Sydney College of the Arts
The University of Sydney

MASTER OF VISUAL ARTS
2004
RESEARCH PAPER

COLOUR, IMMATERIALITY & UNCERTAINTY IN PAINTING

by
Elizabeth Wheeler
Painting

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Statement

This volume is presented as record of the work undertaken for the Degree of Master of Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts.

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Summary

Description of Studio Work

The work submitted for examination comprises a painting which is the culmination of two years of studio research. The research has focused on exploring the relationship of colour and form, using a diverse palette and several geometrical shapes: rectangles, squares, circles and triangles. The media employed is acrylic and oil on canvas. The examination is to be held on 15th December 2004 at Sydney College of the Arts.

Abstract of Research Paper

The objective of the research paper is to explore the theoretical concerns raised in the studio work. The paper discusses concerns such as colour activity and perception; the interdependence of the material and the immaterial in painting; and the uncertainty inherent in the process of painting and how that relates to wider experiences of uncertainty. The discussion focuses on the practice of artists who engage with such concerns, comparing and highlighting commonalities in their work, the objective being to articulate the central concerns of my own practice and in doing so, position it within the discourse of contemporary painting.

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Introduction

The working title of this project was "Revelations". The intention was to explore the potential of the minimalist aesthetic to articulate the immaterial through the strategy of concealment, as well as the antinomies present in painting. However, the development of the project has revealed more than anticipated: the concurrent research through studio practice and study of other contemporary artists and theories has evolved the project in an unforeseeable, though coherent, manner.

Over the course of the project, my studio practice has undergone an aesthetically dramatic shift. The move from working with modified gesso, diluted watercolours and a layering technique, towards brightly coloured and highly contrasting acrylics, and later oils, shifted the emphasis of investigation from minimalism and the strategy of concealment to geometric abstraction and colour field theory. Discovering new materials and methodologies required me to cast all previous working practices into doubt. As this new body of work has developed, my research has focused on creating and understanding the recent work, to enable me to draw the links between the current and previous bodies of work and thereby reach a greater comprehension of the central concerns of my practice.

Figure 1
Elizabeth Wheeler, "Untitled" 2002, watercolour & gesso on canvas, 140x140cm

Untitled, 2002 was created through a process of layering diluted watercolour with a modified and coloured gesso. Sanding at various stages of the layering process revealed sections and shadows of what lay below the topmost layer, hinting at what was beneath rather than uncovering it. This act of concealment, which counteracts a narrative structure, operates to evoke rather than articulate meaning in the painting. As that which has been concealed remains elusive to the eye, meaning is revealed to the viewer through sensory awareness in addition to the sense of sight; therefore a painting that contains an act of concealment can operate at a more experiential, rather than theoretical, level, necessitating a subjective rather than definitive understanding of the painting. As each viewer brings an individual response to the painting, it thus contains many stories rather than a single narrative.

The dependence on an experiential understanding of painting was implicit to a growing attraction to colour. *Random Adventure II, 2003* was an investigation into the relationship between structure and uncertainty. A process-based methodology, whereby the placement of a colour was dependent on the placement of the previous colour, provided a structure which interacted with the uncertainty and subjectivity of colour definition and experience. Further, such a restricted structure allowed for the expression of the accident: a natural, though unpredictable, consequence of the process.

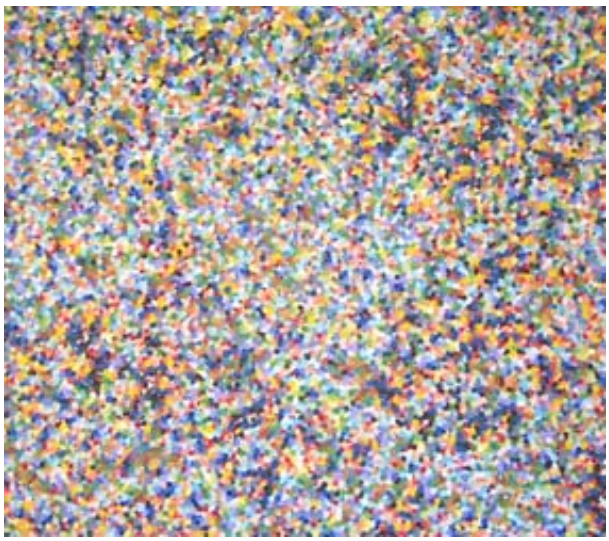

Figure 2
Elizabeth Wheeler, "Random Adventure II" 2003, 140x160cm acrylic on canvas

I began to research the implications of colour use in the picture plane and how a painting based on colour organisation can be understood and experienced. The fascination of the unpredictable outcomes of concealment, produced by layering, covering and uncovering, was paralleled in the indefinite and relational nature of colour experience. Chapter One of this paper investigates the theories surrounding the nature and indeterminacy of colour experience. The focus of the discussion in this chapter is the work of Bridget Riley and of Melinda Harper. Both these painters work with a palette of many colours, using colour to construct spaces within the picture plane that can only be understood experientially, rather than through logic or theory.

Concealment works at a transgressive level, creating intrigue and simultaneously expressing paradox: the concept that meaning can be articulated through non-disclosure is contradictory. Similarly, the expression of the immaterial in a painting presents a paradox to the viewer. That the explicit materiality of a painting can be the vehicle of expression for the perception of the immaterial appears inconsistent with an understanding of the polarity of the two terms. Yet this polarity contradicts an experiential understanding of a painting, which reveals an interdependence of the material and the immaterial in the experience of viewing.

The traditions and methods through which a painting, a fundamentally material object, can allude to emotional and spiritual experience are mapped in Chapter Two

of this paper. The investigation begins with the work of Brice Marden, who makes literal references to emotional and spiritual experiences through the titles of his abstract paintings. The discussion extends to the practices of Agnes Martin and Bridget Riley, which, while aesthetically dissimilar, both evoke the immaterial through the sensory experience of viewing the paintings alone, rather than through a combination of viewing experience and titular reference.

The process of painting *Opening Doors, 2004* was one of constant anticipation, as the spaces described within the painting weren't revealed until the field was fully saturated. The lack of control implicit in such a methodology, even while working to a predetermined process, expresses the joy of surprise, evoking emotions and experiences that cannot be pre-planned. As a consequence, such a practice negotiates the tension between certainty and uncertainty, relying on an interdependent relationship between the two for the outcome of each painting.

Figure 3
Elizabeth Wheeler, "Opening Doors" 2004, acrylic and oil on canvas, 160x200cm

Chapter Three examines the practice of painting as it engages with the issues surrounding certainty and uncertainty. The discussion focuses on the work of Colin McCahon and how the uncertainties in his life were expressed through his paintings, both in visual content and subject matter. McCahon's journey towards a black and white palette, and his move from the illusions of pictorial space to text-

only work, is followed. This journey is characterised by a constant search for certainty and stability, while also documenting McCahon's personal and spiritual doubts. With a remarkably similar intention, the abstract practice of Bridget Riley began with a black and white palette, as an attempt to communicate certainty and stability. However in contrast to McCahon, Riley moved away from this, ultimately embracing the inherent instability of the elements with which she worked and adopting the essential uncertainty of a coloured palette.

Colour

Colour: *1. a phenomenon of light (as red, brown, pink, or gray) or visual perception that enables one to differentiate otherwise identical objects*

2. vitality; interest

3. an outward often deceptive show

Etymology: Middle English colour, from Old French, from Latin color; akin to Latin celare to conceal[1]

How does colour function within a painting? Further, how can colour be used as an organisational element in a painting and how does this affect the viewing process? Judith Pascal, in a discussion of the work of Melinda Harper in 1994, claimed:

> One of the most powerful arguments in favour of abstract painting is that it presents us with opportunities to experience the act of looking in its purest form: our unexplained feelings of elation on seeing a particular combination of colour in the flow of daily life given a permanent form independent of the visual description of objects.[2]

The assertion is that colour combinations are experienced more fully in abstract painting, as colour is released from the forms and organisation of object representation.

Such a polarised position for abstract painting as that claimed by Pascal seems to preclude the possibility of fundamental similarities in the experience of colour in any painting. However, colour is an organisational element of all painting. Bridget Riley writes that colour activity is essential to the construction and experience of an image, whether it is abstract, representational or otherwise. She describes the functioning of colour in the representational painting of the Renaissance period as independent of the overall perspective schema: as soon as a form is coloured, its position in pictorial space can shift. Consequently a form in the background can

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[1] Merriam Webster Online, http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=color, 15th September, 2004

[2] Pascal, Judith, "Harper", Melinda Harper - an installation of paintings, exhibition catalogue, David Prestons Gallery, Brisbane, 1994

suddenly shift to the foreground with the application of a colour.[3] For painters working within the Renaissance tradition a constant tension exists between perspectival structure and colour; the indeterminate and experiential nature of colour operating independently of the dominant system of perspective, which is determinate and mathematically derived. To render the forms of objects, colour activity must necessarily be understood well enough that it can be made secondary to the overall perspectival structure of the painting.

The inversion of this tension between colour and structure is where colour activity is given dominance as the primary organising element of a painting. As with the paintings of the Impressionist artists, this organisational methodology opens up a different experience of looking at a painting. Bridget Riley notes:

> It was the Impressionists who in their different ways took the form and space that colour makes as the determining factor in organising a painting … Monet's paintings are structured … according to a different perceptual experience. Monet seems to paint what we actually experience in looking, the drifting and gathering of sight itself.[4]

According to Riley, the experience of viewing a painting structured primarily according to colour relationships, such as a work by Monet, is more akin to the act of looking, an act of the senses subject to change and circumstance. The fleeting effects created in the painting, a static object, are created through the indeterminate and relational nature of colour.

