities within abstraction.

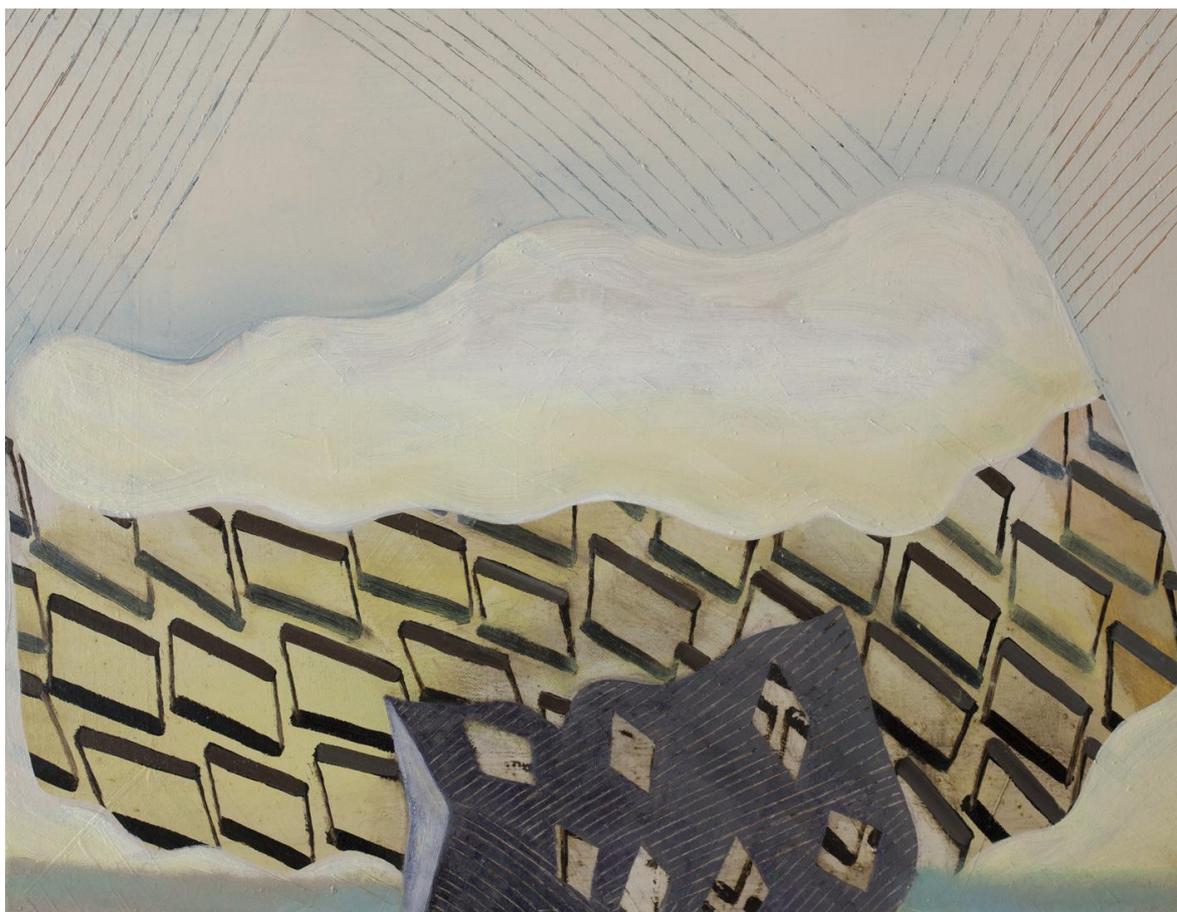
Enamel paint was a material that was re-introduced to my practice after a period of experimentation solely in oil-paint. Enamel - particularly the house-paint variety - has many unique qualities and it’s a material previously used and often in conjunction with oils. Old, pre-used tins of Enamel paint can be sourced for little or no cost which adds to its appeal and goes against the grain of traditional ‘fine’ art materials. It can be a viscous, sticky material that can be manipulated when wet and used to drip paint in a way that oil cannot. When it dries, gloss enamel creates a hard skin that can be wiped over, painted on or scratched into.



