Chapter 2

Modernism's Afterglow: The Revival of Painting and the Survival of Abstraction

2:1

2:2

1 Robert Lindsay, interview with the author, Melbourne, 1987.

2 Patrick McCaughey, "The Transition from Field to Court", in Robert Lindsay (curator), *Field to Figuration*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1987, p.16. During the late 1960s, McCaughey became the chief provincial exponent of American formalist guru Clement Greenberg's theories. After his 1970 New York sojourn he became the influential and much-feared art critic for the Melbourne *Age*. He was the principal spokesman during the 1970s for conservative Colour Field abstractionists such as Sydney Ball and Fred Cress.

Previous page: detail from **2:19**.

2:1 Robert Rooney, *Portrait of Peter Booth #2*, 1978, cibachrome colour photograph, 20 x 30 cm. Courtesy Pinacotheca, Melbourne.

2:2 Peter Booth, *Painting 1981*, 1981, oil on canvas, 244 x 198 cm. Private collection. Courtesy Deutscher Fine Art, Melbourne.

2:3 Peter Booth, *Painting 1982*, 1982, oil on canvas, 197.7 x 274 cm. Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, A. M. Ragless Bequest Fund. Courtesy Deutscher Fine Art, Melbourne.

SIMULATING HISTORY: SELECTIVE HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The disappearance of the past and the simulation of history – both in the mass media and on the overcrowded walls of State galleries – and its replacement by nostalgia in the spectacle of large survey exhibitions is not merely a figure of speech: an accurate history of modern art has largely vanished from the memory of contemporary artists. It is indicated by the cavalier relationship of contemporary artists to their antecedents, and a highly selective historical consciousness. A longing for a lost authenticity (supposedly available during the early period of modern art) is, in Australia, combined with the anamorphic distortion of style created by distance from the international centres of world art.

During the 1980s, art history was raw material available for rewriting. On the one hand, artists and critics made the politics of visual representation the subject of both abstract and figurative contemporary art: this postmodern art is examined in following chapters. On the other hand, painting reappeared in two waves, each time reflecting a nostalgia for modernism: the first was that of neo-expressionism at the start of the decade; the second wave, towards the end of the 1980s, was of a revival of abstraction. The return to expressive painting and the survival of modernist abstraction through the later 1980s into the 1990s mark the stubborn, lingering twilight of an artistic movement – modernism – begun at the turn of the 20th century. Indebted to the example of European modernism, abstract and expressionist art at the periphery of world culture in countries like Australia has always been distinguished by its hybrid character. Australian art is simultaneously richer and less coherent than a mere provincial mirroring of overseas influences and art magazines.

THE RETURN TO PAINTING OF THE EARLY 1980s

Peter Booth, Davida Allen: The Arrival of Neo-expressionism

During the 1970s, painting was regarded as decidedly old-fashioned. Robert Lindsay, then a curator of contemporary art at the National Gallery of Victoria, remembered that the dominant stream of contemporary art seemed to be the "twigs and sand artists" such as Italian artist Mario Merz, who produced evocative *Arte Povera* installations of commonplace objects.[1] Patrick McCaughey later wrote that those artists who persisted with painting during the 1970s reflected the "post-minimal, post-modern kits and devices for making art [that] increasingly became the officially recognised new art of the seventies in Australia".[2]

At the end of the 1970s, painting indebted to the early phases of modernism re-entered the cultural stage. The art was called neo-expressionist; its practitioners, including Peter Booth, Davida Allen and David Larwill, shared the choices of large-scale, highly personal imagery, thick oil paint and a fascination with myth. Whether their paintings were a regressive throwback to European expressionism of the 1920s, or whether they represented the postmodern appropriation – a self-conscious, critical quotation – of such earlier styles, was a matter of heated debate.

Critics and curators such as McCaughey were delighted that the wheel of style had turned; their triumphalism, however, was unsophisticated in the extreme, and linked to conservative agendas of quality. There was absolutely no regional awareness of a neo-

2:3

expressionism more sophisticated than that of a simple "return to painting".

In works like *Painting 1977*, 1977, Peter Booth demonstrated some of the earliest experiments with mythic neo-expressionism in an ambiguous but crucial transition zone between modernism and postmodernism. However, there was no constructive critical context for these new figurative paintings of burning cities, haunted men and monstrous animals when they were first shown at Pinacotheca in 1977. Initial responses stressed that Booth's new paintings were career suicide: he had been considered one of Australia's most important artists, painting dark, minimal abstractions that looked like metaphysical doorways. The new pictures were considered neither part of an international trend nor an influence on young artists. Mary Eagle's comments for the *Age* in 1977 typify this sense of dismay: "It takes a brave artist to swing away from an approach which brought him praise early this year as 'Australia's best abstract painter'". She continued, "I don't care at all [for the paintings] but some images are undoubtedly gripping ... the gingerbread people and Boydian dogs in the night are completely without concession to the artistry of drawing".[3] Booth's pictures were seen as isolated oddities. Few were aware of the dream-diary sources for his imagery; moreover, dreams, mysticism and cultural myth were relatively unfashionable sources for art at that time. It was only in the wake of trend-setting shows such as the 1980 Venice Biennale and "A New Spirit in Painting" in London during 1981 that such work drew local curatorial attention.[4] Neo-expressionism, in fact, emerged in Australia at the end of the 1970s as a personal stand by independent artists, not as part of the formation of a new orthodoxy. For the subsequent generation emerging from art schools, the neo-expressionism and postmodernity of the 1980s arrived with that decade's tidal waves of art magazines, and exhibitions such as the Sydney Biennales.

The internationally fashionable return to painting at the start of the 1980s meant that previous conceptions of advanced cultural practice – which had seen art as being politically radical and socially committed – were discounted. The 1982 Sydney Biennale introduced a pantheon of "new" foreign painters, including Lupertz, Paladino, Chia and Clemente. The Biennale also resurrected international father figures such as America's Phillip Guston, who had dramatically returned to an abrasive, home-made figuration after a respected career as an Abstract Expressionist during the 1960s, and Frank Auerbach, the English artist whose impastoed canvases of London life were rediscovered by international critics. Institutions and collectors in Australia, the United States and Europe were extremely supportive of painters like Chia, Clemente, Paladino and Kiefer, with the major art museums of Australia – including Sydney's Power Institute (later to become the Museum of Contemporary Art) – acquiring, from the early 1980s onwards, representative collections of the Italian *transavantgarde* and German neo-expressionism. The new painting was still regarded somewhat defensively, however. The 1982 Biennale's director, curator William Wright, hedged his bets, offering an equivocal opinion that the movement seemed both liberating and regressive: whether the new style was significant was a question "that hardly can be resolved".[5] And, as Robert Lindsay despairingly noted in 1987 at a forum called "Taste-makers for Posterity": "The thing is: which movements are the most important?"[6] The imagery of excessive self-confidence and bombastic rhetoric should not have been mistaken for naivety or real expressivity, even though in the rushed moment of its Antipodean dissemination, neo-expressionist or *transavantgarde* art was projected as a return to self-expression.

3 Mary Eagle, "Art: Newey's Coloured All-Sorts", *The Age*, November 9, 1977, p. 2.

4 In hindsight, one can see that major neo-expressionist artists like Anselm Kiefer and George Baselitz had exhibited consistently all through the 1970s, even though Kiefer, for example, was not incorporated in a major European survey show until 1977. German painter A. R. Penck was included in the 1979 Biennale of Sydney, yet according to both Paul Taylor and Robert Lindsay his works were not then given particular notice in Australia by either critics or curators. Such reactions were modified as a result of the arrival of the *transavantgarde* and its emphasis on the public spectacle of subjectivity.

5 William Wright, "Director's Statement", in *Vision in Disbelief: 4th Biennale of Sydney*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 1982, p.11.

6 Robert Lindsay, "Tastemakers for Posterity", seminar, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, April 22, 1987, author's notes.