Such a method of painting and viewing experience is fundamentally unpredictable. Nevertheless, the urge to systematise and predetermine colour experience has provided the material for much artistic and scientific study. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colour was studied, theorised and scientifically examined; colour-theories abounded for the formulae of colour experience. The culmination of such study was to be the development of a colour-language that would divorce painting from its ties with nature and create a purely abstract experience of painting. The desire for the separation of art and nature is

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[3] Riley, Bridget, quoted in "The Experience of Painting", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 121

[4] *Ibid.,* p. 121

seen in the writing of the Suprematist Ivan Klyun, who wrote in 1919: '… our colour-compositions are subject only to the laws of colour and not to the laws of nature.'[5]

However, there existed at the same time arguments against such aspirations. Writing at the same time as Klyun, the German painter Adolf Hoelzel, reasoned that:

> … the eye must be the final arbiter and art and science could never be equal partners in the study of colour … the instability of colour-values in various concrete situations, modified by the activity of the eye, was one reason why the art of children and primitive peoples often seemed so much more original and harmonious than the calculated harmonies of the scientists.[6]

While abstraction may free colour from nature in the form and organisational structures of representation, Hoelzel maintains that colour is fundamentally linked to nature in the form of the physiology involved in the experience of colour.

One impetus behind the theoretical analysis of colour lay with the notion that all nature could be empirically understood, and further, that empirical study provided a reliable knowledge source that sensory perception could not offer. Charles Biederman noted in the 1950's that such tremendous scientific discoveries were made at the beginning of the 19th Century into the composition of nature, that optical appearances were considered to mask the true reality of nature. Sensory perception was viewed as inadequate; knowledge of reality could only be achieved through the empirical methods of science.[7]

The premise that the senses are inadequate is contested by Bridget Riley, who instead argues that it is theoretical analysis which cannot provide a full understanding of reality. She writes of colour theory:

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[5] Klyun, Ivan, quoted in Gage, John, Colour and Meaning (Thames and Hudson Ltd: Singapore, 1999) p.248

[6] Gage, John, Colour & Culture (Thames & Hudson Ltd: Singapore, 1993) pp.259 - 260

[7] Biederman, Charles, "The Real and the Mystic in Art and Science (1956-59)" Theories and documents of contemporary art: a sourcebook of artists' writings, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 82

> I think there is a naïve and widespread misunderstanding about theories of colour. Take the colour circle, or rather the function of the colour circle: it is a purely theoretical concept existing in the mind but not in our actual experience. Nobody can ever paint it out 'correctly' because the moment one tries to visualise what has been proved by optical experiment you get involved with pigment – and all the scientific purity is lost … once you get involved with colour reality you are immediately faced with an immense range of variables which govern your vision. These cannot be isolated without distorting the facts of sight.[8]

For Riley, reality is interdependently linked with the variables that govern sensory perception; attempted separation provides a distorted view of reality.

Riley describes her painting as being inspired by the experience of all-encompassing sensation. As a painter, she describes this experience through a language that is visual and, understandably, her descriptions of natural phenomena are generally visual analyses and descriptions of the experience of the whole body within the world. She writes in her text "The Pleasures of Sight" of many experiences from her childhood in Cornwall, describing in detail the delight of the unplanned observations that she would make, for example:

> Taking dawn-walks over the cliffs when one's footsteps left a curiously flat heavy green mark in the pearly turquoise of the dew.[9]

and

> Delving into the minute grey and yellow world of the lichens, which encrust rocks and stems of trees like the work of the finest gold- and silver-smiths, setting off the sudden green of a patch of moss.[10]

Similar to Riley's richly hued paintings, her childhood experiences are colour-full. Each experience is conveyed to the reader through adjective- and simile-rich language in which colour plays a prominent role in the descriptive process. Each

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[8] Riley, Bridget, "Into Colour – in conversation with Robert Kudielka (1978)" The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 101
[9] Riley, Bridget "The Pleasures of Sight" The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 30
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 30, 32

encounter is an analysis of the dynamics of colour relationships in the natural world.

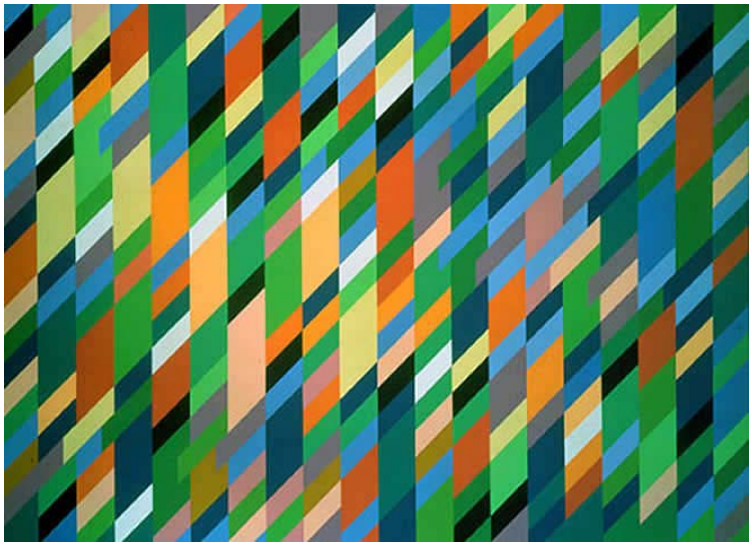

Figure 4
Bridget Riley, "High Sky 2" 1992, oil on linen, 165x228cm, Neuse Museum, Nuremberg, gift of Dr Karl Gerhard Schmidt

In Riley's painting *High Sky 2,* the viewer is presented with a sight of suspended animation. Light, dark and mid-tone parallelograms occupy numerous positions in illusory space, appearing to possess no weight. Dark greens vie with white for foreground space though no such space is definitely occupied. Clusters of blue move diagonally upwards, however such direction is counter-weighted by groups of orange verticals. The overall movement of the painting towards the top right-hand corner is balanced by the pull of the lighter-toned shapes towards the bottom left-hand corner.

The painting describes a space which is operating beyond the laws of nature. There is no sense of a gravitational force or a single illumination source; the surface sparkles with many degrees of light, both in the sense of illumination and of weight. The space is 'unreal'; it cannot be understand through theory, it can only been known through the experience of looking.

Significantly, and despite consistently referencing nature as inspiration, Riley draws a distinction between colour activity in nature and colour activity in painting.

Colour in painting, she says, instead of being intrinsically associated with objects in real time and space as it is in nature, becomes an autonomous entity and the main determinant in the construction of a painting:

> In the real world one generally identifies things, and colour is seen as related to them, as the colour of leaves, atmosphere, earth, water, skin, clothes, silk or satin, etc. But in painting colour is the one material through which everything is brought into existence; there is no other underpinning except the surface of the canvas ... Colour activity is incomparably stronger in painting than in external reality.[11]

Although many painters rely on other qualities of paint, such as its viscosity or its tactile qualities as a basis for the construction for their paintings, this statement does make clear that the focus of Riley's practice is to explore painting as it relates to sight alone and to engage the viewer in a purely visual way. Riley's paintings attest to this; the surface is flat, matte and precisely painted. Any sign of the "artist's hand" has been removed; in fact the painting is performed by an assistant rather than Riley herself. The material qualities of the paint are downplayed to the extent that only the colour is apparent to the viewer and the only relationships in existence are between the colours themselves.

Riley's descriptions of childhood experiences of nature reveal her as an acute observer, one who not only recognises but also analyses visual nuances in the everyday. Riley's writing is painterly in content and style and reveals the mind of a painter. It is interesting to speculate on how much of the visual analysis of childhood experiences occurred at the time of the experience and how much is retrospective, subsequent to a lifetime of painting practice. Speculation aside, however, Riley shows through this piece of writing how an early intuitive appreciation of colour dynamics has developed a parallel, experience-based knowledge of the same.

Riley concludes her list of descriptions of pleasurable sight-experiences by drawing a common connection between each: that they are unexpected and take one by

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[11] Riley, Bridget, quoted in "The Experience of Painting", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 121

surprise.[12] Riley's practice centres on the translation of such experience onto canvas; working against the familiar and the unsurprising; instead the indefinite and relational characteristics of colour form the basis of her practice.

The exciting aspect of colour is, according to Joseph Albers, its instability in various situations, which is then further modified by the subjectivity of the viewer. He writes:

> … colour is changing continually: with changing light, with changing shape and placement, and with quantity which denotes either amount (a real extension) or number (recurrence). And just as influential are changes in perception depending on changes in mood, and consequently of receptiveness. All this will make [us] aware of an exciting discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect of colour.[13]

The unpredictability of colour, together with the subjective process involved in gaining an understanding of it, provides its fascination. Further, the experience of colour is a whole body experience; knowledge of colour is provided by senses beyond sight alone, as well as through the mood and receptivity of the viewer.