Plate 46 *Studio shot*, august 2011

As a result of prior knowledge of the substance, enamel was re-employed in a spontaneous action, using a wide brush to edit problem areas in several paintings. Decisions could now occur quickly and the course of a painting radically altered as and when it needed to be. As long as layers of oil-paint underneath are thin or dry and have been sanded back, enamel can be applied and will not crack after drying. White paint is preferred although it is usually an impure, dirtied mixture, the colour of cream and often miss-tinted, revealing subtle shades of green or grey. This off-white appears to open up space in a painting when used as an editing tool when compared to which colour tends to distract from the editing process.

On canvas and without any pre-planning a start can be made by putting down a field, shape or pattern to see it evoked something. Enamel now becomes a drawing tool used as part of an iterative process, each decision informing the next. A particular shape may trigger a specific memory, fleeting sensation, pattern or simply a knowing way to proceed. If an image is unsatisfactory it can be altered to create another or painted over to keep the entire surface in play. The use of enamel is most successful when used to carve out and articulate a particular shape from the remnants of the previous image rather than simply 'wiping the slate clean' each time.



Repeat Plate *Ovarus*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 508 x 609mm.

Ovarus provides an example of this editing process that features enamel paint. In the painting a small, battered cut-out form sinks in front of a large patterned jelly that seems to wobble due to its pictorial compression. The enamel area behind becomes an airless space that the other shapes inhabit and the overall image is one that would not have been conceived of at the outset. The enamel has a dull shine that contrasts with the brittle, textured shape in the fore-ground and the grubby paint within the pattern behind it. The background has a series of lines scratched into it adding balance to the unusual forms in the lower half of the composition

The efficacy of drawing lies in its ability to be on hand and respond to specific problems encountered in the process of painting. Previous experiments on the A5 format were helpful but the discrepancy of size made certain experiments difficult. This iterative method instigated a new approach to image-making that fused the disciplines of painting and drawing together. It became a system within which to explore a number of possibilities.

The Nuances of Texture

The use of enamel as a drawing tool was also a way to reconnect with the surface of a painting and the substance of paint. Our surroundings are made up of an infinite variety of textures that can be translated through the manipulation of paint. The appearance of pentimento (the outline of underlying images that have since been painted over) is a sign of a painting's history and production and is visible evidence of numerous changes of mind that can take place. If they exist at all these historical lumps and bumps may be sanded back or disguised; alternatively they can become part of a painting's personality and remain as evidence of its facture.



Plate 47 *Monith*, 2011, (detail)

Textures and patterns can be made by scratching or scraping into the paint with different tools that create different effects or by manipulation of the paint itself. *Monith* was made over time with long periods spent waiting for an image to assert itself. The sides of the painting have been abruptly cropped as if obscured by shadow and although a glossy and up-beat blue, on closer inspection the central shape is host to various scars and abrasions. This form appears to have been carved out of the picture plane while simultaneously playing spatial games with the textured area behind it. A herringbone pattern is scratched into the 'floor' of the painting and an oversized painted rope is looped over it, disappearing into the form and discrediting it as a solid mass. The messier qualities

of enamel are evident in the drips that are fugitive in the left node of the form. Bits of grit, bristle and paint dust contrast with the more lush areas of paint, becoming imbedded in their glossier surfaces.



Plate 48 *Monith*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 508 X 609mm

De Kooning was a champion of the ordinary whose urban surroundings were reflected and sometimes literally imbedded in the gritty, textured surfaces of his paintings and the materials he used. The choice to use enamel made sense for de Kooning during long periods of financial hardship although the fascination with what various materials could express was a more likely motive. Ripolin enamel was cheaply available after the War and becoming popular with many artists who could manipulate it more fluidly to draw, drip or pour. (Gaugh 27) Newspaper, charcoal and general debris also worked their way onto the canvas through de Kooning's varied drawing methods; and later in the 1950s safflower cooking oil mixed with tap water became a convenient medium to slow drying and achieve slick, greasy surfaces.