2:4 Davida Allen, *Figure No. 4*, 1979 oil on masonite with collage board, 167.5 x 115.5 cm. Collection: University Art Museum, University of Queensland, Brisbane. Courtesy Australian Galleries, Melbourne.

In the United States, these pictures encountered considerable critical resistance; in Australia they also met with great hostility from postmodern critics like *Art & Text*'s editor, Paul Taylor, who penned a furiously angry essay titled "Angst in My Pants".[7] Critics accused painters such as Chia and Booth of forced childishness, accusing them of reactionary appropriation directed by market-driven values and characterised by the glamorous context of an art-market boom, fashion-magazine coverage of artists' lifestyle excesses, SoHo loft-living, and the lionisation of New York art dealers like Mary Boone. Paul Taylor asserted that the marginalisation of advanced art was a real possibility, evidenced in the removal of acerbic Melbourne critic and painter Robert Rooney from the position of Melbourne *Age* art critic.[8] Neo-expressionist artists would suffer a considerable critical eclipse from the late 1980s onwards in a reaction against the artists' uncritical over-production and as the tidal wave of a return to painting subsided, certain attitudes were inevitably left stranded. Davida Allen's reputation, for example, was irreversibly hijacked by weekend-newspaper journalism. Allen's paintings were about her private life as a mother of several children and her stereotypical role as the crazy housewife-who-paints. She attracted considerable media attention, as if it was a miracle that a WASP housewife could be an artist – an occupation usually reserved for more bohemian players. She was, above all, a stereotypically autobiographical artist: painting like the most macho of neo-expressionists, she blocked out isolated, full-frontal figures in swathes of oil paint over thick fields of colour. Comic and satiric qualities, along with her cartoon-like illustration of dependency and sexuality (in her paintings of actor Sam Neill, for example), were easily overlooked in favour of an affirmative naivety.

The link between brushy rhetoric and autobiography was by the later 1980s such a cliché that artists who wished to demonstrate their awareness of the Self's erasure were expected to work clinically; confirming that the categories of wild, visionary and spectral were now *passé*. When the Art Gallery of South Australia imported an exhibition of German neo-expressionist painting for the 1986 Adelaide Festival, it was a little too late.

7 Paul Taylor, "Angst in my pants", *Art & Text* n.7, Spring 1982, pp. 48-60.

8 Paul Taylor, "Angst in my pants", *Art & Text* n.7. Rooney was replaced by academic Memory Holloway; she was eventually succeeded (in a peaceful hand-over) by poet Gary Catalano. Both writers were highly sympathetic to the new painting. Rooney subsequently became the *Australian*'s Melbourne art critic.

2:4

Salons for New Art: Roar Studios, 200 Gertrude Street

One group of young artists just out of college – the Roar Studios group, which included David Larwill, Judi Singleton and Sarah Faulkner – adopted a wildly eclectic modernism in keeping with the gritty bohemianism of their post-war School of Paris and COBRA models which were the thick, wildly impastoed, often whimsical paintings by artists such as Karel Appel. Roar Studios, in inner-suburban Melbourne, was the most notorious example of artist-run spaces during the early to mid-1980s. The Roar artists worked in a conservative, neo-expressionist idiom that was in itself never marginal: their intention was to exhibit their work without the constraints of curators' definitions and dealers' programs – outside the possible limitations of market forces but not outside the market. The bohemian, larrikin Roar artists were controversial only because they moved outside accepted channels of apprenticeship and patronage.

Another direction, which retrospectively seems more prophetic of international art's celebration of the commodity status of art in the late 1980s, was represented by an exhibition at the NGV in the summer of 1982 – Paul Taylor's "Popism" – which was based on postmodern theories of cultural appropriation, the elimination of divisions between "high" and "low" art, and image-scavenging. The show included already established artists such as Robert Rooney, and a collection of younger artists such as Maria Kozic

and Howard Arkley. Local theorists, especially those based in Sydney, had already judged that expressionist intentions and the manicured roughness of neo-expressionist paintwork precluded artistic and intellectual literacy. *Art & Text* wielded the tools of discourse with a verve and energy that recalled Clement Greenberg's critical axe 15 years before. Local neo-expressionism fell outside the rules limiting the acceptable content for postmodern painting: flaming landscapes and crazy dogs seemed to lack the necessary criticality.

A shift in the production and reception of art took place in the mid-1980s. In 1985 a Melbourne salon for emerging figurative and neo-expressionist painters was established at 200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy – a few blocks from Roar Studios. 200 Gertrude Street generated intense interest, reflected in packed openings spilling onto the grimy pavements outside. The gallery and studio complex was the most important venue in the city for new (but not "raw") painters. Director Louise Neri and her selection committees carefully picked exhibiting and studio artists from the cream of Melbourne's art schools, thus defining their gallery against the unruly menagerie at Roar, which was based on collective membership that anyone could join.[9]

By 1985 the course art would take in the later 1980s was reasonably clear. The Australian art community – artists, critics, curators and gallery-goers – was more knowing, sophisticated and enthusiastic than in the 1970s. Important and innovative figurative painting had been absorbed into a conservative mainstream that produced very little work of real interest and in which the contradictory demands of internationalism, local identity and parochial patronage uneasily coexisted. The tension produced by the arbitration of quality in small fiefdoms, and the attempt to synthesise a nascent late modernism with postmodernism haunts Melbourne's art scene, and to a lesser degree that of other Australian centres, to this day.

9 Despite their flair for publicity, the Roar artists were able to by-pass such processes, yet still achieved considerable curatorial support outside Melbourne, for example, from James Mollison, then Director of the Australian National Gallery in Canberra; they represented a different, self-expressive and more bohemian idea of advanced art.

THE SURVIVAL OF ABSTRACTION: IRONIC MINIMALISM

Dale Hickey: Illusionist Conceptualism

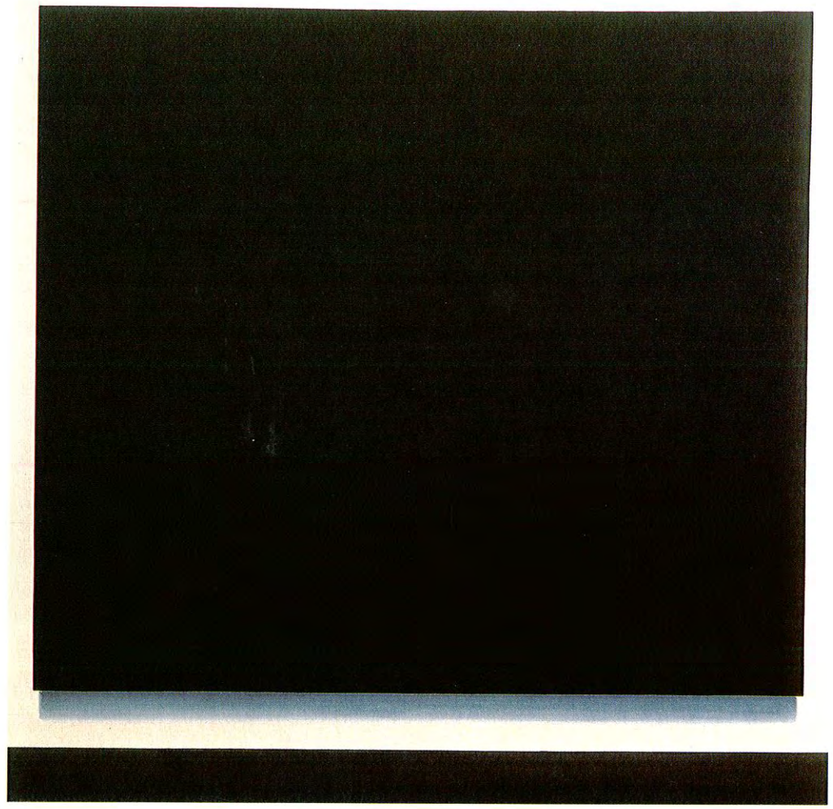
The paintings of Dale Hickey, Robert Hunter and Robert Rooney reflect a relationship to abstraction as least as distanced and self-conscious as that of younger "abstract" artists such as Paul Boston, Janet Burchill and Scott Redford, who all came to public attention in the later 1980s. A particular type of illusionism, disrupting the all-overness of so-called "advanced" abstract painting and existing in an uneasy relationship to doctrinaire formalism, distinguishes the work of these Australian painters, who first exhibited during the later 1960s and early 1970s, from their more conventional peers of the same period, artists such as David Aspden or Fred Cress. The ironic, reflexive minimalism of Hickey, Hunter and Rooney had much more in common with the post-object art of the 1970s. This emphasis was confirmed in the late 1960s by contact and co-operation with members of conceptual art collectives, including Art & Language.