Though concerned with visual communication, Riley describes the experience of looking at her paintings as being more than visual, stating that sight is the trigger for the experience of the other sensations contained within the space of the painting. She says:

> The colours in my paintings should engage the eye, give you something to look at, and in time, through ordered looking … you may become involved in an experience that is not just visual. The paintings offer, each through its different character, a space which invites and accommodates a certain group of sensations – and it is *there* the content can come through.[14]

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[12] *ibid.,* p. 32

[13] Albers, Josef, "The Color in My Paintings" (1964), Theories and documents of contemporary art : a sourcebook of artists' writings , ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996), p. 108

[14] Riley, Bridget, "Something to Look At - in conversation with Alex Farquharson (1995)", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 134

The content of the painting holds an individual range of sensory experience that is accessed by each individual viewer through the sense of sight.

Direct sensory perception is, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the primary way in which we gain knowledge of a work of art. Knowledge is not gained through intellectual identification or processing, as Richard Shiff notes:

> Merleau-Ponty wanted to counter interpretations that derived the meaning of an artist's life and work from fixed ideological and psychological conditions – from life regarded as if formed independent of one's moving sensory perception.[15]

For Merleau-Ponty, a painting offers a way of seeing that renders our experience of existence visible, as Maria Fera explains:

> The painting is a *visible* that proffers a quasi-presence or immanent visibility of the thing. Merleau-Ponty tells us it is more accurate to say that we are seeing according to it, or with it, rather than we *see it*. Painting renders visible the flesh or truth of our being-in-the-world. As the art of and through vision, it uniquely reveals to us our hidden handling of experience and constitutes the paradigm expression of *le corps vécu* – the *lived body*.[16]

Riley supports the idea that art expresses the experience of our being-in-the-world. She said in an interview in 1990:

> It is simply not enough to operate from the closed world of a specialised ideal. If a painting is to be a work, a work that aspires to the condition of art, it is obliged to express the tenor of existence … Art has to be expressive of the urgency and failure, love and inadequacy that drive human endeavour.[17]

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[15] Shiff, Richard, "Bridget Riley: The Edge of Animation", Bridget Riley ed. Paul Moorehouse, (Tate Publishing: London, 2003) p. 84
[16] Fera, Maria, "Cézanne and Merleau-Ponty" Perception, Language, Being", The Structurist, Number 19/20, 1797/1980, p. 75
[17] Riley, Bridget, quoted in "According to Sensation – in conversation with Robert Kudielka (1990)", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 120

Painting, being a physical object in space and constructed using a visual language, must be approached in a physical, sensory way and the content of the painting then emerges as a secondary phenomenon. The senses are of primary importance, the sense of sight operating in interdependence with the other senses to provide the viewer with knowledge of a painting.

The unpredictability and momentary nature of the act of looking is opened up in the paintings of Melinda Harper. Using colour as a key organisational element, changeable spaces are constructed within the picture plane. Ben Curnow wrote in 1998 of Harper's paintings:

> The sense of imaginary space in Melinda Harper's paintings emerges in time from the visual activity of looking 'into' them, rather than from the illusion of depth. The longer one looks, the more it is there; a space made out of time and colour. There is no light or shade, no inside or outside, only intensities. Disparate colours compose the surface piece by piece, in blocks and bands, 'advancing' and 'receding', as they do, but not departing from the surface, and never just merging into a continuum. Each and every chromatic nuance or mixture seems to possess its own being, its own force, its own space; its own charm.[18]

The space in Harper's paintings is not created through perspective or illusion, but rather through the organisation of colour. The space is experienced through sensory perception, through looking.

Melinda Harper's *Untitled, 1999* contains a range of sense experiences, which shift within the time of viewing. Overall, it is expressive of a sharp, up-thrusting energy. The high tonal contrast between the black and white areas (the white areas are always positioned adjacent to a black area) creates a tension within the image, as well as space created by colour activity. It is within the depth of this seemingly three-dimensional framework that the other colours are located. The orange areas are shorter rectangles; some are almost square. The orange areas are linked visually in horizontal sequences, whereas the blue, white and black areas are predominantly

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[18] Curnow, Ben, http://www.contemporaryart.com.au/harper/harpertext.htm#94, 31st August 2004

long, vertical and rectangular shapes that dominate the image and construct the verticality of its energy.

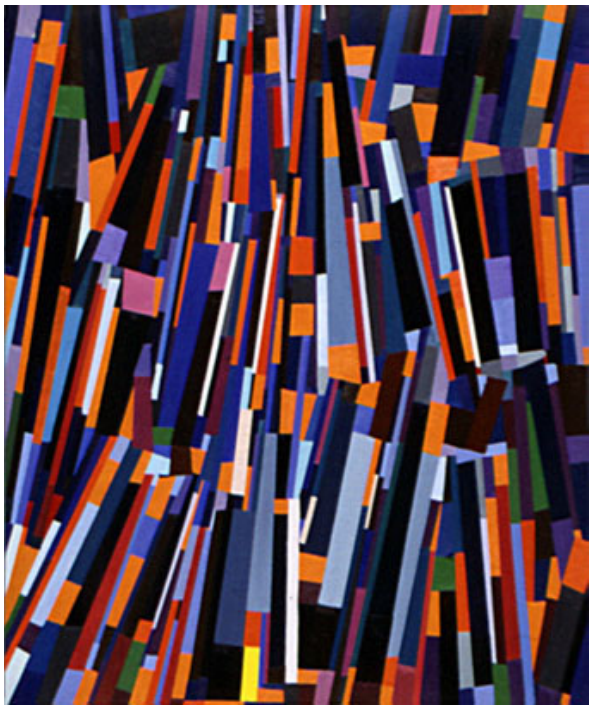

Figure 5
Melinda Harper, "Untitled" 1999, oil on canvas, 122x102cm, private collection

When the eye is following the oranges it dances sideways in a slightly zigzagging motion, moving downwards until it reaches the bottom-most band of orange. This band loops across the bottom of the canvas in a curve and forces the eye back into the centre of the image. When the eye picks up on the white areas, they leap forward towards the viewer, out of the canvas, forming a triangular or pyramid-like structure inside bans of other colours interact.

The mood of the painting is dark, of high contrasts, of discord. The spaces described in the image operate against the rules of gravity. Black is pitted against white, blue against orange; there are small areas of green and also of mauve. There is one lone patch of canary yellow. This sits at the centre of the base of the white triangle, locating the origin of the upward energy of the painting. The painting does not move in a downwardly direction, the eye is consistently caught and forced back upwards each time it attempts to slip downwards. The only path downwards is along the orange zigzags, yet this brings the eye to the base of the triangle where it is shot straight to the point at the top of the canvas again.

Harper's powerfully colourful paintings are dazzling in an optical sense; yet they simultaneously exert a physical presence that can be felt within the body, not just the eye. The paintings "take place" in the space between the canvas and the viewer: the colour and the viscosity of the paint reach out from the wall, surrounding and embracing the viewer. The coincident physical presence of the painting and the viewer creates the otherwise unseen spatial dimensions and completes the experience of the painting as an interdependently visual and bodily action.[19]

Ben Curnow describes this experience of viewing Harper's work as one of a particular consciousness which he aligns with fundamental, or pre-rational awareness:

> Experience in this sense (as a condition of fundamental awareness) is precisely that kind of consciousness which has been idealised in the context of aesthetics, and which can be distinguished to a degree from 'reason' or 'knowledge'. Nourished as it is by the present moment, it must consist in a process whereby the rational mind's 'prejudices' continually take second place to fresh observations. And the chromatic universe, with its presumable infinity of variation, quite naturally serves as a symbol of subjective immediacy.[20]

Natalie King similarly describes Harper's use of colour, claiming that the colour in Harper's paintings is a translation of instinctual or physiological drives.[21]

Painting provides access to the consciousness of fundamental awareness through the sense of sight. Riley writes of how she hopes her paintings interact with the viewer:

> More than anything else, I want my paintings to exist on their own terms. That is to say they must stealthily engage and disarm you. There the paintings hang, deceptively simple – telling no tales as it were – resisting in a well-behaved way, all attempts to be questioned, probed or

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[19] Fera, Maria, *op. cit.*,, p.74
[20] Curnow, Ben, "Of Innocence and Experience The Paintings of Melinda Harper", Art & Australia, vol.33, no.2, Summer 1995, p.206-207
[21] King, Natalie, "Melinda Harper", Art & Text, no. 44, Jan.1993, p.80

> stared at and then, for those with open eyes, serenely disclosing some intimations of the splendours to which pure sight alone has the key.[22]

Sight is the means through which sensory experience can be accessed and painting that is organised by colour renders this experience open to sight.

[22] Riley, Bridget "The Pleasures of Sight" The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 34

Immateriality

Immaterial: *1. Not formed of matter; spiritual*

2. Of no real importance; inconsequential[23]

Material *1. Of or concerned with the physical as distinct from the intellectual or spiritual*

2. Being both relevant and consequential; crucial

3. Something, such as an idea or information, that is to be refined and made or incorporated into a finished effort[24]

What range of experience can be accessed through painting? If painting can describe space which operates beyond physical laws, does it have the potential to realize the conjuncture of the immaterial and material?