Plate 49 *Untitled*, 2011, oil and enamel on paper, 508 X 609mm

The use of variable textures and paint applications can imbue feeling into an image in a nuanced way through associations with textured, patterned things in the real world. Experimenting with texture in a more pre-meditated way required adhering things to the surface of the painting or mixing substances into the paint to create specific effects. This often requires planning ahead and in doing so many of the serendipitous qualities are lost. In later works texture is scribed into the paint and accumulated through elements of chance. Paint flakes, stray drips, arbitrary articles of fluff and grit that naturally occur within a studio environment tend somehow to make their way onto the canvas.



Plate 50 *Studio shot*, October 2011.

PART FOUR

Doubt

Although he had become a master of his materials, de Kooning was a great doubter and evidence of this doubt was visible in the outcomes of his procedures. He would often sabotage his facility with certain materials by introducing an element that would alter their natural properties or by drawing with his eyes closed.

De Kooning worked intuitively with his materials although this intuition was in itself a form of tacit knowledge. Richard Shiff, author of *Between Sense and De Kooning* asserts that:

“A person possesses tacit knowledge yet is unable to articulate or explain it, as if it were never fully conscious in an intellectual way, although perhaps conscious in an intellectual way.....I say that I have a hunch when “in fact” I am reasoning by deduction – but doing it very quickly. This may explain why we doubt our intuition less than reason tells us we ought to doubt it. Slow reasoning expresses distrust of fast intuiting.” (Shiff 49-50)

Doubt can occur as a reaction to what is certain or known and De Kooning had “a constant aversion to conclusion, closure and certainty” (30) and he preferred what he called ‘falling’ or ‘slipping’ as a way of working. De Kooning’s doubt alerted him to the dangers of becoming overly familiar with materials and procedures and helped him avoid lapsing into a definable style that could be named or categorized. It also allowed him great freedom to reside within the ambiguous nature of his practice.



Plate 51 *Untitled*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 508 X 609mm

Doubt is an attitude of inquiry associated with my own studio practice and its procedures. Procedural changes need to occur when habitual reliance on certain materials becomes programmatic and when repetition without variance begins to seem a pointless task. There are many possibilities in terms of materials and processes but they are not always right in a particular situation. In this sense doubt represents the fine balance between the known and the unknown.

At times, when working with enamel, a painting can become overloaded with countless layers of paint which have failed to bring the image into being. Enamel may be a useful drawing tool when used to edit a shape or change the speed of a painting, but it can become unworkable if overused. A decision needs to be made about whether to proceed with the method or to try another, as a lack

of intention can result in many failed attempts. If there is decision to continue, it is done so with the knowledge that something has to *change* in order for it to be a workable method.

Doubt is a form of 'slow reasoning' in that it eliminates problems by deduction. These decisions take place over time and eventually form the basis for patterns of intention to emerge. Doubt may be a permanent condition of studio practice as new ideas, materials and ways of working continually present themselves. In this respect doubt is not a negative condition but one that inquires and evaluates in order to gain knowledge.

Doubt is a critical tool in developing aspects of studio practice and how this practice may be positioned within the context of Art History and discourse. Doubt remains a relevant mode of inquiry within the ongoing climate of political and social upheaval within cultures. This not a new condition but one that continues to responded to in contemporary painting. When we choose a particular material, medium or way of working, it may be a response to - or a reaction against - the prevailing norms of society and culture; how we perceive the world and position ourselves in it.

Modest Painting

One of the many ways in which painters make choices is through the size and scale of their paintings. This research has identified with painters, many of them contemporary; that have chosen to work on a modest scale.