Pinacotheca Gallery, the vast Richmond space in which their work was exhibited from the 1970 inaugural show onwards, was the centre of an extraordinarily disciplined Melbourne avant-garde. However, the artists of the Pinacotheca group were also familiar with the local tradition of modernist abstraction and aware, for example, of George Johnson's neglected geometric abstractions.[10] Figurative allusions informed the Pinacotheca artists' work, disrupting the appearance of highly accomplished Post-Painterly Abstraction. Their pictures even contradicted American critic Rosalind Krauss's asser-

10 Author's interviews with Robert Rooney, Melbourne, October-November 1989. Johnson, an almost forgotten figure, showed his constructivist, iconic abstractions at the Charles Nodrum Gallery in Richmond during the later 1980s.

2:5 Dale Hickey, *Passion*, 1993, oil and enamel on canvas, 183 x 183 cm. Courtesy Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne.

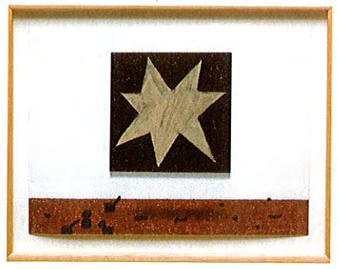
2:6 Dale Hickey, *Burst*, 1991, pastel on paper, 27 x 37 cm. Courtesy Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne.



2:5

tion, at the time, that serial painting obliterated the aura of a work of art.

In 1970 Dale Hickey photographed 90 white walls and arranged the prints in a wooden box with index cards. *90 White Walls*, 1970, shows the idiosyncratic effects of Hickey's early contact with conceptual art. For Hickey, *90 White Walls* was a step in a two-decade transition – through an about-turn in the mid-1970s, when he painted Morandi-like suburban landscapes and the cup paintings described in the last chapter, to a series of studio interiors repeated through the 1980s. In these later paintings, easels and trestle tables were silhouetted against disturbingly opaque, glossy paint which cancelled deep space, returning the eye to the pictures' surfaces and subjects. Heavily outlined studio debris inhabited gaps in an impenetrable liquid zone of house enamel and bituminous black.



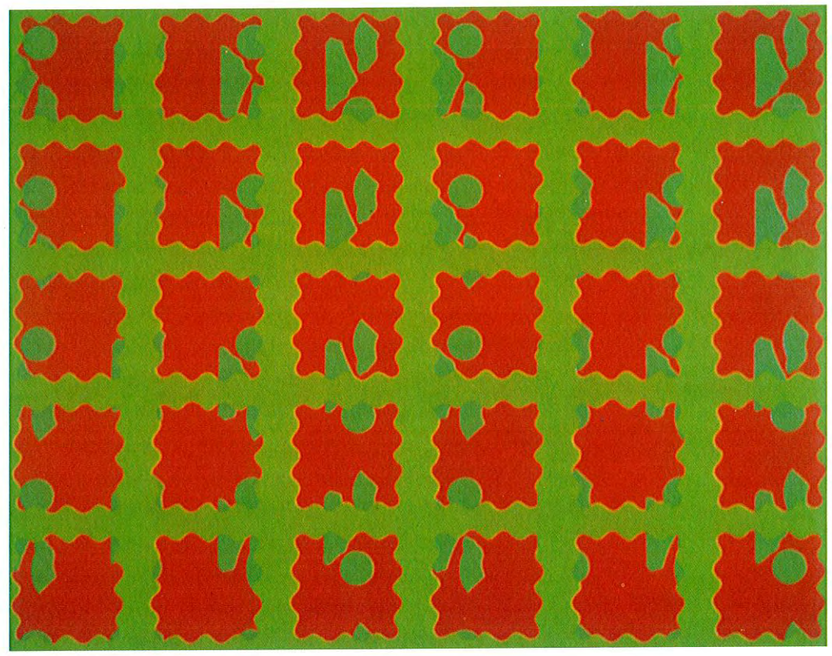
2:6

Hickey's exhibitions of the late 1980s and early 1990s were an examination of the processes of abstract painting through all its manifestations during Hickey's own contradictory career. The works were a literal-minded re-viewing of his paintings over the 30 years he had exhibited. Most of the 100 oil pastels in his 1990 Melbourne show were of one subject only: a painting against a shining white studio wall, above a sketchily drawn brown floor on which were scattered signs of activity – cans and brushes. Hickey's cursory rendering of shadows established a sparse illusionist description of space. His laconic titles underlined a cancellation of meaning, which had always been taken as the

sign of his existential denial of the real. The imaginary paintings within the drawings were fictional. They resembled works the artist might conceivably have completed years ago, during the 1960s, and followed the groupings of subjects that he explored: introspective examinations of mathematical proportions and signs, symbols, cups, landscapes and tables. The picture in *Dialogue (5A)*, 1991, alluded to Hickey's large abstract paintings during 1967-68, in which repetitive patterns based on air vents, quilts and sound baffles were repeated across the canvas like minimalist wallpaper. The abstraction within *Burst*, 1991, as well, existed in a particularly ambivalent relationship to the real, historical pictures that preceded it.

Hickey's abstraction was deliberately matter-of-fact. Just as the drawings and paintings simultaneously defied entry and speculation, they also constructed the subject as an inmate of the prison-house of language and his own art history, and posed themselves, for example in an almost unreadable large monochrome, *Passion*, 1993, as puzzles or theorems – in this case the *trompe l'oeil* of a black square with painted cast shadows posing as the painting of a painting. The conflicting claims of painting's ability to represent were enumerated in different styles and by the depiction of work and industry – thus the artist's emphasis on tools of measurement, paintbrushes and empty cans.

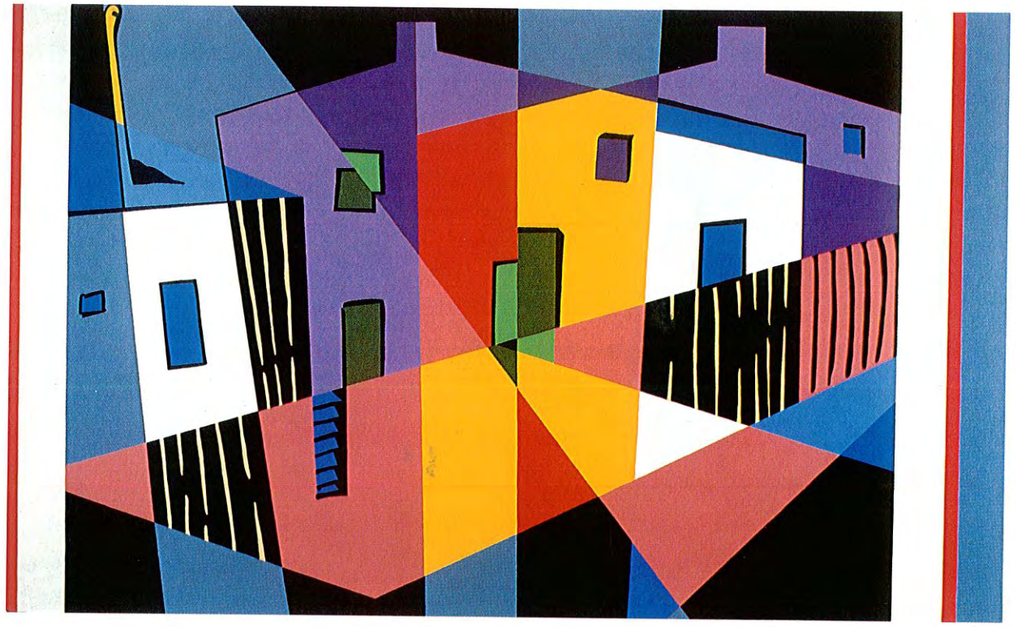
From the perspective of *90 White Walls*' clearly signalled conceptualism, it was obvious that Hickey had continually been aware of the arbitrary, mediated nature of visual signs. The vocabulary of his figuration since the early 1970s had therefore been a meta-language, rather like scientific formulae. In later exhibitions, Hickey's refusal to depict himself even indirectly suggested an art of deflection by a painter who had eliminated the signs of agitation and accentuated all evidence of inactivity: a refusal of the



2:7

2:7 Robert Rooney, *Variations Slippery Seal II*, 1967, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 106.7 x 106.7 cm. Collection: Bruce Pollard. Courtesy Pinacotheca, Melbourne.