Painting has the ability to describe opposites in the same space and at the same moment, as a painting relies on oppositions and relationships in composition to construct visual interest. However, further to this, the historical location of painting is at the conjunction between the spiritual or emotional and the material, rendering it a description or emanation of things mysterious. The medium of painting allows this conjuncture and is the means through which it is experienced, rendering the immaterial in a visible and therefore tangible way, as Robert Motherwell writes:

> It is the medium, or the specific configuration of the medium that we call a work of art that brings feeling into being, just as do the responses to the objects of the external world … the most common error … nowadays is to mistake the medium for an end in itself, instead of a means.[25]

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[23] The Collins Australian Pocket Dictionary, ed. Krebs, W.A., (Australia: William Collins & Sons Ltd, 1989), p. 411

[24] The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=material, 17/08/04

[25] Motherwell, Robert, "Beyond the Aesthetic (1946)", Theories and documents of contemporary art : a sourcebook of artists' writings , ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996), p. 27

However, as it is the medium through which the immaterial subjects of painting are experienced, is it possible to separate the means from the end? Is not the vehicle of expression, the material, interdependent to the purpose for the expression, the immaterial? Painting need not be homogeneous in nature; it can and does possess an inherently, and paradoxically, dualistic structure.

Margaret Wertheim argues in her book The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace, that the development of a mathematical system of mapping space, or linear perspective, precipitated a scientific revolution which changed the general understanding of the universe from a dualistic model, which consisted of a physical and a spiritual order, to a homogenous model in which the whole of "reality" is understood as physical space. In this scientific conception of reality, she claims there is no conceptual space for the immaterial, as:

> In this vision painted by modern science, the physical world is the totality of reality because within this vision physical space extends *infinitely* in all directions, taking up *all* available, and even conceivable territory.[26]

Wertheim reasons that a reality comprised solely of physical bodies within Euclidean space precludes the accommodation of God. Further, such a sterile space cannot accommodate humans themselves: humans who have emotions, cares and longings.[27] The limitation of such an understanding of the universe is that it ignores the existence of the immaterial, not recognizing the interdependent relationship that the spiritual and emotional realms have with the physical.

Despite this historically significant philosophical shift to the concept of a purely physical reality, the tradition of painting has continued to negotiate the emotional and spiritual connection with the physical material of paint, describing a space which is concurrently material and immaterial. This is how, centuries later, Robert Motherwell can write that it is the medium of art that brings feeling into being.[28]

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[26] Wertheim, Margaret, The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace, Australia: Random House Australia Pty Ltd, 1999, p. 33
[27] *Ibid.*, p.119
[28] Motherwell, Robert, *op. cit.*, p. 27

Brice Marden speaks of the immaterial space produced by the material presence of a painting, writing:

> Painting creates a space on a wall. That space is the vision of the painter. The painter strives to make his expression explicit because he wants to affect man. By so doing he works to keep man's spirit alive.[29]

For Marden, the physical configuration of a painting provides a structure which is resonant with the emotions and spirit; he states:

> The rectangle, the plane, the structure, the picture are but sounding boards for a spirit.[30]

That Marden references the spiritually and emotionally expressive qualities of painting in his work is most easily recognized in his *Annunciation* series. The paintings in this series not only refer to the biblical narrative, they also refer to the history of the painting of this narrative (Botticelli and Piero della Francesca, for example, both executed paintings in the same theme) and the traditional devotions surrounding the narrative. The series is composed of five paintings, each bearing a title derived from the 15th century formulation of Mary's emotional response to the Angel Gabriel: Contubatio (disquiet), Cogitatio (reflection), Interrogatio (inquiry), Humiliatio (submission) and Meritatio (merit). [31]

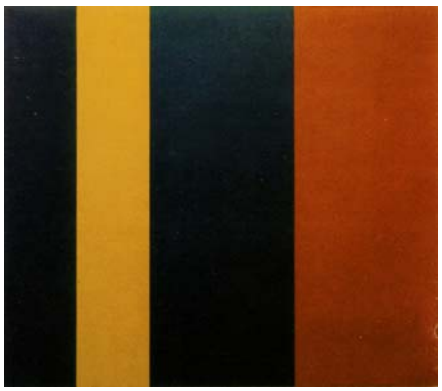

Figure 6
Brice Marden, "Conturbatio" (Disquiet), 1978, oil and wax on canvas, 84"x96", The Pace Gallery, New York

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[29] Marden, Brice, "Statements, Notes and Interviews (1963-81)", Theories and documents of contemporary art: a sourcebook of artists' writings , ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996), p. 139
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 139
[31] Stephen Bann, "Brice Marden: From the Immaterial to the Material" in Nicholas Serota (ed), Brice Marden: Paintings, Drawings and Prints 1975-80, London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1981, p.10

Marden, using a mixture of wax and oil paint, builds the depth and nuance of colour and the sensation of surface in each panel. Each painting is a subtle variation of colour combinations, presenting the viewer with Marden's physical interpretation of the various emotional responses evoked by the titles of the works. Stephen Bann, in his analysis of these paintings, argues that the traditions that are referenced by Marden in this series shape our approach to, and understanding of, these works in particular and of painting in the broader sense, encompassing the cult surrounding the uniqueness of the work of art. He reasons:

> Would it not be relevant to point out that the Annunciation signifies, not simply a type of iconography or a particular formal scheme, but the incarnation of the spirit in the material world.[32]

This painting then is, in concept and content, a conjuncture between the material and the immaterial, containing seemingly contradictory elements at the same time.

The literary parallel to this function of painting is that of the myth. From a structuralist viewpoint, a myth is an endless struggle to overcome contradictions and the narrative of the myth conceals or represses the seemingly contradictory elements with which it is composed. These contradictions are, commonly, the co-incidence between the supernatural and the natural world. According to the analysis of Levi Strauss, the meaning of a myth lies below the narrative surface.[33] This being the case, the meaning of a myth lies in the coexistence of contradictions, especially the coexistence of the material and the immaterial; the narrative structure of the myth, the method of concealment, is the vehicle of this meaning.

One example of a motif in painting that possesses a mythic structure, in which the seemingly contradictory elements of materiality and immateriality coexist, is the grid. Rosalind Krauss, in her essay "Grids, You Say", discusses the function of the grid in modern art, arguing that the grid functions in the same way as the myth, and moreover, that it embodies material and spiritual dimensions concurrently. She says:

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32 *ibid.,* p.11

33 Bullock, Alan & Trombley, Stephen (ed), The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999, p.555

> In the cultist space of modern art, the grid serves not only as an emblem, but also as a myth. For like all myths, it deals with paradox or contradiction not by dissolving the paradox or resolving the contradiction, but by covering them over so that they seem (but only seem) to go away. The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).[34]

Further, as it makes no literal reference to a spiritual realm, the grid can function on an even more mysterious or repressed level than biblical iconography.[35]

The grid provides this paradoxical juncture by opening the dialectic to a perception beyond the limits of a materialism-based system of understanding, while seemingly grounded firmly and solely in the realm of the material. Krauss argues for this appearance of materiality as a necessity in an era where the values of science were upheld over the values of religion. She concludes her comparison of the grid to the literary function of the myth by emphasising that, while the grid is not a story, it is a structure which allows the contradiction between the values of science and belief to be maintained within Modernism's unconscious.[36] The function of the grid in modern art is to appear as one thing, that is, the mapping of the material surface of the work of art, a function sanctioned by the prevailing culture of science, while simultaneously alluding to its opposite, belief.

Krauss continues her discussion by drawing parallels between the modernist grid and the language of the window in Symbolist art. The bars and mullions of the window form a grid which simultaneously describes opacity and transparency:

> As a transparent vehicle, the window is that which admits light – or Spirit – into the initial darkness of the room. Yet if glass transmits, it also reflects. And so the window is experienced by the Symbolist as a

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[34] Rosalind Krauss, Grids You Say, exhibition catalogue, New York: The Pace Gallery, 1979

[35] Holland Cotter, in an article on Mondrian observes: "As an intellectual framework, materialist art history is neither inclined nor equipped to engage the spectacles of the hereafters, astral planes and fourth dimensions, so inevitably misses the core dialectic that attracted numerous 20th-century artists in the first place."
Holland Cotter, "Abstraction and the True Believer" Art in America, November 1995, p. 75

[36] Krauss, Rosalind, *op. cit.*

> mirror as well – something that freezes and locks the self into the space of its own reduplicated being.[37]

The grid, as it has evolved from and continues to allude to, the window, can be seen as forming an impenetrable visual field while simultaneously functioning as an opening through which the immaterial can travel.

Different viewing distances affect the experience of the window as being transparent or opaque. Similarly, the dualistic nature of grids in painting is experienced at different viewing distances. For Agnes Martin, the experience of painting is constructed by the viewer. She writes:

> Saint Augustine says that milk doesn't come from the mother …
> Tremendous meaning of this is that painters can't give
> Anything to the observer
> People get what they need from a painting …
> When you have inspiration and represent inspiration
> The observer makes the painting.[38]

Unlike perspective painting, where distance is mapped within and happens inside the space of the picture plane, distance happens externally to Martin's paintings. Their concurrently material and immaterial nature is understood experientially, dependent on the physical distance and relationship between painting and viewer. This individual and experiential understanding is uncertain, as it is unpredictable and subject to change, yet in being so, it communicates that which would otherwise remain undescribed, as Martin writes:

> It [the painting] represents something that isn't possible in the world. More perfection than is possible in the world … The point. It doesn't exist in the world.[39]

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37 Krauss, Rosalind, *op. cit.*
38 Martin, Agnes, "The Untroubled Mind", Theories and documents of contemporary art : a sourcebook of artists' writings , ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996), pp. 129-130
39 *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131

However, as it is the materiality of the painting which is the vehicle for the communication of that which doesn't exist in the world, the material and immaterial form an interdependent relationship within the painting.

