

## Certain Abstract Things

20 June - 19 July 2014

# Exhibition Labels

# CEBLA N **ABSIBACI**BSIBACI THINGS

from the
Griffith University
Art Collection

# 20 June-19 July 2014

Lesley Dumbrell
Miles Hall
Melinda Harper
Chris Howlett
Nevil Matthews
Frank Osvath

Kerrie Poliness
Gemma Smith
Paul Selwood
Bryan Spier
John Tonkin





## **Certain Abstract Things**

## 20 June - 19 July 2014

Griffith University Art Collection includes many fine examples of abstract art. The exhibition *Certain abstract things* showcases a small selection of these pieces, which are made by highly individual artists with particular concerns, though this grouping reveals resonance between artworks that are resolutely non-objective or non-representational. Operating in parallel with other forms of abstraction that might take objects or images as reference points, these works are committed to other things, such as systems of order and disorder, rhythms, optical sensations, bodily experience of two- and three-dimensional space, and the enjoyment of formulas, games and processes.

It is fascinating to reflect on why non-objective art is still so compelling and powerfully affective. non-objective art could be drawn from patterns and structures – consider the geometric patternings of classical Greece, or the rhythmic placements of floor tiles and bricks. Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich's of the earliest modern be or has played a powerful role in modern and contemporary art history. The capacity of lines, shapes, volumes, rhythms and colours to affect our vision, our sensitivity to order and disorder, our felt experience of two- and three-dimensional space, packs a charge.

## Artists:

Lesley Dumbrell, Miles Hall, Melinda Harper, Chris Howlett, Nevil Matthews, Frank Osvath, Kerrie Poliness, Gemma Smith, Paul Selwood, Bryan Spier, John Tonkin

## **Lesley DUMBRELL**

b1941 Melbourne VIC

**Khamsin** 1973

synthetic polymer paint on linen

Purchased for Mt Gravatt Teachers' College. Acquired by Griffith University Art Collection under amalgamation with Brisbane College of Advanced Education (Mt Gravatt), 1991.

**Griffith University Art Collection** 

Notes: Lesley Dumbrell is one of Australia's foremost practitioners of Abstract art. She began painting at a time when Abstraction was a field largely dominated by male painters, while many talented women were marginalised and achieved little recognition. In the late 1960s, inspired by a changing consciousness created by such things as organised protests by women about the Vietnam war, she helped to initiate a series of meetings and lectures by women artists. An offshoot of this project was the setting up of the Women's Art Register, which aimed to increase the professional profile of Australian women artists by compiling a comprehensive public record of their work. Dumbrell completed a degree in Fine Arts in Melbourne in the early 1960s, after which she turned to Abstract painting, in the belief that it reflected a world beyond surface appearances, which was nonetheless 'real'. She wrote: "One of the things I think a painting can do is lead you into such an ambiguous area that it reminds you of a number of things but it does not necessarily become specific. Just like molecules, they make up every structure we have around us but we cannot see them. Yet they are the underlying pattern of how this reality comes forward. I have always been fascinated by the underlying structure of things and in a way I have always played with the same kind of shapes or linear structures because I think they relate to a number of different possibilities." (G. Sullivan, "Seeing Australia", Annandale: Piper Press, 1994).

Her work is inspired by natural forms and landscapes, both from urban Melbourne and the landscapes she experienced in her travels. "Khamsin" is an Arabic term referring to the desert wind, and Dumbrell's painting of the same name experiments with optical effects, suggesting the rippling of desert sands, or the rhythm of light and sound. Her work is interesting when compared to other female abstractionists in the Griffith University Art Collection, such as Kerrie Poliness, who also uses optical and geometric structures which create an experience of fictive depth, and Hilary Boscott whose abstract formulations also have their roots in natural forms. Abigail Fitzgibbons, December 1994

Miles HALL b1974 Canberra ACT Norton Blue 2007 oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas Purchased 2008. Griffith University Art Collection

"The genesis of this series was a number of small scale paintings done on Norton wet and dry sandpaper. The industrial nature of the roughened surface provided a textured visual quality to the form that inspired me to create the work on a larger scale. Thus the use of silicon oxide. Oil paint was used as I wanted to exploit its organic qualities against the roughened surface of the support."