The choice of a small format is not merely a practical one, having been evaluated as a means suitable to the imagery way of working; it is also represents an attitude of persistence and of rigorous pursuit within painting. A small painting may often fall into the category of a 'modest' painting although it should not imply a lack of ambition in the work itself, as more often than not, the integrity of every mark is subject to close scrutiny.



Plate 52 *Gallery Installation, 2011*, Image courtesy of Anna Miles Gallery

In her essay *Modest Painting* (2009), Mira Schor draws attention to the generations of painters from the late modern period to the present that continue to work with relatively small formats. Modest sized outputs are seldom included in art-historical narratives where large scale ‘triumphs’ are given precedence. The large-scale innovations of the Abstract Expressionism are synonymous with painters such as Pollock and de Kooning; the masculine physicality of their paintings became at the time dually symbolic of progress and freedom so imbued within the Post-war America psyche.

Schor emphasizes the influence of the current era of Meglography and its opposite Rhopography which according to Norman Bryson in *Looking at the Overlooked*, is the:

“...depiction of those things in the world that are great – the legends of the gods, the battle of heroes, the crises of history. Rhopography (from rhopos: trivial objects, small wares, trifles) is the depiction of those things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that ‘importance’ tramples underfoot.”(Schor 136)

Thomas Nozkowski made the conscious choice in the 1970s to make small paintings that could be hung in his friend’s small apartments. The Vietnam War, Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement had dominated the American political landscape for a decade and out of this grew a need to make sense of painting in relation to the changing world around him. It was also a reaction

to the burgeoning art market and the growing trend of large scale artworks popular with museum-style galleries. Schor asserts that size no longer matters in the same way it did when art was being defined by the movement it associated with. “It is reasonable to assume that in every generation, no matter what the prevailing ethos of the culture, some set of personal characteristics will exist that may lead to a certain formal approach that would combine aesthetic ambition within modesty of form and scale, continuing an ongoing dialogue of *mega* and *rhapos*.” (153)



Plate 53 *Drawing*, 2011, Oil and enamel on paper

Mysterious Sources

Thomas Nozkowski once quoted De Kooning to summarise his own approach. It wasn't what you *could* paint that was interesting rather what you *couldn't* or *shouldn't* paint. (Nozkowski) Nozkowski is simultaneously open and mysterious regarding the sources of his paintings which he says are distillations of memory, nature and a general response to life's personal experiences. He will almost never pinpoint the experience or 'thing' on which the painting is based and it remains untitled along a codified system. His paintings may take many months to complete and they emerge through constant stages of negotiation until the final image asserts itself. Although

unnameable in one sense, Nozkowski's paintings appear as vaguely industrial apparitions of the urban landscape they inhabit.

This is relevant on a more personal level as there is a resistance in my own practice to make known to the viewer, the specific sources that may have inspired the image. Naming becomes a slippery task as the original feeling, pattern, painting, colour or intention, come from unfathomable combinations of knowledge, experience and perception. Looking becomes a more important task as painting is usually stimulated by the immediate nature of its environs such as the textures, patterns and changing weather that may be experienced on a daily basis. These sources can then be distilled and abstracted in a painting to reflect an atmosphere and climate that belong to the imagination.



Figure14 Prunella Clough, *Untitled*, 1965, oil on canvas

British painter Prunella Clough (1919-99) once said “I like to say a small thing edgily” with regard to her abstract paintings, “If I take a thing from the real world, detach it and put it into a painting, something takes over that goes further than anything I can logically describe or assess.”(Robertson 20)

In her early career Clough painted scenes that invoked a social realism of the industrial kind. Gradually her figures emptied out leaving abstracted fragments of machinery and the urban landscape; miasmic colour; pattern and textures that held beauty in their obscurity.

In my own work connections are now made with everyday things, other painters, materials and ways of working. The paintings contain qualities that are mysterious and mutable while others forthright in their wonkiness. The work is careful not to become neither loose and gestural or tightly controlled and even variable marks feel measured and necessary.