2:8 Robert Rooney, *After Colonial Cubism*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 198 cm. Courtesy Pinacotheca, Melbourne.



2:8

traditional signs of "expression". Since they showed rather than told, Hickey's later paintings and drawings "ironised" the truth of representation.

Robert Rooney: Things

Dale Hickey's illusionist shadows turned pseudo-industrial grids and grilles into abstract patterns. Robert Rooney transformed equally banal sources such as the knitting patterns used as the origins of his Superknit paintings of 1969-70. Rooney's sophisticated paintings systematically eliminated almost everything except clichés and content; his formal methods were so rigorous that they allowed almost nothing other than an excess of contradictory clues.

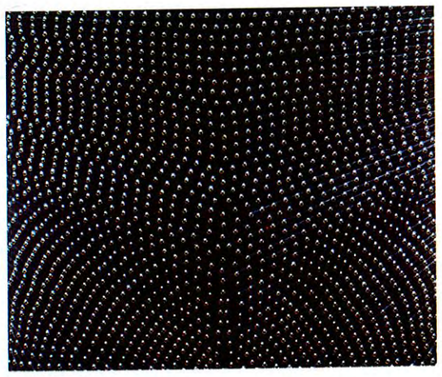
Rooney reinvented himself several times after he first exhibited in 1960. He reincarnated as Francis Bacon, as an experimental musician, as one of the most important minimal painters of "The Field" in 1968, as a conceptual artist, as an accomplished portrait-photographer during the later 1970s and, finally, as critic Paul Taylor's exemplary "Popist" painter. Rooney's serial rhetoric, combined with deadpan, anarchic wit, intersected with a reputation for visual austerity so completely that he remained the most misunderstood artist of his generation. Greenberg's ghost still walks where art conforms to standards; Rooney's simultaneous refusal to play the painter, his anamorphic distortion of nostalgia and his rejection of a socially critical paradigm, explain an almost dysfunctional undervaluation of his work.

Rooney's paintings were confessional for two reasons. Firstly, their means were so sparse that they seemed too thin to bear the weight of their literary content. Flatly rendered, with minimal traces of expressive inflection and no reference to the now-familiar technocratic absence of aura, his hand-painted acrylic surfaces neither took advantage

of mechanical reproduction's necrophilic glamour, nor did they inscribe the recognisable signs of conventional subjectivity. Secondly, the symbolism of Rooney's paintings was at the same time hermetic, autobiographical and ordinary to the point of banality. Just as the well-known Superknit paintings were derived from knitting patterns but posed themselves as sombre serial abstractions, so the paintings of the later 1980s and early 1990s, the Infant Abstractions, for example, were alarmingly literal translations of abstract drawings Rooney made in high school. Others (the In Storyland paintings) were simplified, flattened versions of story-book illustrations for small children. *After Colonial Cubism*, 1993, perfectly demonstrated postcolonialism's perversion of modernism. Suburban perspectives were fractured by arbitrary division into a vorticist explosion of elegant, designer colours. The stylistically contrary signs of Synthetic Cubism (such as the conventionalised marks standing in for texture, and wandering black lines crossing spatial transitions) were undermined by a deliberate schoolroom academicism. The grey and black planes at the edge of the painting were replaced, as in a pure design exercise, with yellow and orange shapes at the picture's centre. The images' complicated origins emphasised the lengths to which Rooney went to render meaning opaque. Understanding his sources was no help at all, because of a third-degree irony that neutralised the nostalgia of 1950s references. Rooney's 1990s paintings demonstrated that his true antecedents were artist-librarians such as Marcel Broodthaers, and that his art was profoundly sensual and iconic.

Retrospectively, Melbourne minimalism – which included the works of Rooney, Hickey and others – seems weirder and weirder. This suggests that critical discussions about grids should have been replaced long ago, remembering the artists' autodidact readings and sophistication, by more literary inquisitions into the grotesque. The abstraction of these pictures existed in a particularly ambivalent relationship to late-modernist paintings, especially the Post-Painterly Abstraction such as that of Kenneth Noland, seen in the 1967 exhibition, "Two Decades of American Painting", at the National Gallery of Victoria.[11] Both Rooney and Hickey were always alert to the arbitrary, mediated nature of visual signs. The vocabulary of late-modernist abstraction in Melbourne, from the late 1960s onwards, was often a meta-language where representation and abstraction were satirically and certainly presciently juxtaposed.

11 Like most Australian artists, Rooney and Hickey saw the exhibition "Two Decades of American Painting", curated by Waldo Rasmussen of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which toured to the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1967. The impact of this show is widely acknowledged. For example, see Margaret Plant, "Dale Hickey", in Margaret Rich (curator), *Dale Hickey*, City of Ballaarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat, 1988, p.2.



2:9

2:9 Janenne Eaton, *Untitled*, 1993, electronic resistors and oil on canvas, 198 x 165 cm. Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Courtesy the artist.