Artist quote, 2009

## Melinda HARPER

b1965 Darwin NT *Untitled* 2004

oil on canvas

Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by The Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Foundation for the Arts, 2009. Griffith University Art Collection

Melinda Harper completed a Bachelor of Art (Fine Art-Painting) at the Victoria College in Melbourne in 1985. She went on to lecture in painting at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne from 1993 to 1995. Harper has been exhibiting extensively since 1986 with her works being included in many major exhibitions such as Primavera at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Good Vibrations: the Legacy of Op Art in Australia at the Heide Museum of Modern Art and Australian Perspecta at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Her works are held in public collections throughout Australia. Harper lives and works in Melbourne.

Chris HOWLETT
b1974 Kokopo PAPUA NEW GUINEA
Composition at rest 1997
mattress ticking on board
Donated by Tim Morrell, 2003.
Griffith University Art Collection

## **Nevil MATTHEWS**

b1930 Ayr QLD d2013 Brisbane QLD

Parallel force 1968-69

acrylic sheet, wood, aluminium

Purchased for Mt Gravatt Teachers' College. Acquired by Griffith University Art Collection under amalgamation with Brisbane College of Advanced Education (Mt Gravatt), 1991.

**Griffith University Art Collection** 

## **Unit one** n.d.

acrylic sheet, metal, board Donated by Robin Gibson, 1975. Griffith University Art Collection

## *Impacted* 1970

synthetic polymer paint on board Gift of the Artist, 1985. Griffith University Art Collection

Nevil Matthews is a Brisbane painter, printmaker and sculptor. "Parallel force" shares the concerns of work by American formalist critic Clement Greenberg's favoured painters, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski, who belonged to the group of artists called the 'Post-Painterly Abstractionists'. Like the Post-Painterly Abstractionists, Matthews' work shows an aversion to the gestural style of Abstract Expressionism, which was associated with a utopian and idealised aesthetic (with the brushstrokes as a symbol of the artist's individuality). "Parallel force" concentrates on the formal elements of painting - colour, the shape of the support and the two-dimensionality or flatness of the surface. Matthews was one of the first Australians to paint in this style. Abigail Fitzgibbons, May 1995

Victor MEERTENS b1955 Seymour VIC Sommer 1986-87 metal, wood, fibre Purchased 1996. Griffith University Art Collection

"These works from The Angels of Mons, such as SOMMER were made very quickly, very brutally, using sledge hammers, tin-snips and hammer and nails. They aren't fancy but then again, neither was life at the frontline. Always thinking that if you raised your head above the ground someone would cut it down. But it doesn't matter because Sommer has survived. It bares the scars, and the evidence of battle (the shrapnel wounds). It's right in front of you. Direct from 1918. Though it doesn't smell like a museum piece it does stink like a trench full of rotting bodies. That's why it offends, because it dares to tell the truth. It refuses, like so much art, to be soft."

Kerrie POLINESS
b1962 Melbourne VIC
#1-4 from Black O Wall Drawings #1-6 1997
ink, chalk
Purchased 1998.
Griffith University Art Collection

The "Black O Drawings" are a derivative of Kerrie Poliness' instruction based wall drawings, "Red matter wall drawings", which dealt with rectangular formations consisting of lines applied to the wall from instruction manuals. These 'drawings' are black and circular in form, with the 'art object' remaining the set of instructions used to generate the drawings in an unlimited edition. The work has affinities with Minimalism, emphasising the conceptual component of the work and bringing into question the role of the artist in the creation of art, and the stability of the art object. More specifically, they are a direct reference to the wall drawings of American artist Sol le Witt. Poliness has reduced the work to its essence: the permanent artwork is the set of instructions informing the reader how to construct the work; the drawings consist of a series of lines which form geometrical patterns; the work has a number of possible applications; and the person installing the drawings is part of the conceptual process. Art becomes an information event. "The six BLACK O wall drawings begin their life inside the confines of a small, white, beautifully crafted box and expand onto the wall via processes of instruction and approximation. Each of the six drawings has its own individual instruction manual contained within the box. Whoever holds the box has therefore a potential licence to become the creator. It is in this way that the Artist enters into collaboration with the holder of the box. The Artist provides all the tools and materials that are needed and explains all the steps necessary to execute these drawings, however, it is the unique and original stamp of each maker which shapes the outcome of the six BLACK O wall drawings produced." (Sarah Cottier, "Kerrie Poliness: Black O Wall Drawings", ex cat, Sarah Cottier Gallery, July 1997) Edwina Bartleme, September 1998.