Titling my work has always proved difficult as there is a fear of naming the experience or thing and shutting down interpretation. Many abstract painters adopt codified ways of titling, particularly with algorithmic-type systems that make sense only to the artist. A unified approach to titling, without resorting to a numerical system, would need to be more oblique in order to somehow detach from linguistic associations which are infinite in their variety.

There is a tendency towards single word titles such as *Ovarus*, *Plyx*, *Monith* and *Klume* which are created by hybridising parts of words to create unknown and mysterious ones that make no other claims or suggestions. Overall, my resistance to titling perhaps signals a resistance to naming the visceral experience of painting.

Knowing When to Stop

“Sometimes I see it then paint it. Other times I paint it and then see it. Both are impure situations, and I prefer neither.”
Jasper Johns (19)



Plate 54 *Untitled*, 2011, Oil and enamel on canvas 609 x 710mm

Plate 54 adheres to a figure/ground structure with an interconnected element. The field is a series of dirty-pink horizontal bars, with flecks of yellow that have been created by dragging a scraper hastily across wet paint. The painting is set aside and given little thought until some week later a centralized form is added using white enamel. The form is an organic shape with two cut out irregular holes and is altogether unplanned. After hastily brushing a left-over blue across the form effectively colouring it in, it is set aside once more. Once again the painting is resumed with a lack of investment in its success; the work has not been agonized over, the labour minimal. Without an idea in mind the brush begins to draw with the enamel and a last minute twist creates a semi-transparent plume that weaves behind the shape, through and in front of it creating a visual impossible. Its cloth or veil-like function appears to lift the shape out of the pink field (and the picture-plane) and hold it, suspended, in front.

Not all paintings are created with this kind of economy and there is an acceptance that, although similar in attitude, some paintings will take longer to paint using different procedures. Part of the process overall is questioning the struggle to resolve work and this involves not anticipating or over-calculating but remaining *alert* to what is happening from one work to the next.

Having several paintings 'on the go' together is a form of drawing that enables the discovery of similarities and differences and where paintings may indirectly inform one another. Thomas Nozkowski often tacks up sheets of paper next to his paintings in order to capture and record any interesting moments that may have been lost in the painting process.

There is an intense level of criticality involved at various stages of making that tries to recalibrate what the intention for the painting might be. Sometimes a painting may be hurried along with no clear goal in mind and become overloaded with the history of its making. Others may be sketched on paper beforehand with a pre-conceived vision of shape, colour or other formal aspects. However pre-planned and delineated ideas may stultify by the time they reach canvas incurring the lack of motivation to continue. Part of the pleasure of painting is responding to the image as it emerges and possessing formal strategies to make an image that is an impure mixture of the familiar yet unknown.

Slow Thought

In painting things take time and there are long periods where forms and procedures are tested, unable to find purchase. In his essay *On some Limits of Materiality in Art History* James Elkins

discusses what he calls the ‘slowness of the studio’ remarking that “nothing may happen for long periods of time, and even when something does take place, it may not be immediately clear what it was, or whether it might be important.” (Elkins 7)



Plate 55 *Work in progress*, 2011

It is through time that we glean experience, although this experience is constantly changing. Much of the research conducted during this project has returned to time, its relationship to both physical and pictorial space and as a passing occurrence in studio. It is a concept that will no doubt, in the future, provide stimulus when considered in relation to my painting practice.

When planning a painting or engaging in the activity of painting, time becomes a significant factor. Knowing when or when not to do something to a painting is a nuanced way of planning that takes place over a certain time period. Clearly there is ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ painting taking place but how and when it occurs is a time-based phenomenon. Slow painting may be a subtle fade that requires time to dry or a form that refuses to elucidate itself; fast painting may be a more pleasurable experience in which a series of dots, dashes and squiggles take minutes to complete. Differentiating between the two may go some way towards understanding a studio practice in which *not* painting becomes a tacit inaction.

Time is evident in a painting’s materiality; its pentimento, surface treatment and the imagery itself. These mysterious areas of pattern and form are remnants of time and memories past. Some appear to have been captured for a moment and held, suspended in motion; while others dissolve, slowly moving outwards, beyond the picture’s edge.