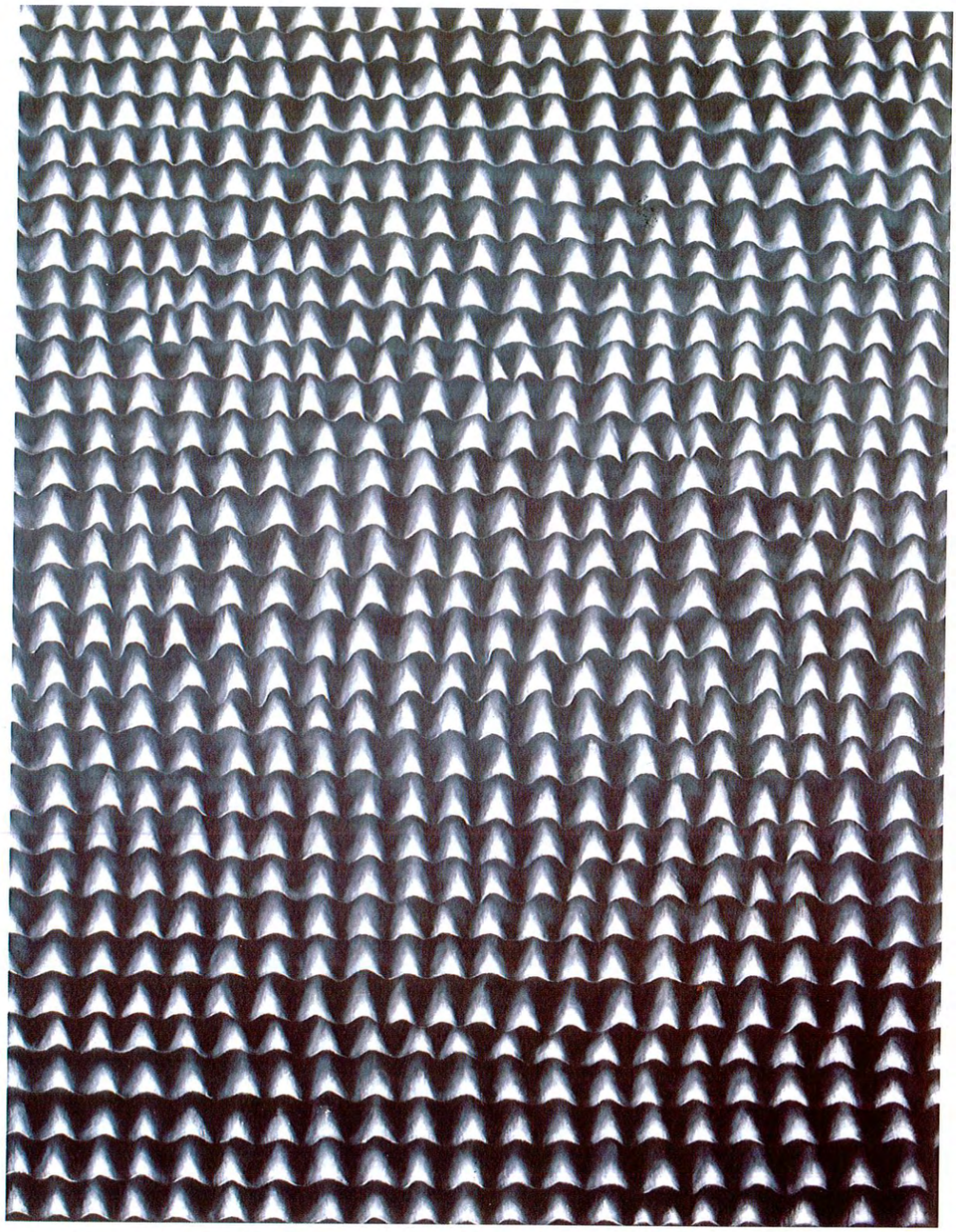
2:10 Janenne Eaton, *Sing the sailors*, 1990, oil on canvas, 232 x 174 cm. Private collection. Courtesy the artist.

THE SURVIVAL OF ABSTRACTION: TRANSCENDENTAL ABSTRACTION

Janenne Eaton: Austerity and Openness

A second, easily recognised, version of abstraction during the 1980s was characterised by iconic, symmetrical formats, an elimination of gestural brushwork, a reduction in colour values towards the monochromatic, and a rhetoric that emphasised, sometimes to the point of kitsch, the transcendental and the sublime. This type of painting was represented by artists such as Paul Boston, Rod McRae, James Clayden and Janenne Eaton. It was originally associated with the Tony Oliver, Verity Street and Pinacotheca galleries in Melbourne and Watters Gallery in Sydney, and later with Melbourne's Niagara Galleries.

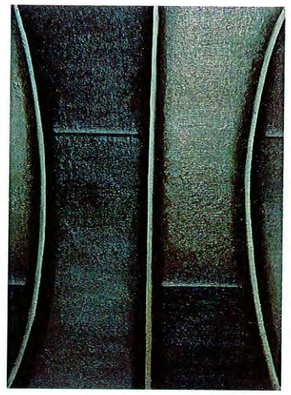
In the mid-1980s, Janenne Eaton looked like yet another painter recycling images under the loose guise of a feminist reformulation of art history. In a major Sydney survey exhibition at that time, the 1986 Perspecta, she showed a painting modelled on Gau-



2:10

2:11

2:12



2:13

guin's *Manao Tapapau*. Instead of the Tahitian girl lying on a bed, Eaton substituted a bound and gagged woman, watched from suburban Venetian blinds by a "spirit figure" drawn from a newspaper photograph of a Russian soldier in a gas mask. The most memorable feature of this painting was neither its play with then-fashionable tropes of the viewer's gaze, nor its choice of quotation, but the painter's stubborn, chalky technique. Contemplating the work was like looking at an inversion of American neo-expressionist painter Eric Fischl's *Bad Boy,* 1981. What appeared then as enigmatic open-ended narrative, proved with the hindsight prompted by her more recent large abstract canvases, and specifically those of the early 1990s dealing with Australia's convict past, to be a genuine fascination with the spirits of the dead. Irony was a passing phase.

Her paintings looked like 1960s British Op artist Bridget Riley meets American mystic minimalist painter Agnes Martin – an accurate assessment of Eaton's priorities. *Sing the sailors,* 1990, was an arrangement of repeated rows of monochromatic, moody greys resembling curtain folds. Backlit and graduated in tonal transition to white light, the forms could have been cellular structures or early minimal painting gone Tantric. Eaton escaped backwards from postmodernity towards the deceptive simplicity of iconic minimal abstraction. She refined single metaphoric images that hovered between non-objectivity and an austere landscape of vacant openness. Like Agnes Martin, her impulse was towards the transcendental. During the late 1970s, Eaton spent time as an archaeologist in the "nowhere" of outback Western Australia; the psychological charge she discerned at night in that landscape appeared in her Canberra works of the late 1980s and early 1990s as an enforced, even violent, monastic dumbness.

Eaton's work required an understanding of the process of the mind of a believer who found the world's character inexplicable by any theory other than the psychic. This seemed an unnecessarily perverse complication of painting, but Eaton was clearly impelled to explain the world to herself, and was troubled by its disorder. In *Breaker,* 1989, black-on-black rectangles were edged by shafts of white paint. These framed a central image in which the artist's transcendental folds faded upwards into white blankness. *Breaker* was saved from the dual extremes of grandiosity and preciousness by the artist's hand-made geometry. Her irregular measurements, broken lines and imperfect tonal shifts constantly returned the viewer to the painting's surface. Attention wandered across and back into a picture space rather like the warp and woof of woven fabric; the travelling eye avoided the predictable strait-jacket of architectonic form. Eaton was interested in the experience implied in her shallow picture space, in the same way that a portraitist is interested in the character of a face. Her walls of light codified this attitude, and the resulting sense that there was more to her paintings than simple-minded form or equally obvious metaphysics was the key to their fascination. Her abstraction scrupulously respected its historical limits, foregoing both a neo-expressionist rhetoric of the expressive mark and the postmodern knowingness of style revisited in favour of a gradually evolving postcolonial awareness.

2:11 Paul Boston, *Man in a Landscape I,* 1983, mixed media. Courtesy Niagara Galleries, Melbourne and Annandale Galleries, Sydney.

2:12 Paul Boston, *Untitled,* 1985, ink and charcoal on paper. Courtesy Niagara Galleries, Melbourne and Annandale Galleries, Sydney.

2:13 Paul Boston, *Painting No. 3,* 1991, oil on linen. Collection: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Courtesy Niagara Galleries, Melbourne and Annandale Galleries, Sydney.

Paul Boston and Rod McRae: Sign Systems and Mixed Metaphors

Paul Boston's early experiences with Buddhism are persistently mentioned; as if "spirituality" explains his paintings and reliefs. Boston graduated from the Preston Institute in 1972. He lived in South East Asia and Japan for three years and, in 1980, he visited America and Europe. In the United States, Boston saw a Philip Guston retrospective at

the San Francisco Museum of Contemporary Art, and the rough-hewn figuration of Guston's later paintings profoundly affected the course of his work. Irresistibly metaphoric and suggestive, the paintings that he produced over the following decade were usually associated with transcendental values because of Boston's stubborn repetition and revision of unitary iconic images and abbreviated fields of void-like openness.[12] A number of recurring, easily recognisable figurative motifs appeared – lamps, candles, ships and the human head. These deliberately hermetic, monochrome paintings attracted considerable attention.