Kasha Linville, in her visual analysis of Agnes Martin's 1958 solo show, describes Martin's grid paintings as a permeable space through which one can "drop" into a space evocative of sensory experience. She writes:

> Miss Martin's most important paintings are all-over grids pencilled on monochrome oil or acrylic-covered, square canvases, usually 72 by 72 inches. This fact is totally misleading as to the nature of her art, since the idea of a grid implies rationally calculated painting … Nothing could be more wrong … You can drop through her paintings into the memory of sensation. Hers is a non-illusionistic window onto the art experiences we have almost subliminally in our lives, far away from art objects. Her works carry you beyond themselves as vehicles for tactile, sensory memories on a very private level, a level closer to the shape of things. She isn't interested in how objects look but in their feel.[40]

Here, the grid is used as a visual vehicle for the communication of sense-experiences.

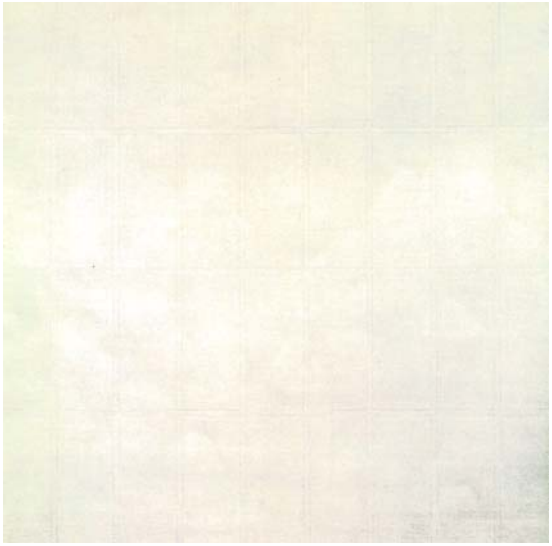

Figure 7
Agnes Martin, "Untitled #5" 1977, india ink, graphite, gesso on canvas, 183cmx183cm, The Pace Gallery, New York

[40] Linville, Kasha, "Agnes Martin: An Appreciation", Artforum International, June 1971, p. 72

The grid's function in Martin's paintings is uncovered from different viewing distances. Close to the surface, the texture of the canvas and the hand-drawn lines are most apparent. The perception of materiality is primary. Linville describes this as the sensation of touch being made open to sight, saying that at close range Martin's touch-judgments can not only be seen, but also felt.[41] The visual analysis continues through a description of the experience of stepping away from the paintings. The material qualities initially dematerialize into an expanse of atmosphere and then, moving further away again, the window to this atmosphere closes to become wholly opaque.[42]

This experience of the grid as simultaneously transparent and opaque renders the viewing experience uncertain. Krauss, in drawing connections between the grid and the Symbolist window, writes:

> Flowing and freezing; glace in French means glass, mirror and ice: transparency, opacity and water … For Mallarme, particularly, the window functioned as this complex, polysemic sign by which he could also project the 'crystallization of reality into art.'[43]

This quality of polysemy allows the window, and also the grid, to become not only the site of conjunction between the material and the immaterial, but also the passage between them. The seeming contradictions and uncertainty of such a structure parallels the indeterminate and polysemic nature of reality.

The "crystallization of reality into art" which is experienced through a conjunction of the material and immaterial, is the intention of painter Bridget Riley. In a statement written in 1970, she wrote:

> My final paintings are the intimate dialogue between my total being and the visual agents which constitute the medium … I have always tried to realize visual and emotional energies simultaneously from the medium

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41 *Ibid.,* p.73
42 *Ibid.,* p.73
43 Krauss, Rosalind, *op. cit,*

> … One of my aims is that these two responses shall be experienced as *one and the same*.[44]

The geometric structures of Riley's paintings, like the grid and the window, embody the interrelationship of opacity and transparency, facilitating the passage of light to the viewer. The materials at differing viewing distances make tangible the experience of both the material and the immaterial.

The totality of experience, which Riley is engaged with expressing through her paintings, cannot be described in a purely material, or visual, way as the experience is not purely visual. She describes in an interview an instance where the experience that inspired a painting could not be conveyed through visual description alone. The experience of the environment rendered sight useless as a means for understanding the place, the result being an all-encompassing experience of disorientation. Riley describes the experience in the following way:

> … I was going up a mountain in France that had a vast expanse of shale on top. It was an extremely hot day. I was getting anxious because we were going in a car up a steep narrow road. Visually it was total confusion; I felt there was no possibility of understanding the space of the situation. You couldn't tell whether this shimmering shale was near or far, flat or round … We found it so alarming that we got out of the car, which of course intensified the situation.[45]

The painting which was inspired by this experience of glare and disorientation, *Static 1, 1966*, renders visible the experience which was previously inaccessible to sight.

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44 Riley, Bridget, "Statement (1967)", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 79

45 Riley, Bridget, "Interview with David Sylvester (1967)", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 76-78

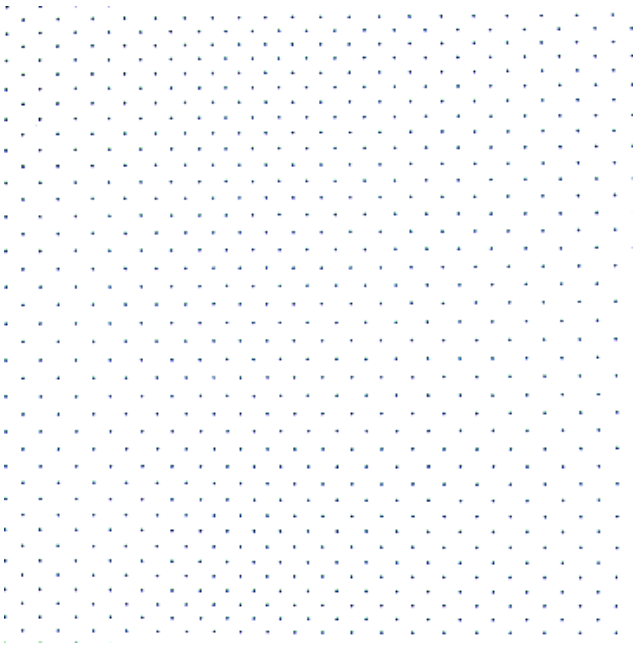

Figure 8
Bridget Riley, "Static 1" 1966, emulsion on board, 228.6cmx228.6cm[46]

The painting is constructed using the repeated unit of a small, black ellipse. Each ellipse is slightly rotated as it is duplicated and at close inspection of the canvas, the physical quality of each individual ellipse can be ascertained. However, a more distant view dissolves the individuality of the unit into a mass, creating the overall effect of a unified yet shifting and pulsating visual field. A most distant view of the painting renders the field an indefinite grey haze.

In a significant parallel to Linville's analysis of Martin's paintings, Riley describes a series of three distinct viewing distances from her own work. These descriptions are prompted by Robert Kudielka in the following interview:

> … this interplay between movement and stability is paralleled in my recent works by the interplay of light and colour. The colours painted on the canvas can be identified as certain hues – but as one looks at the painting one sees a luminous disembodied light, variously coloured.
>
> *I see, you don't 'describe' light by colour.*
>
> No, I don't paint light. I present a colour situation which releases light as you look at it.

[46] Collection of Hannelore B. Schulhof, New York

That means the painting doesn't exist factually.

No, in a way, it only comes to life when looked at from a certain distance.

If you stand close to the canvas, you just see the colour –

Yes – objective hues, say cerise, olive, turquoise –

But if you stand far away from the painting?

You only see a nebulous grey. The painting has eluded you.

And between the two extremes – the experience you intend?

The area of activity – of light.

So light is also something which happens between the two polarities: the stable body of colour –

And its absolute dissolution. When grey eclipses the light, the painting is unable to offer anything.[47]

Here, the close view of the surface of colour, when viewed at the middle-distance, transforms into atmosphere, or light. Moving further away, the painting shuts down. It becomes opaque: a nebulous, indistinct grey. This system of viewing distances can only be experienced in a personal and physical way, requiring direct interaction between an individual and a painting. Riley observed in the same interview that she finds it interesting to watch people look at paintings, as each person is caught in an individual dialogue with the work, looking for a position or positions from which they can experience it; each individual unconsciously chooses their relationship to the painting.[48] A personal interaction between the viewer and the material presence of the painting is required to gain the total experience of a painting, that is the interdependent relationship between the material and the immaterial.

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[47] Riley, Bridget and Kudielka, Robert in "In Conversation with Robert Kudielka" The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) pp. 85 - 86

[48] *Ibid.,* pp. 85 - 86

The coincidence of the material with the immaterial in painting is not so much a paradox but a mutually dependent link necessary for the experience of the work. This experience relates more closely to the totality of reality than does a singular, and therefore incomplete, understanding of being in the world.

Uncertainty

View: *1. The act of looking or seeing or observing*
2. The visual percept of a region
3. A personal belief or judgment that is not founded on proof or certainty[49]

If painting can contain the experience of the spiritual, how does the practice of painting relate to belief? How can there be any certainty in a practice based on elements that are unseen, unpredictable and unquantifiable?