Plate 56 *Klume*, 2011 enamel and oil on canvas, 508 x 609mm



Plate 57 Studio, November 2011

A Summary

The evolution of abstract painting was a legacy of the early Modernists who had begun to “break the smooth surface of the visible world into parts and put it back together differently.” (Danto, Koplos and Schwarbsky 43) The picture plane underwent significant change during the course of Modernism and its ability to operate *both* as portal of illusion and a flat surface, remains the essence of the dialectic. As the project unfolded, it became apparent that it no longer mattered what degree of depth or flatness a painting contained, or whether it was abstract or representational. Practice instead became focused on the *negotiation* of these binary relationships and how they could be explored through the use of various pictorial devices.

This research has drawn knowledge and inspiration from the work of many painters and their unique modes of perception. Understanding and interpreting the context their work is situated in, has been a valuable aspect of the project. Of particular interest is the way early Modernist painters

began to abstract space by fashioning the picture plane into increments of space, object and sensation. The use repetitive pattern and decoration as a spatial device was also reframed in terms of its ongoing use in my own practice. Aside from its various aesthetic qualities, patterning can be a useful system to process and organize the plethora of visual information and sensations woven into our everyday experience.

The development of personalised procedures in studio, such as the practical experiments with enamel paint, became more meaningful as they fostered the synthesis of an iterative drawing and painting process from which the image could materialize. It is through various studio habits that we form the knowledge that is hard-wired to our intuitive actions and choice of materials. These materials have certain properties which influence outcomes, often in unexpected ways.

A refusal to distinguish between abstract or representational imagery is common in many contemporary painting practices. This ambiguity may be symptomatic of a distrust of naming and categorization within a given genre rather than simply 'hovering' between. Ambiguity is a feature closely associated with doubt which can manifest as materials and ways of working with them are grappled with. Doubt can work positively as critical tool as it instigates change and possibility within patterns of intentionality and intuitive reasoning. Doubt by its very nature is questioning and these inquiries extend to the positioning of a painting practice within specific frameworks of art-history, theory and discourse. The impact of societal, political and cultural change underpins much of what we doubt and may result in the recurring impulse by many painters to work on a modest scale and engage with the *rhapos* of life.

“Phenomenology gives us lessons in unlearning that allows us to re-learn how to see the world.” (Critchley 12) and many current commentators on art now pursue the phenomenological nature of everyday experience and tactile sensation to interpret the embodied relationship between the painter and the substance of paint. Pre-reflexive ways of seeing and doing are often at odds with theoretical and aesthetic categorizations of the image and when engaged in the activity of painting and/or looking, words often fail us as specific feelings can defy explanation. This project is situated within current discourses which insist that Modernist paradigms remain ongoing and open-ended to allow further critical analysis and interpretation.

The western tradition of Modern painting is generally perceived as a linear progression of movements culminating in the flattening and complete inversion of the picture plane. However, it has tentacles that reach sideways into other cultures, many of which continue to have a profound influence in the visual arts. Research into the Japanese art of Ukiyo-e enabled reciprocal connections to be made with other aspects of early Modernism in terms of spatial devices and decorative qualities; and aspects of Eastern thought have also taken root with the exploration of The Japanese concept of *Ma*. This philosophy of space demonstrates the infinite possibilities of

space and its relation to time and perception. It has provided this research with alternative avenues of inquiry and highlighted the value of investigating other cultures visual paradigms to alter and enrich perceptions of aesthetic worlds.

A studio practice is intertwined with accretions of visual experience that are accumulated via a multitude of textures, patterns and life's daily occurrences. Experiential knowledge adjusts modes of perception as time passes although it does not always take shape as a linear form of progress. In terms of a painting practice, this knowledge is often tangential or obtuse, taking time to crystallise in the imagination before it materialises through the substance of paint and an understanding of ways to proceed.

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