Sign systems other than writing, such as directories and road signs, were important as models to explain Boston's works. Other new abstractionists, such as Melbourne artist Elizabeth Newman, attempted to subvert the same tropes valued by Boston and Eaton in deliberately mismanaged pastiches of Abstract Expressionist painters such as Mark Rothko. In Boston's collections of symbols, the head was significant as the receptacle of thought. This emphasis on the symbolic was identified with profundity, as were painterly, impastoed monochromes and tonally ambiguous figure-ground relationships. Boston, however, was more complex than a naive transcendental abstractionist. He did not appear to be particularly interested in portrayals of a sublime absolute, noting that "It's like a reconciliation of contradiction and using that as a basic method to get to the point where *nothing* really exists".[13] Like all Boston's works, *Painting No. 3*, 1991, presented viewers with an accomplished formalist abstraction destabilised by cryptic figurative references. His calculated cultivation of the ambiguous in painting was like a cartoonist's loving caricature of contemporary art. His interest in the cancellation of signification was both poetic and conceptual. For Boston, his painting "works as a vehicle for cancellation in a total way – you've got nowhere to move if it works right ... it stops the mind".[14] He also asserted in 1989 that:

> In my most grandiose of moods I think that a great painting in the vein of the work that I am doing would be like a hole in meaning, would be like a hole in the world, would be like ... everything else is reading very clearly and exactly, but this thing is unreadable, but engaging.[15]

Boston's abstraction was synthetic – an amalgam of cues and clues. They were similar to the complicated, labyrinthine monchromes of Rod McRae, whose large paintings demanded at one moment to be read as an aerial view of fantastic rocky landscapes and at another coalesced into ghosts from a medical textbook floating in a shallow cubist space. His pictures, like those of Janenne Eaton and Paul Boston, often hovered on the edge of simplified figuration and made use of conventional signs and symbols instead of assuming the formal operation of a "language of abstraction". All these artists' early 1990s exhibitions demonstrated the involuntary tendency of Melbourne painters to project a landscape-derived romanticism into their dialogues. Their work was also far from unsophisticated, displaying an awareness, through a cultivated ambiguity and artificiality, of the world of gallery openings and art magazines. Neo-conceptual artists had noted abstraction's particular affinity with this complicity: abstract art was not subversive in itself. It was just as easily complicit with, and involved in the same operations as, all elite culture. The signs of sincerity were the same as those of deception. Boston, McRae and Eaton, like their American contemporary Ross Bleckner, were interested in the ambiguities inherent in an overtly "morally serious" abstraction.

12 Christopher Heathcote, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", *Art Monthly* n.28, March 1990, p. 13.

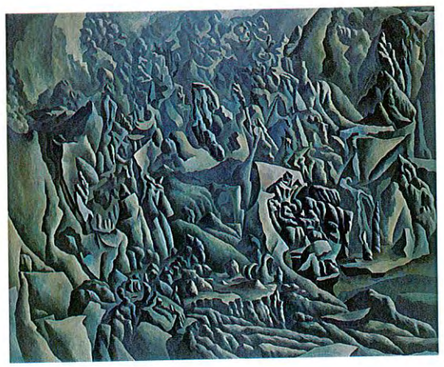
13 Paul Boston, in unpublished interview with Ashley Crawford, 1989.

14 Paul Boston, in unpublished interview with Ashley Crawford, 1989.

15 Paul Boston, in unpublished interview with Ashley Crawford, 1989.

2:14 Rod McRae, *Pale Waters Still*, 1987, oil on canvas, 165 x 205 cm. Collection: Bruce Pollard.

2:14



The Revival of Modernism in the Late 1980s: The New Abstraction

The persistent impulse to revive early modernism's charismatic idealism reappeared in the later 1980s as a rehabilitation of abstract painting. The new abstraction was presented by young artists and curators as a somehow "resistant" and socially aware artistic idiom. It thus represented the revival of early-modernist attitudes towards non-objective art, which envisaged an artistic language capable of communicating transcendent truths unmediated by social codes. This revival was potentially incompatible with both the postmodern art scene of the 1980s and the lingering legacy of 1970s art, for it represented something else altogether: the survival of avant-garde longings for social relevance and engagement. There appeared to be, at first sight, a vast difference between self-consciously postmodern art (the art described in the next chapters) and neo-modernist abstraction. This abstraction attempted to synthesise contemporary post-modern awareness and avant-garde rhetoric.[16]

Alternative spaces, founded by young artists in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, provided a focus almost exclusively for abstract painters who owed a considerable artistic debt to painter John Nixon (whose mid-1970s installation, *Blast*, was discussed in the last chapter). Nixon's art was pivotal in the formation of the new abstraction that appeared in Australian alternative spaces; many younger artists were affected by his example, both through his teaching and through identification with his strategic rejections and alliances with commercial and institutional galleries, including his work at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane. Throughout his career, after graduation from Melbourne's National Gallery School in 1970, Nixon attempted to directly control the interpretation of his non-objective paintings and installations. In the mid-1970s he initiated Art Projects, a highly significant alternative gallery in a run-down office building on Melbourne's Lonsdale Street that exhibited a wide range of non-commercial works by artists as diverse as Peter Tyndall, John Davis, Bonita Ely, Jenny Watson and Nixon himself. Tireless in his activity as exhibition organiser and self-publicist, he continued to be a role-model for a newer conception of the impresario artist.

The establishment late in the decade of active, artist-controlled exhibition spaces in Sydney and Melbourne, as well as a desire by some younger artists to define themselves against the recent past through non-objective works, reflected Nixon's aesthetic and entrepreneurial influence. Melbourne's Store 5 was initially set up by young Melbourne artists Melinda Harper and Gary Wilson in order to show and promote the work of recent graduates from Melbourne art schools – primarily from the Victorian College of the Arts and from Victoria College, Prahran. Operating on a tiny budget from a small store-room off a dilapidated warehouse courtyard, Store 5 opened each week for a few hours, with a new show every Saturday afternoon. Many younger painters had been attracted by cheap rents and their slightly seedy ambience to such dusty, decrepit spaces above shops along the adjacent Chapel Street, Prahran. Store 5 was one of a group of initiatives taken by art students in the late 1980s in Melbourne; another was Supporting Women Image Makers (SWIM) – a feminist discussion group originating at Prahran College. With a considerable sense of disenfranchisement, these artists realised that their slightly older peers' easy experience gaining gallery representation would not be repeated, that women would continue to find establishment of an artistic career more difficult than men, and that the boom in collecting art by young artists was winding down. This dissatisfaction was not altogether warranted: from graduation, the Store 5

16 Such reconciliations were inevitably riddled with contradictions. During the mid-1980s, for example, similar efforts by New York "Neo-Geo" abstract painters such as Peter Halley and Philip Taaffe were immediately and critically interrogated by suspicious writers such as Thomas Crow and Yves-Alain Bois. See Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning", in David Joselit and Elisabeth Sussman (eds.), *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1987, pp. 29-50. Neo-Geo painting's claims to difference rested on its simulation and parodic intentions; Crow and Bois, however, judged Neo-Geo to be merely pastiche. In 1988, Melbourne curator Juliana Engberg expressed her relief that Australian art seemed to have been spared an invasion of Neo-Geo painting. See Juliana Engberg, discussion during the seminar "The Concept of Avant-Garde: From the Modern to the Postmodern", quoted in *The present and recent past of Australian art and criticism*, special supplement, *Agenda* n.2, p. 26. By 1994, however, the success and belated proliferation of local exponents of similar painting was so complete as to represent a new orthodoxy.