Paul SELWOOD b1946 Sydney NSW Purple and Rust c. 1978 steel, synthetic polymer paint Purchased 1978. Griffith University Art Collection

Australian works such as these owe much to American minimalism and formalist aesthetic discourse of the sixties. The work is abstract (not even being given a representational title) and sets up a meditative play of formal harmonious repetition. The materials used are of key importance. Steel is most commonly used as a non-tactile, non-decorative and functional medium. This aspect is captured in the solid frame supports. However the 'cross beams' fall elegantly, bending under their weight, making them appear softer and more fragile. Similarly, in painting them, colour also softens. These slats, from various angles, appeared plaited or intersecting and tend to draw attention as much to the surrounding space and light as to their own substance. This marks a shift from sculpture to installation, from an emphasis on an artwork freestanding in space to an artwork incorporating and addressing space itself. Beth Jackson, September 1991.

Gemma SMITH
b1978 Sydney NSW
Chessboard painting 2 2007
Synthetic polymer paint on board
Purchased 2008.
Griffith University Art Collection

Chessboard painting 3 2007 Synthetic polymer paint on board Purchased 2008. Griffith University Art Collection

Gemma Smith graduated from the Sydney College of the Arts in 1999, and with honours from the Queensland University of Technology in 2004. She has continuously explored new directions in her art practice, but systematically exploits Modernism's abstract aesthetics to develop variable crystalline forms and images.

Smith's *Chessboard Painting 2* (2007), is part of over a dozen works in this series, produced by the Brisbane based artist. It is a vibrant geometric abstraction literally created on and over a chessboard's grid. Chessboard Painting 2 continues Smith's investigations into colour consideration and prismic shapes.

Smith references artist Marcel Duchamp in using a 'found' object as the foundation and surface for the painting. Duchamp also notably changed careers and became a professional chess player later in life. In 1952 he claimed that he came to the "personal conclusion that while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists." Smith playfully alludes to this and the game of chess forming her own rules and systems to construct the series. "I remember accumulating rules such as: to not use the same colour twice, only use mixed colours rather than from the tube". Painting on the chessboard's black and white backdrop, Smith is covering the modernist's grid with her improvised invention. Her bright trapezoids leap out as three-dimensional polyhedrons - the contemporary chess pieces in her game. She mimics Modernism's abstract style but reworks it with an experimental exploration.

Critic Mark Penning states that if there is a political edge to Smith's approach it is tied to a desire to share art with her audience. This commitment to 'sharing' is opposed to the insularity and detachment of modernist abstraction. By means of the chessboard, Smith relays to her viewers that art is playful, enjoyable, and not necessarily confined by its history.

Text by Carol McGregor, Short Internship Program, 2011.

Bryan SPIER b1975 Canberra ACT The Press 2010 synthetic polymer paint on canvas Purchased 2010. Griffith University Art Collection

Bryan Spier creates meticulously constructed and highly illusionistic works that question the idea and existence of painting in a world saturated with the digital and the technological. Graduating from the Canberra School of Art (painting) in 1998, Spier completed a Master of Visual Arts at the VCA, University of Melbourne in 2005. He has exhibited extensively in Australia and internationally over the past eight years at public, commercial and artist run spaces.

## Frank OSVATH

b1961 Budapest HUNGARY

Homage to John Cage 1992

Super-VHS, transferred to digital file
Gift of the artist, 1995.

Griffith University Art Collection

## John TONKIN

b1963 Adelaide SA

air and water I - III 1993 - 94

computer animation

Purchased with the assistance of the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body, 1994.

**Griffith University Art Collection** 

John Tonkin's videos are hallucinogenic and hypnotic, creating a 'contemplative space in which the viewer's mind can wander'. The "air and water" series relies on natural formations, such as waves and strands of grass, for inspiration. They suggest flux and change, an image of nature speeded up. Tonkin writes, the work "is a series of computer animated studies of the elements of air and water, created using physically based modelling techniques. These animations are deliberately simple in their pacing and rendering. They are lyrically evocative, suggesting a range of emotional spaces". Abigail Fitzgibbons, March 1995