

Yesterday, today and tomorrow: Abstract art & Australia

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Once, abstraction had its reasons. It appeared first in the late 19th century in connection to that century's fascination with occultism. Then, in the hands of the avant-garde, it established relations first of all with the spiritual and then with music. Subsequently, and against this, the Russian Revolution aligned abstraction with politics, and as early as 1921 Rodchenko painted the so-called first last painting, *Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow Colour, Pure Blue Colour*. 'Art into life' was his Productivist credo and the 1920s saw a dimming of the initial efflorescence of abstraction, mostly in response to the oft-expressed 'call to order' edict, the demand that art return to its figurative roots. The 1930s, however, saw a regathering of the commitment to non-representation and a reconvening of abstract artists in Paris, that city's gravity able to pull painters and sculptors from all over the world into its then battle with Surrealism, including the Sydney artist JW Power.

It was against this background that in the years during and after World War II the work of artists from Sydney – in particular the Geometric

Abstraction of Ralph Balson, Grace Crowley and Mary Webb – established the Australian line of non-figuration. Since then abstraction has been with us, and our painters in the second half of the last century made contributions to Tachism (Balson and Elwyn Lynn, for example), Abstract Expressionism (Tony Tuckson and Peter Upward, for example), Colour-field (Lesley Dumbrell and Michael Johnson, for example), Hard-edge (Tony McGillick and Normana Wight, for example), Minimalism (Ian Burn and Robert Hunter, for example), and to the return of painting after Conceptual Art (Janet Burchill and John Nixon, for example). All of these artists' work stands against landscape painting, the predominant art of the nation.

From the 19th century Impressionists and 1920s gum tree nationalists to the post-war landscapes of Nolan and Drysdale, it has been the nexus between the landscape and representation that has driven the construction of 'Australian' art. Its chief progenitor was Bernard Smith (1916–2011), a communist, whose antipathy to abstraction infected his

history. For Smith, non-figuration, when it was there at all in his work, was a 'cul-de-sac', a 'failure', 'luxurious pageantry' and 'bland and pretentious'. His *Antipodean Manifesto* (1959), his notorious 'defence of the image', was published as he completed his canonical *Australian Painting 1788–1960* (1962) and the twin appearance of these texts brought him acclaim and redundancy in equal measure. By the time of his 1971 update of *Australian Painting*, Smith was overwhelmed by the fact that abstraction was then the foremost concern of our artists, part of an international tendency that continued throughout the last century.

Today, however, abstraction has lost its reason. It has 'ghetto-ised' itself, cut itself off from the rest of painting. No longer musical, cosmic, nor political, abstraction has uncoupled itself from its own history despite the ballooning numbers of artists overworking the tailings of what had been a once great mine. Although abstraction is now incorporated into our institutions and no longer outside its doors, our museums show little understanding of its complexity.

There is still not a single painting by such central figures as Mondriaan and Newman in our public collections, let alone Blinky Palermo or Heimo Zobernig. This is despite the fact that, as is the case with the latter, his work has engaged with Ian Burn's own engagement with Mondriaan. Together with such attenuated conceptual work, in the new century it is Indigenous artists who, it seems to us, offer painting new possibilities. Untrained in our conformist art schools, their work challenges their white contemporaries. From Emily Kame Kngwarreye to George Tjungurrayi, today it is the work of our artists coming from the studios of what had been so misunderstood by a generation earlier as the 'empty centre' or 'dead heart' that speaks to our common future.



Above

George Tjungurrayi
Untitled 2002
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
183 x 244 cm
Museum of Contemporary Art,
donated through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts
Program by Fraser Hopkins, 2010



Right

Emily Kame Kngwarreye
Untitled (Awelye) (#62, 67,
69, 66, 65, 70) 1995
synthetic polymer paint on paper
6 parts: each 77 x 52 cm
Museum of Contemporary
Art, donated through the
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