2:15

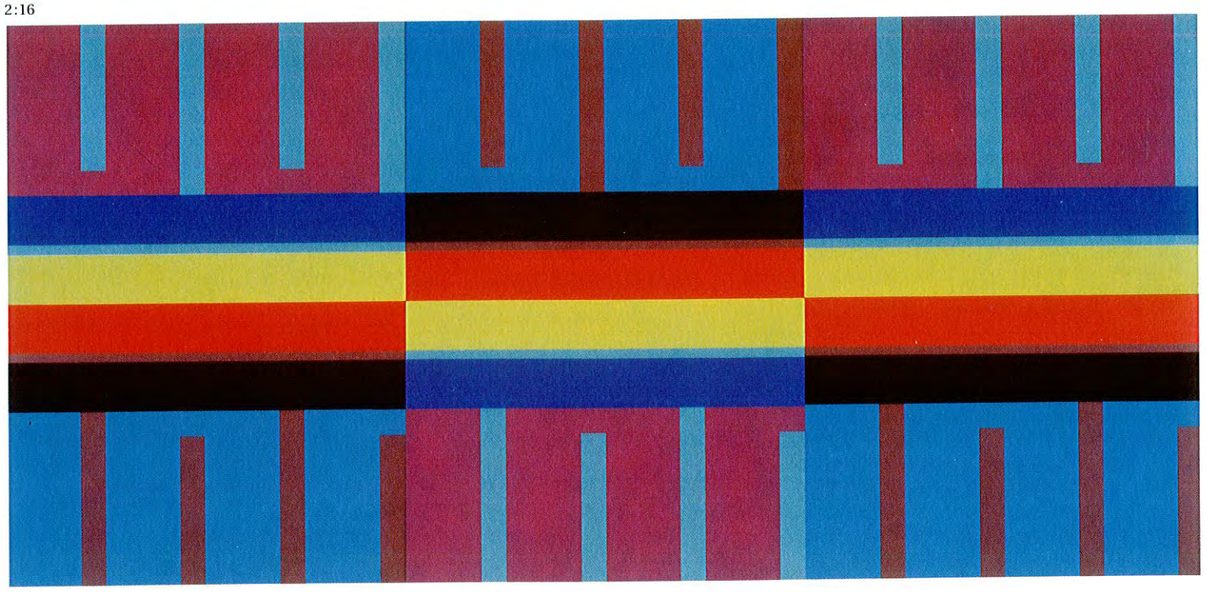
17 The new abstractionists defined themselves quite simply. The commentary surrounding their work was largely written by the artists' friends, themselves, or by curators eager to establish the painters' importance. Therefore, it was supportive, uncritical and reflected the artists' own perception of their work and its significance. The Store 5 artists were intensely serious, even when they employed parodic visual images. They defined themselves as excluded from the "art establishment", asserting their vanguard role and seeking to establish a "socially critical" role for art. According to 200 Gertrude Street Director Rose Lang, an

artists received considerable support, in the form of inclusion in curated group shows, from the directors at the George Paton Gallery and their associated journal, *Agenda*. The paintings from Store 5 found early acceptance at 200 Gertrude Street and space was readily made available, initially in an exhibition called "Resistance", curated by Melinda Harper in 1989.

In Sydney, First Draft West provided a similar focus. This gallery was the successor to First Draft, which had been founded in 1987 in a shop-front on Sydney's busy Parramatta Road, in Chippendale. The co-Directors of First Draft West initially included Narelle Jubelin and, later, Justin Trendall and Helga Groves. First Draft West was surrounded by used-car yards and was at first quite isolated, except for the Mori Gallery further out at Leichhardt, from the city's main gallery district in Paddington. First Draft West had a similar but slightly more heterodox exhibition policy to Store 5, and some members of the Melbourne group also exhibited with First Draft West. Many of the young Sydney artists were painters, working with similar small, systematic, serial formats to the young Melbourne abstractionists.

Underlying the formation of these spaces was a recurrence of the periodic upheavals in which young artists attempted to side-step the Establishment. The new abstractionists wished to establish reputations on their own terms.[17] They also believed – whether cynically or not – that their serial, roughly-made hermetic work necessitated, in the cryptic words of one supporter, "the frequent and sustained exposure required for project-based practice in the existing system".[18] In other words, the neo-modernist artists wished to avoid the usual long gallery lead-times between planning and exhibition. They also wished to minimise, by short exhibition periods, the interval between different artists' exhibitions and thus, most importantly, maximise the sense of a committed self-perceived avant-garde grouping of young artists – a warehouse Bohemia. Critics stressed the self-consciously workman-like, humble, often awkward manufacture of the new

2:16



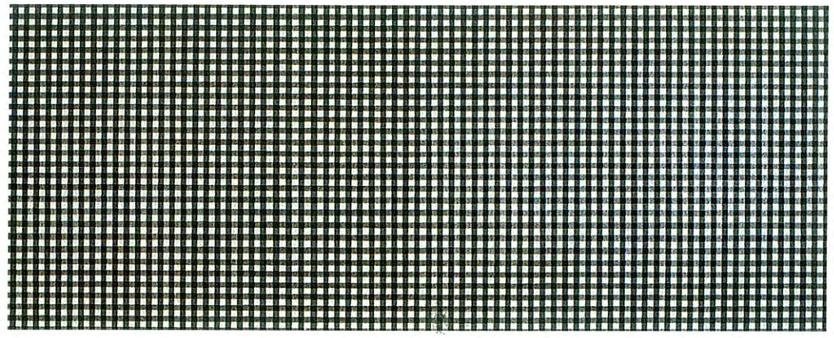
early supporter, the abstract painting of the Store 5 group was, by virtue of its imputed difficulty, severity, austerity and seriousness, somehow "resistant". Of course, this severity did not prevent the artists' easy and fast incorporation into the most entrepreneurial and energetic commercial galleries in Melbourne and Sydney.

18 Rose Lang, catalogue essay, *Language, Faith and Possibilities*, 200 Gertrude Street Artists Space, Melbourne, 1990, unpaginated.

19 Natalie King (curator), *The Sub.vêr'sive Stitch*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, September 1991, p. 6.
Lesley Dumbrell was a formalist painter of large, highly accomplished decorative abstractions who came to critical attention in the early 1970s. Her trademarks were small Op Art-like bars, arranged in repetitive patterns across uninflected grounds of bright saturated colour.

20 Rose Lang, *Language, Faith and Possibilities*.

2:17



abstraction, noting its links with craft genres. Since much Store 5 abstraction, such as Anne-Marie May's repetitive panel of sewn fabric, *Untitled (Constructions of Grey Rays)*, 1991, emphasised labour and materials, critics drew affinities with the Women's Art Movement's interest in embroidery and quilts during the 1970s. From this perspective, May was like a latter-day Lesley Dumbrell, producing small but labour-intensive works, though avoiding the shimmering opticality of Dumbrell's decorative abstractions in favour of domestically-scaled work with a "subversive stitch".[19] Common fabrics and textile techniques thus parodied and mimicked the lofty forms of modernist abstraction. Other younger abstractionists similarly felt that mimicry possessed an anti-authoritarian quality. For example, Elizabeth Newman wrote cryptic inscriptions across under-sized Colour Field paintings. Newman and Angela Brennan, both Melbourne artists, mimicked the apolitical formalism of the 1960s, turning its grand gestures into thrift-shop fashion.

The desire to establish differences extended to postmodern painting. Rose Lang, speaking on behalf of the Store 5 artists, characterised postmodern painting as "elegant revelations of a deathly nihilism".[20] According to Lang, younger abstract painters were repelled by the melancholic language and slick, easily marketable styles of 1980s postmodernism, presumably implying that the young abstract painters represented a reaction against theoretically inclined artists like Imants Tillers (whose work is examined in the next chapter). However, such artists – most notably Tony Clark – were much admired mentors of the Store 5 artists. Given the radical examinations of art, museums and commodification by slightly older postmodern artists such as Clark, the program of the Store 5/First Draft group suggested a considerable degree of either naivety or neo-conservative nostalgia. Natalie King, another young curator closely identified with the group, noted that although the new abstractionists publicly resisted the romantic view of abstraction as a privileged site of pure meaning, untrammelled by materiality or technique, they also exhibited a conflicting fascination with that same ideology and its austere romanticism. Neo-modernist abstraction, in fact, was profoundly contradictory, assuming that there was such a thing as an *a priori* "language of abstraction" uncontaminated by the (presumably different) *a priori* truths they despised. The new abstractionists explored, almost in spite of themselves, signifying practices at the borderline between figuration and abstraction, treating abstract painting as a period style, available for fashionable revival like cover versions in the mass culture pop-music industry. They thus demonstrated clear affinities with the work of the older postmodern artists mentioned before.

