

ROBERT OWEN JACKY REDGATE CALEB SHEA GEMMA SMITH LYDIA WEGNER

6 DEC 2016 - 4 FEB 2017

IN THE WHITE SQUARE

"...the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth."

- Kazimir Malevich

A line cuts through a circle then slinks around a square. Edges fold, spaces open and collapse. The shapes are simple, concrete ... or is one a shadow? A pastel hue radiates warmth and a gradient blue whispers a breeze, while elsewhere two tones zing in an almost electric harmony. Speaking for themselves, colours, contours and materials play on our senses, evoking something beyond that which we see. For Malevich, I imagine, this is the 'thing'.

With roots in the modern European movements of Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism, abstraction is widely recognised as emerging in the early 20th century. As artists of the avantgarde rejected the hitherto dominant genre of realism, their focus turned to the work of art itself, challenging convention through non-representation and mining art's utopian promise in an era of rapid change. Finding form in disparate styles and schools of thought since – from Abstract Expressionism, hard-edge painting and Minimalism, to a range of contemporary iterations – abstraction has steadily continued as a relevant and vital conduit for creative enquiry.

This exhibition considers the ways in which five contemporary artists employ abstraction as a primary visual language in the context of a broader historical trajectory. The title is borrowed in part from two of the 20th century's great pioneers of abstract art – Wasily Kandinsky's *In the Black Square* (1923), and Kazimir Malevich's *White on White* (1918) – while also referring obliquely to the 'white cube' exhibition space that came to prominence during the last century. Situated in the formerly industrial, oblong 'white cube' of ARC ONE Gallery, the works span sculpture and photo-based media and are drawn together by a shared emphasis on colour, form, space, light, optics and geometry.

Drawing on tenets of Constructivism, Minimalism and 20th century colour theory, **Robert Owen's** expansive and multidisciplinary practice has, for several decades, explored abstraction through colour and geometry. In this exhibition Owen combines a reductive abstract aesthetic with the traditionally illustrative medium of photography in a suite of vibrant prints never before shown in Melbourne. Taken during his representation of Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1978, Owen's photographs are simple, close-up compositions of



bright weathered walls, window frames and street intersections of the Venetian island of Burano.

Concisely framed by the artist as geometric blocks of colour rather than representative streetscapes. the scenes reflect a neoplastic sensibility in their painterly depiction of rectangular shapes, bold white lines and asymmetry. As noted in an early review of the series, Owen's "quiet, detached and classical colour essays have the eye-tingling quality of High Renaissance painting, linked to an almost Mondrian-like sense of composition." ² Fascinated by the relationship between perception, knowing and feeling, as well as art's ability to manifest sensations that normally can only be felt and not seen, Owen's intimate architectural pictures vacillate between pure colour and form, emotion, and recognisable matter.

This cognitive exchange of what we know versus what we see is consistently observed in the minimalist-conceptual work of **Jacky Redgate**. For more than two decades Redgate has worked with mirrors and objects in her studio, exploring abstraction, light, space and optical effects









through photography. Light Throw (Mirrors) Fold - Yellow (2016) extends her ongoing photographic series, Light Throw (Mirrors), which began in 2009 and led to Light Throw (Mirrors) Fold (2014—). In this work Redgate disrupts the symmetry of the folding screen found in the Fold series and reduces her compendium of objects to circular and rectangular mirrors. A brilliant yellow rebounds across the fold onto the opposite white surface, as the mirrors reflect light and colour in return, proposing a quasi-cosmic spatial dialogue.

Produced using analogue photographic and print processes, Redgate's technically-accomplished photograph captures geometric reverberations of light, colour and reflection while nodding to Op Art in its feat of visual trickery and optical interplay. Indeed, her "ingeniously simple combination of ... elements defies our impulse to classify and label, creating a phenomenological ripple as a result." Reimagining objects within the lexicon of abstraction, Redgate examines the nexus between how we represent and perceive real-world phenomena through images.

Also beginning in the studio with materials and a camera, **Lydia Wegner** takes everyday items which she then re-animates by way of measured, experimental gestures and analogue effects. Interested in the possibilities of light and shadow, colour and form, Wegner moves across two and three dimensions to distill her playful, temporary assemblages into staged abstract photographs. Falling within the genre of sculptural photography and the photographic still life, her influences extend from Fischli/Weiss's witty interpretations of the ordinary, to the high-keyed photographs of Elad Lassry, and the photomaterialist experiments of Barbara Kasten.

Blue Haze, Blue Cross and Blue Cut (all 2016), step away from the identifiable object-as-subject and make up a triptych of bright, geometrically layered compositions. Choosing papers and other materials for their surface and tonal qualities, Wegner combines a vivid palette with studio lights to create photogram-like images nuanced by hard lines, highlights and shadows. Within their fixed black frames her fleeting constructions arouse a sense of floating, movement and depth. Pulling the eye back and forth then across the photograph's reflective surface, they call our attention to the viewing experience itself.