Bridget Riley wrote in 1988:

> There is seldom a single focal point in my paintings; in general, my paintings are multi-focal. You can't call it unfocused space, but not being fixed to a single focal point is very much of our time. It's something that seems to have come about in the last hundred years or so. Focusing isn't just an optical activity, it is also a mental one. I think this lack of a centre has something to do with the loss of certainties that Christianity had to offer … it is all to do with the loss of certainties. Nevertheless, in losing this focus we find ourselves moving in a new range of experience, open to things that were previously less accessible.[50]

Painting that questions the traditional certainties of the picture plane, that is painting which denies the focus of perspectival space or dissolves the figure/ground relationship, makes manifest such mental uncertainty. A further uncertainty is a process-based approach to painting, which denies the artist the sense of control that a pre-conceived idea or outcome gives and builds the element of surprise into the construction of a painting.

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[49] WordNet ® 2.0, © 2003 Princeton University,
http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=view, 16/08/04
[50] Riley, Bridget "The Experience of Painting – talking to Mel Gooding", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 122

Imants Tillers echoed Riley's words a few years later when speaking of the work of Colin McCahon. He relates McCahon's work to the loss of certainties characteristic of contemporary society, saying:

> … there is 'a constant tension between the search for meaning, the desire for transcendence and a pervasive and immovable scepticism. It is this aspect of McCahon that I find … most relevant to our condition today.'[51]

This tension between belief in an absolutist dogma and a constant questioning is something that William McCahon observed in his father and in his father's art. In writing of the development of his father's understanding of the Christian faith, and the relationship of this to his painting practice, William comments:

> … Colin understood the essence of this [Christian] creed to involve the non-judgemental observation of his fellow men. Christian Witnessing gives meaning to a lot of McCahon's art, for on the whole he neither condemns nor supports, he questions, while reporting and sharing his own personal state of mind. Colin's committed but questioning belief in the Christian message is never openly stated by him but is plainly there to be read on his canvases.[52]

William McCahon continues to relate how, from a background of rigid Protestantism, Colin became more and more isolated from the structures and dictates of the established church, placing greater emphasis on personal revelation and responsibility:

> Cynicisms generated around such questions as the need to devolve self-responsibility to the Church, the reliance on standardised dogma and behaviour, and the requirement to worship in a form and at a set time and place, were all issues that helped make McCahon a homeless Christian.[53]

This sense of spiritual homelessness is reinforced in McCahon's paintings of the New Zealand landscape. As a person of European descent, he was living and

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[51] Tillers, Inmant quoted in Smith, Jason "Essay: Colin McCahon" http://www.nga.gov.au/mccahon/essay.html 1/03/04

[52] McCahon, William, "A Letter Home", Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith ed. Marja Bloem and Martin Brown, (Craig Potton Publishing: Amsterdam, 2003) p. 31

[53] *ibid.,* p. 31

calling "home" a land from which his forebears did not originate, and further, a land that is steeped in the traditions and religion of another culture.

In the painting *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury* of 1950, McCahon has painted six landscapes in a storyboard format on the one canvas. The landscapes are empty. They are empty of figures, buildings, trees and any other discernible signs of "life".

Figure 9
Colin McCahon, "Six days in Nelson and Canterbury" 1950, oil on canvas laid on board, 88.5x116.5cm, Auckland City Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki, Aukland

McCahon's painting of the Nelson and Canterbury landscape is dark and the colours are bleak. The earth is of browns and greens and blacks and the sky is of varying shades of grey, with only one of the six scenes having a small patch of blue sky. The landscapes, individually, are hauntingly beautiful; they also convey a sense of solidity and peacefulness, describing the folds of the land as a place of shelter and repose.

However, all six views can be seen at once, inferring that the experience of each informs the others and cannot be separated. In the overall image, the land loses the sense of being settled and comforting. Seen in this storyboard format, the weight of the solid land from the scene above becomes a heavy sky for the landscape below, and further, the landscapes at the top of the canvas have their own heavy skies painted in. This conveys the feel of the uncertainty and unease of the heavy sky of an approaching storm. The horizon line is fragmented between each landscape, not only between the panels arranged vertically, but also those adjacent horizontally

through the painting of a thick black and red stripe down the centre of the canvas. The painting is segmented into six parts that cannot be joined together as a whole, yet simultaneously, cannot be read individually as the surrounding forms are unable to be screened from the viewer's peripheral vision. The result is a multi-focal image that describes a journey, as the eye moves from one scene to the next, though this journey has no fixed direction, beginning or end, nor a place of repose within its duration.

The journey is a central theme in much of McCahon's work, as Jason Smith has noted:

> McCahon installed his paintings to emphasise the serial investigation of particular motifs, and to support an association of his work with the concept of 'the journey'.[54]

McCahon's work is about the journey, or the process of searching, it is not about the arrival or the solution. McCahon does not reach a destination, or reach any tangible conclusions; rather he remains in the uncertainty of the wilderness, still searching for a home, still seeking a place of certainty. Significantly, McCahon later placed biblical figures and events within the New Zealand landscape, fusing the two strong influences in his life and making more personal and tangible the journey of belief and doubt.

The uncertainty felt by McCahon is expressed through the construction of his paintings with multiple focal points and an ambiguous perspective and further, through the analogies made or stories depicted in his paintings and their numerous possible meanings. The seemingly blank landscape that McCahon has depicted in *Six days in Nelson and Canterbury* can be seen as analogous to a blank canvas, awaiting the mark of the human hand, that is, an interpretation or application of a narrative. Considering McCahon's interest in biblical narratives and his notable fascination with the story of Moses, an interesting parallel can be drawn between *Six days in Nelson and Canterbury* and that of the biblical account of Moses leading the Israelites through the wilderness in search of the Promised Land. For the Israelites, the period following their escape from slavery in Egypt was a time of

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[54] Smith, Jason "Essay: Colin McCahon" http://www.nga.gov.au/mccahon/essay.html 1/03/04

great doubts, as they constantly questioned the motives of their God for bringing them to such a place. The people vocally expressed their lack of faith at many times, asking questions such as:

> Why did you bring us out of Egypt into this miserable place where nothing will grow?[55]

and

> The Lord hates us. He brought us out of Egypt just to hand us over to the Amorites, so that they could kill us.[56]

This questioning of faith was being expressed by a nation who, although spectacularly and miraculously delivered from a situation of slavery to another nation, had become effectively homeless, living from day to day in tents in the desert, uncertain of when and if they would ever reach the land that had been promised to them.

McCahon struggled with the lack of certainty that stemmed from his questioning of the Church's definitive interpretations of Christianity and also struggled to grasp and explain his own experience of God. He was constantly expressing the tension between belief and doubt, and the frustration of the impossibility of having one without the other. Belief is defined as:

> Conviction of the truth or reality of a thing, based upon grounds insufficient to afford positive knowledge[57].

According to such definition, belief cannot exist without doubt, rendering the certainty of any conviction open to questioning. McCahon's desire for certainty and his journey in search of absolutes, is recorded in the chronology of his paintings, which finally culminated in his black and white text paintings. McCahon felt he had, in the discovery of the absolutes of black and white, reached a stable platform from which to speak. He said:

> 'I only need black and white to say what I have to say. It is a matter of light and dark.'[58]

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[55] Numbers 20:5a, The Good News Bible (William Collins Sons & Co Ltd: Glasgow, 1976), p. 152
[56] Deuteronomy 1:27b, The Good News Bible (William Collins Sons & Co Ltd: Glasgow, 1976), p. 171
[57] Arthur Delbridge (ed), The Macquarie Encyclopaedic Dictionary, Australia: Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, 1995, p. 80

Bridget Riley is another painter who has negotiated the language of black and white. Riley's engagement with black and white elements originally stemmed from a desire to engage with that which was absolute and from a desire for stability; that is, the desire for a stable ground from which to make an unarguable statement. Riley intended to make a deliberate, unqualified and personal statement to her former lover, Maurice de Saumarez, following the break up of their relationship. She wished to communicate to de Saumarez, without speaking to him, that absolutes do exist and, accordingly, proceeded to make a single, all-black painting. [59] She commented on the formative period for her black and white work:

> At that point in time I wanted to say: that *there were absolutes*; that one could not pretend that black was white. I wanted to make a deliberate statement …[60]

However, this original intention was frustrated by the discovery that the elimination of all contrasts didn't say anything. Paul Moorhouse describes this discovery:

> Despite the emotional intensity with which it was invested, an all-black painting – to her surprise – said nothing. In attempting to create a completely unqualifiable structure, Riley saw that she had eliminated any possibility of visual and expressive tension.[61]

Riley's black and white paintings soon evolved from this original desire for the stability of absolutes to become an exploration into the language of contrasts and the relationship between stability and instability.

In considering the expressive failure of a painting which did not contain the element of contrast, Riley developed her first black and white work, *Kiss*.[62] *Kiss* is composed of two black shapes separated by white, one a rectangle and the other a rectangle above it, which has a concave edge that bulges downwards towards the other shape, almost, yet not quite, touching it. The white area is squeezed at this point,

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[58] *ibid.,* p. 29
[59] Riley, Bridget quoted in "Personal Interview" (1988) by Henriques, Nikki, The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 25
[60] Riley, Bridget "The Experience of Painting – talking to Mel Gooding", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 125
[61] Moorehouse, Paul "A Dialogue with Sensation – The Art of Bridget Riley", Bridget Riley ed. Paul Moorehouse, (Tate Publishing: London, 2003) p. 14
[62] *Ibid.,* p. 14

momentarily arrested in its horizontal energy. A visual spark occurs at this location; the eye, travelling along the "horizon line" encounters this spark before continuing the journey to the other side of the canvas, where it is shot off at an upwards angle, travels a curved path over the top end of the canvas and descends again to the horizon line at the left edge of the painting. The painting feels incomplete in the sense that the eye follows a path outside of the canvas edges; a path that is not described in the image but that is alluded to.