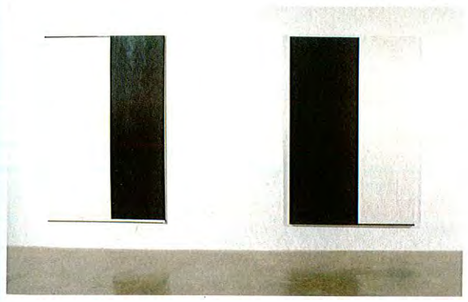
2:15 Stephen Bram, *Untitled*, 1993, oil on canvas, 40.5 x 30.5 cm. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

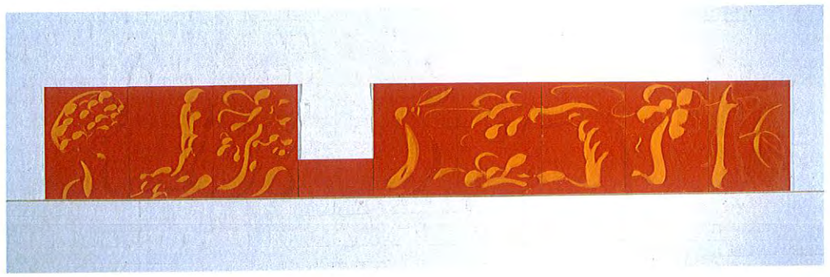
2:16 Constanze Zikos, *Your Lifetime Icon x 6*, 1992, enamel on laminex, 150 x 320 cm. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photograph: Kenneth Pleban. Courtesy the artist.

2:17 Debra Dawes, *Gingham (Grey)*, 1991, oil on canvas, 60 x 150 cm. Photo: Kalev Maevali. Courtesy Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne.

2:18 Debra Dawes, *Large Verticals #s 8, 9*, from the Houndstooth series (installation view), 1991, oil on canvas, each 180 x 120 cm. Photograph: Kalev Maevali. Courtesy Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne.

2:18





2:19

The validity of the idea of "resistance" and "subversion", embodied in relatively small-scale abstract paintings exhibited to a very small audience, remained untested by most critics, who simply repeated the artists' claims. The distinctions between the most thoughtful of the new abstractionists and their modernist and postmodernist antecedents was in fact more generational than stylistic; Stephen Bram, Debra Dawes and Constanze Zikos produced paintings that had the same sophisticated, ironic minimalism as those of Robert Rooney and Dale Hickey. Zikos' formalist abstractions, such as *Your Lifetime Icon x 6*, 1992, were made from kitchen laminex; Rooney had based a late 1960s series on breakfast cereal packets. Dawes' pictures, like Hickey's, were both geometric abstractions and second-order critiques, lovingly executed, of historically distant styles. All these artists' works were based on systems and structures so familiar that they could not be read as anything other than clichés: squares; horizontal sections; or asymmetrical divisions of a vertical rectangle. The younger artists' detachment from their antecedents was symptomatic of the widening gulf between contemporary abstraction and its sources.

On the one hand, Dawes' black and white rectangles and Zikos' laminex simulacra of Colour Field painting offered themselves as objects of self-sufficient contemplation. Zikos' *Your Lifetime Icon x 6* resisted simple appreciation and, in its colour-saturated blankness, allowed a state of bodily awareness similar to the experience of minimal art. On the other hand, this contemplative intention was subverted by the particularly self-conscious character of its manufacture from household laminex. Dawes' *Large Verticals #s 8, 9,* 1991, exhibited a double allegiance: all the pleasures of a detailed inspection of truly sensuous paintwork and the rigour of a serial installation's minimal imagery. The artist's large rectangles of black or white were carefully spaced and edged to create optical after-images. Final closure on either aspect – intellectual citation of historical reference or handmade pleasure – was blocked. Neither the overall field of formal relationships nor the minute play of handmade difference was allowed to dominate. This refusal was quite obvious: like the Pinacotheca painters mentioned before, Dawes' paintings and Zikos' panels were in no way informative. The artists' contradictory signals defeated references to the inflected field of landscape and to the utopian spaces of formalist abstraction.

2:19 Tony Clark, *Kufic Landscape,* 1991, acrylic on canvasboards, 61 x 370 cm. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

2:20 Dale Frank, *The Big Daddy Painting,* 1990, acrylic and oil on canvas, 230 x 180 cm. Courtesy Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Melbourne.

The Crisis in Geometry: The Persistent Authority of Modernist Mythology

During the 1980s, critics and artists consistently conflated all the different strands within modernism and constructed a falsely monolithic, exclusively authoritarian picture of that movement. One of the reasons for this was modernism's appearance as an imported authoritarian idiom. Younger artists saw that late 1960s formalist painters such as Michael Johnson, David Aspden and Sydney Ball had been almost immediately absorbed

2:20

and patronised by institutions and art schools. In fact, Australian art students during the 1980s were taught by a disproportionately large number of tenured, male abstractionists whose work had come to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Modernist abstraction had become a symbol of cultural, economic and social power: it had been an emblem of privilege and cultural hegemony. Its symbolism had been analysed and recycled in the United States by Neo-Geo painter Peter Halley, whose essays explained the iconic meaning of abstract painting during late capitalism.[21] Halley's critical attitude could be detected in the Australian paintings of many abstract artists, including Elizabeth Newman. Young abstract painters displayed a deeply ambivalent "anxiety of influence" typified by amnesia towards their local heritage, and specifically towards artists such as Hickey and Rooney. Australian art had never been a pallid reflection of international influence. The persistent, infantile promotional preference for the "Next Wave" on the part of art magazines, critics and curators papered over the internal contradictions between artists' works and critics' explanations.

The new abstraction produced by Generation X artists was fragmenting by 1993 as its inherent contradictions and the differences between artists became evident.[22] Although they attained national institutional acceptance very quickly (as seen in the drop-dead elegance of the 1993 Australian Perspecta survey at the Art Gallery of New South Wales), the new abstractionists did so without articulating any particular theory other than inconsistent avant-garde sentiments and vague utopian longings.

On the other hand, photographer Graeme Hare, film-maker Andrew Frost and older painters such as Dale Frank, Richard Dunn and Tony Clark adapted and analysed modernist tropes such as avant-garde "subversion" into far more interesting works without the same simple-minded nostalgia. Through an often deliberately cursory replication of the look of non-objective painting, Frank, Dunn and Clark created a generalised resemblance to specific historical references – respectively, to French Tachism, post-War American painting and 1920s European neo-classicism. Through deliberately *faux-naïf* illusionism and allusions to early Matisse, Tony Clark's later paintings (for example *Kufic Landscape*, 1991) turned Arabic script into landscape forms belying the diminutive size of his work's small panels. Having thoroughly absorbed the postmodern critique of modernism into their work, these artists were particularly interested in the persistent authority of modernist mythologies. Profoundly aware of the relativity of style and the eccentric tyranny of distance, they deployed modernist abstraction as part of a deeper conceptual strategy.

21 Peter Halley, "The Crisis in Geometry", in his *Collected Essays 1981-87*, Gallery Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich, 1988, pp. 74-106.

22 For a brilliant indictment of the conflation of formalism and stagnant modernism see Rex Butler, "Nixon's Watergate", *Agenda* n.37, July 1994, pp. 10-11.
Although Butler's article is about the art of John Nixon, his lucid argments about the modernist-as-poor-victim syndrome, Nixon's inability to grasp the institutional and historical recuperation of modernist ideas about art-as-work, and the importance of refusing to exempt artists' subjectivities from critical analysis are equally relevant to the neo-modernist painters under discussion in this chapter. Many Australian artists, and not necessarily the artists discussed here, simply refused to understand that the control of critical discourse leads in the long run to the impoverishment of their own critical reputations. I would agree with Butler's placement of Nixon, and hence many of the younger abstractionists, in the recent and interesting tradition that includes mainly European artists such as John Armleder.