Form, space and colour theory are similar considerations in **Gemma Smith's** hard-edge sculptural works, *Boulder #8 (block)* (2011) and *Multi Coloured Adaptable* (2008). Also a painter, Smith engages the two mediums to investigate abstraction, typically feeding her discoveries from sculpture into painting and vice versa. Her methodology is at once systematic and improvisational; she draws on modernist principles of geometric abstraction regulated by her own self-imposed rules and constraints. Both controlled and highly intuitive, her process provides a creative fluidity to her formal work.



Balancing a bold colour arrangement with an origami-like design, the mutable plywood of the Adaptable allows for countless configurations of colour and shape. Panels press forward and recede, toying with negative and positive space and encouraging an almost puzzle-solving imagination. Smith expands her proposition in Boulder #8, a luminous and kaleidoscopic sculpture made from transparent acrylic, with an intriguing enquiry into the interplay of colour and light. The sculpture's translucent surfaces offset its crystalline mass, conjuring weightlessness and fluctuating demarcations of depth. Smith's playful extrapolation of surface and space is heightened by the open-endedness of the two works, which metamorphose according to the audience's engagement with them. Conflating hue and shape with real and illusory notions of space, Smith's chameleonic sculptures reveal a comfortable ambiguity between representation and tangible object.

Like Owen, **Caleb Shea's** work can be understood as relating to Russian Constructivism in his use of industrial materials and clean geometries, while also tapping into formalist abstraction of the 1960s. In *Untitled (Sparkled Magenta)* and *Untitled (Sparkled Dark Claw)* (both 2016), Shea continues his formal investigations into abstraction – and specifically line, form and colour – with a pair



of complementary, angular steel sculptures. Grounded without plinths in the gallery, his solid yet elegant formations appear to converse in space, activating internal and inter-sculptural fields of energy.

To date, many of Shea's steel sculptures have adopted colours bearing a strong reference to modernism, such as red, blue and yellow. In these works Shea deviates from the modernist spectrum and applies a bright magenta and dark brownblack. Glittering and metallic, his paints enable a lighter, more playful reading of the hardwearing objects. Tempted to anthropomorphise his dynamic forms, the trained observer will trace lines, curves and folds only to be thrown off course at each turn. For Shea, it is during the art-making process that he intuitively aims to jolt the viewer's sense of anticipation and perceptual habits; the moment the artist begins to identify something familiar, he reconsiders the sculptural route and takes us somewhere else.

Blending formal concerns with a more idiosyncratic and expressive touch, the artists of *In the White Square* transport us outside the metaphorical white cube and into the colourful realm of abstraction. In their creative experiments they exercise play and improvisation to forge new visual connections and interrogate ingrained systems of perception. At times stirring sensation through a dexterous manipulation of compositional elements, their works elicit an emotional as well as intellectual response. During a recent conversation on the subject, Robert Owen eloquently noted: "Training the eye is one thing but training the soul in this age is much, much harder."4 As these contemporary artists each refer to abstraction's past, they remind us of the enduring potential of pure abstraction to connect sight with experience and feeling as it evolves into the 21st century.

Laura Lantieri

NOTES

- 1. Malevich, K., *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, Mineola, New York Dover Publications, 2003, p. 67.
- 2. Borlase, N., 'Painterly quality', Arts in the Galleries, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1979.
- 3. Art Gallery of NSW, 'Light Throw (Mirrors) #1 by Jacky Redgate: The Collection: Art Gallery NSW': https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/332.2011/?tab=about [accessed 14 November 2016]
- 4. Robert Owen, in conversation with the author, 22 November 2016.



COVER IMAGE

ROBERT OWEN, Burano pink & grey wall, 1978, inkjet print on Canson Infinity 310gsm cotton rag paper, 72 x 47 cm

INSIDE FOLD

LYDIA WEGNER, Blue Haze, Blue Cross, Blue Cut, 2016, archival inkjet prints, black frames, 95 x 64 cm [each]

INSIDE SPREAD (Top to bottom)

ROBERT OWEN, Burano street #2, 1978, inkjet print on Canson Infinity 310gsm cotton rag paper, $47 \times 72 \text{ cm}$ JACKY REDGATE, Light Throw (Mirrors) Fold - Yellow, 2016, chromogenic photograph (handprinted Sandyprints), $104 \times 130 \text{ cm}$ GEMMA SMITH, Boulder #8 (block), 2011, acrylic, $48 \times 72 \times 38 \text{ cm}$

GEMMA SMITH, *Multi Coloured Adaptable*, 2008, acrylic on plywood, polyester, installed dimensions variable CALEB SHEA, *Untitled (Sparkled Magenta)*, 2016, stainless steel, polyurethane paint, $223 \times 96 \times 80 \text{ cm}$

BACK COVER

CALEB SHEA, Untitled (Sparkled Dark Claw), 2016, stainless steel, polyurethane paint, 71 x 92 x 66 cm

Robert Owen, Jacky Redgate & Lydia Wegner are represented by ARC ONE Gallery. Caleb Shea is a Melbourne-based artist. Gemma Smith is represented by Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney & Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

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