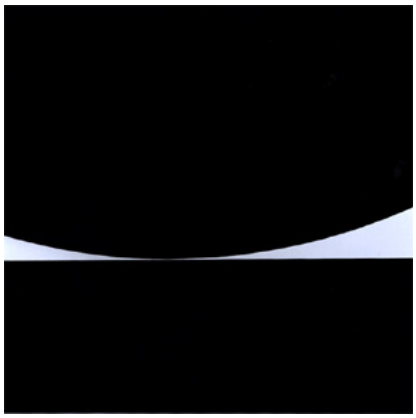

Figure 10
Bridget Riley, "Kiss" 1961, acrylic on linen, 122x122cm, private collection

The tension contained within the image, and its power to draw the eye back to the location of extreme energy from within or beyond the picture plane, is the vehicle for emotive expression. As Paul Moorehouse writes:

> … visual disruption is the key to the work's expressive character.[63]

The vehicle of expression in this painting is the disturbance created within the pictorial field.

The process of exploration into the relationship between stability and instability essentially destroyed her original intention of gaining a stable ground. Indeed, the process began with her failure to accomplish this intention. Riley noted:

> When I made the first black and white painting, I did not intend to make more than one. And then I became interested; I thought perhaps I can try one more. The first one hadn't done quite what I wanted …[64].

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63 *Ibid.*, p. 15

Further, the more Riley developed the language of her black and white geometric paintings, the less and less stable they became. Paul Moorehouse, analysing the evolution of the black and white paintings, observed that:

> In the interaction of contrasted elements, she saw the tendency of the formal structures she was creating to destabilise, dissolving into intense and unsettling perceptual experiences.[65]

The perhaps inevitable culmination of this development was Riley's embrace of instability, the importance given in her practice to such seen in her adoption of a coloured palette. Riley finally gained a stable ground in this manner; albeit in the certainty that there was no certainty inherent to the elements with which she worked. She commented:

> I saw that the basis of colour is its instability. Instead of searching for a firm foundation, I realised I had one in the very opposite. That was solid ground again, so to speak, and by accepting this paradox I could begin to work with the fleeting, the elusive, with those things which disappear when you actually apply your attention hard and fast – and so a whole new area of activity, of perception opened up for me.[66]

The discovery of a firm foundation in the inherent instability of colour seems to coincide with an acceptance of the impossibility of discovering that which is absolute; that is, with the acceptance that all that is certain is that all is uncertain. Whether Riley intends this reliance on uncertainty to be applied to all areas of life is, in itself, uncertain, yet she believes whole-heartedly that it is the only valid approach to art, writing:

> Any artist worth consideration is aware that there is art beyond art-movements and slogans, that dogma can never encompass the creative process.[67]

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[64] Riley, Bridget "The Experience of Painting – talking to Mel Gooding", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 125
[65] Moorehouse, *op. cit.,* p. 15
[66] Riley, Bridget, quoted in Moorehouse, Paul "A Dialogue with Sensation – The Art of Bridget Riley", Bridget Riley ed. Paul Moorehouse, (Tate Publishing: London, 2003) p. 18
[67] Riley, Bridget, "Untitled Statement (c.1968)" Theories and documents of contemporary art : a sourcebook of artists' writings , ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996), p.112

While opening up a new area of exploration and perception, the discovery of colour also broadened the scale at which Riley worked and further scattered the focal points within the picture plane. As Paul Moorehouse observes:

> Riley's adoption of colour coincides with a new, larger and more expansive format than she had used previously, its purpose being to prevent focusing on discrete pictorial elements and, rather, to create an area which the resulting fusion of colours could inhabit. The resulting space echoes precisely those characteristics she first noticed in Pollock's dripped paintings: a shallow, multi-focal expanse.[68]

To reiterate Riley's words:

> … it is all to do with loss of certainties. Nevertheless, in losing this focus we find ourselves moving in a new range of experience, open to things previously less accessible.[69]

What is made accessible is that which is ordinarily on the periphery; what was on the edge is brought to the centre, although it remains elusive to focus and definition. Looking at a Bridget Riley painting is like looking straight at matter in one's peripheral vision: the image is multi-focused, elusive and fascinating.

I recently experienced the indeterminate nature of colour and the process of seeing, while making a visual analysis of Bridget Riley's *Aurum* painting of 1976. I began by viewing the painting from a distance of seven or eight metres, at which distance I could view the painting in its entirety and experience the inflexions and rhythms within the image. I wrote: the colours of the painting, orange, light-blue, mid-blue, green and pink, caress the eye. The hard edges between the colours are indistinct, rather the strict geometrical structure forces the colours to blend into groupings that elude distinction and are reminiscent of what is seen in the peripheral vision but lost when focused upon fully. The areas that are predominantly yellow remind me of the yellow spots that appear momentarily in my field of vision on a very hot, glary Australian day, although the rest of the colours don't correlate with such an association, as they are too cool. It's the green that doesn't correspond; it feels of moss and understorey vegetation and of a place where water is plentiful.

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[68] Moorehouse, Paul, *op. cit.,* p. 19

[69] Riley, Bridget "The Experience of Painting – talking to Mel Gooding", The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 122

Figure 11
Bridget Riley, "Aurum" 1976, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 105.5 x 272cm [70]

The painting feels like the experience of water, the curves of the geometry behind its construction makes the colours ripple and forces them into motion. The eye is constantly in motion, momentarily focusing on a point but being unable to grasp that point before being moved on. The painting is slippery in the sense that it denies the viewer a focal point to grasp on to as well as denying the tangibility of a tactile surface. The surface is flat, pristine and devoid of the sensuousness of tactility; it is sensuous in a purely visual way. Yet it alludes to the experiences of the other senses – of lyrical string music harmonies blending and caressing the ears; of the fingers running slowly up and down a naked back; of summer fruits like mango.

When the eye is focused on the pink and orange groupings, these red-based colour bands distinctly separate from the mid-blue, creating sharper edges like tongues of fire. There's an edge to the image thus formed that is belied by the softness of the pastel palette. Yet the eye is unable to focus on the pink for any length of time; the ribbons of blue subsequently form bands of waterfalls across the canvas, catch the eye, creating alternative and irresistible focal points.

The pronounced landscape format of the canvas invites a response from the viewer that relates to experiences of the natural world, rather than the experience of self-awareness or analysis that can stem from the contemplation of a portrait style format. The clinical construction of the painting further removes the personal and

[70] Purchased 1976, Collection: Art Gallery of NSW, (c) Bridget Riley, photograph: Brenton McGeachie for AGNSW, [accn# 245.1976]

the emotional from the experience of the painting, however it is evocative of a purely sensual experience.

After writing this analysis, I made a closer inspection of the surface of the painting, only to discover that I had incredibly misjudged the palette used. The closer viewing distance revealed that only four colours were used in the painting: a yellow-green, a sky-blue, a salmon-pink and a very pale bone-grey. I had based my analysis on phantom colours produced through a combination of a specific viewing distance, light levels and the colour dynamics produced through the structure of the painting. The painting is in a constant state of redefinition; the relationship between viewer and painting and the relationship between the colours within the image produce an ever-shifting and therefore undefinable focus.

Further to the uncertainty created by colour relationships and a multi-focal field, the indeterminate nature of an image stems also from the manner of its construction. As Riley notes:

> I discovered that I was painting in order to 'make visible'. On the one hand I had to make something which had this essential quality of precipitating itself as 'surprise' and, simultaneously, there was no way of knowing with what one was dealing until it existed; so that in order to see one had to paint and through that activity found out what could be seen.[71]

This idea is echoed by Theodore Toadvine in his discussion of Cezanne's work:

> … the meaning of the work can only be forged through its execution. The source of Cezanne's uncertainty lies in this contingency: nothing guarantees that the work will hit its mark, since only creation can teach where the mark lies.[72]

Every painting is an "unknown" until it is revealed through the completion of its construction. Every painting, before it can conceivably occasion a surprise in the vision of the viewer, is firstly a revelation to the painter. The uncertainty of such a

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[71] Riley, Bridget "The Pleasures of Sight" The Eyes Mind ed. Robert Kudielka, (Thames and Hudson Ltd: London, 1999) p. 33

[72] Toadvine, Theodore A Jr., "The Art of Doubting: Merleau-Ponty and Cezanne", Philosophy Today, Winter 1997, p. 548

process would seem to leave the painter with no foundation upon which to begin work, yet this inherent uncertainty is, in itself, a certainty. Process, like colour, is inherently unpredictable and therefore, paradoxically, a certainty on which to base a practice.

