

Of Colour and Light: Victorian Women Abstract Artists Biennial 2020

West End Arts Space

Curated by Anna Prifti

Abstraction: The body politic.

Abstraction has formed its own tradition. Its broad interpretation means that abstraction cannot be restricted to a formula, nor can it be thought of as conforming to convention. Abstraction can acknowledge or represent its precedents, its series, its material and its concept or inspiration. As an artistic and intellectual practice it can be a vehicle for irreverence, eccentricity, sensuality, politics or emotion. Within its processes and the continual experimentation with chaos and order, it can be endless, and for the practitioner it brings enormous challenges in the quest to centre that which continues to be elusive.

There are two possible Latin origins to the term abstraction; *abstrahere*; to withdraw, or *abstractus*, meaning to draw from. Art history has called the abstract art of the past century many things, not all of them favourable. A few examples are 'non-objective', 'non-figurative', 'non-mimetic'¹, 'non-representational', 'non-depiction', 'imageless abstraction' 'reductive abstraction' and more. This list consists of terms that are negative, with 'less' and 'non' used descriptively and prescriptively. It is 'not figurative, not narrative, not illusionist, not literary'² and not illustrative. As Varndoe notes, the odd part is that 'the few positive terms we might give to it, such as "geometric" "abstract," or "rational," were [previously] rejected by the artists.'³

Abstraction has on occasion created a sense of confrontation, scandal, even hostility. It is complex and has the ability to achieve a variety of expressive effects. The emotion that can be 'read' or communicated from non-objective work can be as great as, or greater than, that

¹ Stephen James Newton, *Painting, Psychoanalysis and Spirituality*, 2001 ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). 92

² Frances Colpitt, *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century, Contemporary Artists and Their Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). 154

³ Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art since Pollock*, 1st ed. (Washington: Princetown University Press, 2006). 97

of the allegorical or narrative driven figurative genre. It can be a site to be revisited and re-interpreted. Equally, the term abstraction, as we use it, is difficult to define; it is elastic in meaning, which is an oddity that places abstraction at an advantage.

As a genre, abstraction has been with us for just over 100 years, however, it was as long ago as Plato that an alternative to figuration was muted. Here could be a way of working that did not tell a story, would communicate non-verbally, was adaptable, and by exploring it within a serial method, ongoing. It can incorporate personal experiences such as music, literature, elements of nature, as well as the materiality and tactility of medium, all of which play a considerable role in the evolving processes of the work.

Contemporaneously however, abstraction has a bumpy ride. Superficially it can be aligned with interior decorating, and, as patently explained to me recently, it can be overshadowed by the 'quick fix' of figurative work. The viewer is denied the instant gratification of ease of entry to a work through allegory, story or saga. I do not refute the fact that a conversation or discourse can occur between abstract works, particularly when works are presented in concert or series, but it is a very different way of seeing to the cinematic or direct story telling.

Abstraction has the ability to 'be its own subject, in its own world, one that reveals itself slowly over time and may not look exactly the same to us from one day to the next.'⁴

Abstraction has not vanished, as has been so often predicted, but has survived. It can create a strong emotive response and an intense non-verbal communication experience.

Due to its modernist referencing, abstraction has been connected to a striving for purity, an absolutism, spirituality or rebellion. It is my contention that abstraction has countered its earlier influences and is thereby now able to incorporate a sense of impurity, as well as to question its past role of perceived spirituality. From the conceptual ground work and processes, to the choice and the innovations in methods of working and choice of media, abstraction's freedom of interpretation has led to the development of a broader invention.

⁴ Nickas, *Painting Abstraction : New Elements in Abstract Painting*. 7

Umberto Eco in his book *On Beauty* states that 'art has discovered the value and fecundity of material'⁵.

There is a firm relationship between the medium artists use to create their work, the method of using the medium and the impact of it on the resulting work. The process can be so structurally inherent that it becomes part of, and is critical to, the completed work. It remains apparent. 'What takes place during the development of the process should remain visible in the end result.'⁶ This does not mean that all interpretations have been successful, nor does it negate that moment of 'magic' when, through invention and medium, the 'image' or surface of the work becomes something other than itself; that is to say, the point where a painting goes beyond the concept to become a unified whole.

This exhibition celebrates the work of Victorian women who are exploring abstraction as a visual language. Given the habitual under-representation of women artists' generally within the multi pronged art market, and the difficulties that face an abstract artist in the 'quick fix' entertainment driven climate currently, it must be acknowledged that the exploration and development of their chosen genre takes great strength, focus and determination.

I wish to claim a positive place for abstraction contemporaneously. There are a large number of artists continuing to work in the area and the methods of expression are broad, rich, complex and passionate. They demonstrate an ongoing commitment to abstraction as a continual visual language. It is still the sum total of all its antecedents as it reinvents itself to concerns of 21st Century. I feel it is important and relevant to be able to give abstraction its due cognisance.

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⁵ Umberto Eco and Alastair McEwen, *On Beauty* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2004). 401

⁶ Peter Olpe, *Drawing as Design Process* (Liechtenstein: Verlag Niggli AG, 1997). 4