What is distinctive in Riley's work is its sense of radiance. It is as though her acceptance of, rather than frustration with, uncertainty has produced images that are strong and immersive and positive. McCahon's works are similarly strong and immersive, but in contrast, pervade an increasing sense of hopelessness. McCahon's text-based works are multi-focal, though this focus has a directional aspect. The texts that he has transcribed onto the canvas were carefully chosen, always expressive of the relationship between faith and doubt, although finally focusing more fully on doubt. The texts are always open to multiple interpretations, as Marja Bloem comments of the Elias series:

> The fact that he chooses that text is fascinating because it is about doubt and all the possibilities of misunderstanding.[73]

His use of a black and white palette seems to indicate a further engagement with the oppositions of certainty and uncertainty. Further, the parallels between white and black, life and death are invoked in these paintings; the tension between the two is the vehicle for emotive expression in McCahon's painting. As he said to his students:

> 'All great art has death as its subject.'[74]

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[73] Bloem, Marja, "Spreading the Word" Artforum International Sep 2003, p. 254
[74] McCahon, Colin, quoted in Bail, Murray "I AM", Colin McCahon: A Question of Faith ed. Marja Bloem and Martin Brown, (Craig Potton Publishing: Amsterdam, 2003) p. 46

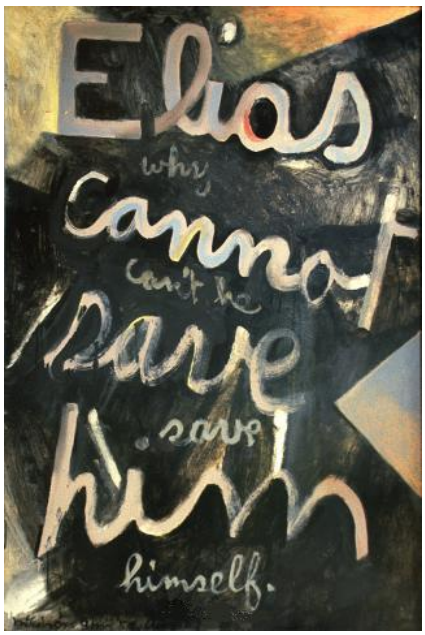

Figure 12
Colin McCahon, "Elias: why cannot he save himself" 1959, enamel paint and sawdust on hardboard, 147.5x100cm, private collection

McCahon's "Elias" series focuses on the misunderstandings and misinterpretations within the account of the crucifixion of the Christ. *Elias: why cannot he save himself* from 1959 loosely quotes the speech of two sets of witnesses at the crucifixion. The first group were the religious leaders of the time who misunderstood the task that Jesus was to complete on earth and therefore doubted Jesus' claim to deity:

> … the chief priests and the teachers of the Law jeered at Jesus, saying to each other, 'He saved others, but he cannot save himself! Let us see the Messiah, the king of Israel, come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him!'[75]

The second group were bystanders who heard Jesus cry out to God and mistook him for crying out for the prophet Elijah:

> At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud shout, '*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*' which means, 'My God, my God, why did you abandon me?' Some of the people there heard him and said, 'Listen, he is calling for Elijah!' One of them ran up with a sponge, soaked it in cheap wine and put it on the end of a stick. Then he held it up to Jesus' lips and

[75] Mark 15:31-32a, The Good News Bible (William Collins Sons & Co Ltd: Glasgow, 1976), p. 70

> said, 'Wait! Let us see if Elijah is coming to bring him down from the cross!'[76]

As Jesus died immediately following this incident, the commonly held belief that Elijah would come back from the dead to rescue the righteous in times of dire need caused doubts of his claim to innocence.

The painting is constructed to reinforce the doubts conveyed in the quoted texts, as the sharp angles of the very pale yellow shapes at the edge of the canvas force the eye constantly back towards the central text of the piece. There is no resting place within the image, yet there is also no escape, as the directional nature of the angular shapes, coupled with the inherent directionality of text, keeps the eye in constant motion within the image. The viewer is unable to escape the anguish of the doubts expressed and the layering of the two "quotes" reading from top to bottom: "Elias / why / cannot / can't he / save / save / him / himself" reinforces the questions and uncertainties.

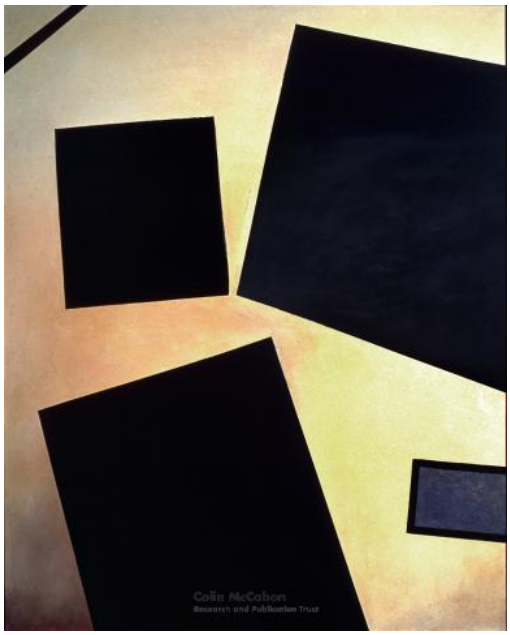

Figure 13
Colin McCahon, "Gate 15" 1961, enamel on hardboard, 151.3 x 121cm, Auckland City Art Gallery Toi O Tamaki, Aukland

McCahon did not always use text to communicate uncertainty; he also expressed uncertainty through the language of abstraction. His *Gate 15 (first Gate series)* of 1961 has an ambiguous presence: the canvas is dominated by three black rectangles,

[76] Mark 15:35-36, The Good News Bible (William Collins Sons & Co Ltd: Glasgow, 1976), pp. 70 - 71

the corners of which are located near the centre of the image, yet they do not touch each other. Each is set on a slight angle away from, or towards, the straight edge of the painting. One is smaller than the other two; it appears to float in the creamy-orange mist which functions as the atmosphere and background, while the larger two rectangles each meet an edge of the painting, one at the bottom edge and one on the right edge, and each are truncated by the canvas edge on an angle. These two larger rectangles lead the eye from the edge of the image into the centre; they function as paths for the eye, both leading the eye towards the small black rectangle. They function more like springboards than paths, however, as they do not touch the small rectangle: the eye must make the leap across the atmosphere of the ground into the blackness. The black appears to have infinite depth; it feels like a black hole that beckons the eye behind and beyond the picture plane. However, as the eye moves into the black space, the function of the rectangle shifts to that of background and the cloudy orange shifts to the foreground and gains a solidity on which the eye can stand to prevent being drawn into the black hole.

Yet just as the eye shifts to this new foreground, the black rectangles reassert themselves as the dominant areas within the image and thrust forwards towards the viewer, shifting to the foreground and the creamy-orange retreating once again. The eye leaps back onto the two large rectangles and slides down and to the right and off the edge of the painting.

There is also a small grey rectangle located in the bottom right-hand side of the image. It is bordered by black and it, like one of the larger black rectangles is truncated by the right-hand edge of the painting. The eye attempting to enter the image through this gate, follows the black border in, travels to the left, up, around to the right, then slides straight back off the painting. The other solid area in the image, the black band that runs diagonally across the top left-hand corner, offers no more than a transitory entry to the image either: the eye follows it up and across and off the painting. They eye is forced to negotiate the snake-and-ladder functioning of the three black rectangles, firstly climbing up, and falling into, then sliding back off the painting. The eye does not attain rest; as soon as an element is grasped onto as "solid", its status shifts and becomes unstable. The eye is forced to move on in search of the unattainable: lasting stability.

The painting alludes to a faith in the existence of a firm foundation, something that we long for and work towards, but also of a doubt that it is anything more than transitorily attainable. The expression of the void and its attainability or otherwise marks many of McCahon's paintings. What the void represents: the potential for transcendence, or the certainty of annihilation,[77] remains ambiguous in the images, interpretation being on an individual basis and therefore uncertain. Further, because of the shifting nature of the elements that represent the void, both meanings are expressed simultaneously. The void is something that can be sought after and at the same time feared beyond all else. The certainty of some of the quotes that McCahon uses, for example: "You must face the fact …", provides an extreme counterpoint to the uncertainty which is expressed in his work, both in the religious subject matter and in the processes and disciplines involved in the practice of painting.

[77] Miller, Steve, "Colin McCahon – NZ Artist explores questions of faith", Look, November 2003, p. 27

Without disturbance, disruption and the inherent uncertainty created by such tension, a painting can "say" nothing. The language of painting is built upon the interaction of elements of opposition and relationship, and therefore lacks certainty. However, these are the elements which engage visual interest, which resonate with lived experience and which articulate the interdependent relationship between doubt and belief.

Conclusion

The experience of colour in painting is not bound to the arena of abstraction, however a painting that uses colour as a primary organisational element becomes less an image to look at, than something to look with. It can evoke the experience of looking itself. An experiential understanding of such works is necessary, as a theoretical understanding is incomplete and cannot provide knowledge of the totality of reality as experienced through the body.

The totality of reality encompasses not only the material but also the immaterial. The common understanding of space is that is composed of entirely physical matter, yet such an understanding precludes such human dimensions such as emotions and spirit. Painting embodies both concurrently, dissolving the supposed dichotomy and providing a space in which the physical, emotional and spiritual can reside.

Working with the inherently unpredictable elements of opposition and relationship which are fundamental to the practice of painting, appears to preclude the possibility of any certainty within such a practice. However, paradoxically, the one certainty is that all the elements are inherently uncertain. As such, the practice of painting requires the acknowledgement of the certainty of uncertainty; certainty and uncertainty are necessary and interdependent to the process of painting and visual expression.

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