

2011: Abstraction, Installation, Conceptualism: Some Returns — to the Once and Forever Future. (21.7.1)

by Ken Bolton

Abstractions—Nicholas Elliott, Ben Sando; Light Square Gallery, June 28—July 28, 2011. **On Abstraction**—The TwoPercent Collective; Clubhouse Lane Gallery dates. **From Margin to Centre**—various artists—SASA Gallery, July 5—August 5). **room for plan B**—Elizabeth Newman and Nicki Wynnychuk; Australian Experimental Art Foundation, May 20—June 18.

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Abstraction—the full-blown sort—was *the* mode of the fifties and big in the sixties, and continued as a selling style (or range of styles) into the next decade. It has never really gone away. And various major figures' success with it has periodically given its popularity with younger artists a boost. Richter, Twombly are examples, or Robert Ryman.

Locally the situation is a little different as regards major names' offering encouragement, or inducement, to take it up, to look into it or whatever. 'Different' because there is something creepy about abstraction still for many. Abstraction still carries the charges laid at its door during the wars conceptualism waged against it: this argument would have it that abstraction is, typically, handsome or attractive large-scale decoration for boardrooms and hotel lobbies and the palaces of the rich—but vapid—"visual muzak", as Lucy Lippard said of Jules Olitski's vast surfaces. The Minimalists and Conceptualists had little time for any of them—Noland, Olitski, Morris Louis. A little time for Frank Stella, as a kind of literalist, working at the coalface of Painting's end-game scenario. And Ryman, I guess, as yet another who would not buy into transcendence. But abstraction no longer represents the future.

In Australia the leading commercial galleries take their cue from overseas but remain plainly 'commercial'. So, whereas the exceptions (like Roslyn Oxley,

say, or Darren Knight) have foregone *this* luxury trade in decoration, many established galleries have continued to carry the names that were becoming prominent in the late 60s and early 70s as fashioners of this product. Michael Taylor? John Firth-Smith, Robert Jacks? (There was still money in it. Who could sell conceptual art?) These last have little appeal for the young, I think. Here, only a few names are unsullied by this good-taste rep: Ken Whisson, Tony Tuckson. (Are artists like Tony McGillick, Rollin Schlicht, Dick Watkins looked at? Is Ian Fairweather? Olsen surely seems a boring old dodge—all that ingratiating, blokey joie de vivre guff. Is Fred Williams too palatable?) Dale Frank is an intermittent siren figure, I would suppose: corrosively ironic, deliberately ‘bad-faith’, startling, and by turns ravishing, null, exorbitant etcetera—all the right moves really. But has he been around too long? I mean, ‘for the young’?

And maybe the reappraisal of Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson is part of this and part of the renewed impetus—impetus at least to ‘take up’ abstraction, give it a go. I am guessing. And doing so as a way of rehearsing a background with which most people will be familiar. To utter the syllables “Greenberg” is to have said enough.

All this is prefatory to thinking about two exhibitions recently purporting to deal with abstraction.

In Adelaide, Paul Hoban, John Barbour could both regularly be seen ‘as’ abstract, particularly Hoban—but abstraction as a path to ‘the other’, to encounters with the obdurately non-human—a kind of neo neo-primitivism theoretically licensed by the earlier neo-primitivism of Bataille and Dubuffet’s Art Brut. In their quite different ways both Hoban and Barbour have been influential in Adelaide: they’ve taught here; they show regularly; they represent both seriousness and mystery and anarchy. (And ‘play’.) So they have appeal. John Barbour died, prematurely, early this year—but the present tense might still apply to his work and its effect. Many of his students and former students—two decades worth—will have been making art in some kind of dialogue with Barbour’s views, making it for his understanding or approval.

Anyway, suddenly in Adelaide there's a rash of abstraction briefly surfacing. Formalist, it is not the sort of abstraction that courts 'the Other'. (A month back Maarten Daudeij's exhibition (of slightly Rietveldish Merzbuilt installation at Felt gallery) was partnered with some very gently tachiste non-figurative paintings by Mal Wass: monochrome's applied to workaday, declaredly 'material' surfaces.)

Of the two exhibitions under discussion I saw the TwoPercent Collective's showing first—*On Abstraction*. And the thing to say about it is that the artists seem to have arrived at abstraction too easily. Whereas the art of fifty or so years ago had struggled towards abstraction over quite a period and often on the basis of the preceding work by others, work that it knew well—DeKooning and Gorky coming, after years of work, out of Picasso and Miro and before that Cezanne—the TwoPercenters have not had to 'abandon' the figurative (or not abandon it with any qualms). And their work seems not to be abstract in the sense that it 'abstracts' from a given style's apprehension of the objective. Nor does it seem to address the felt constraints of the canvas shape or size, or of conventions as to the relation of the picture to its parts and of the parts to framing edge, picture shape and to illusions or effects of depth etc. Nor, surely, can it be seen as 'boldly' or daringly launching into the unknown, disowning the job description of reportage for the perilously 'non-figurative'. No-one, now, bats an eyelid; audiences may, in fact, yawn.

Intentions don't matter in some senses. If the picture works it works. (At doing what is another question.) But intentions matter of course to the artist: has something difficult here been achieved, *for* them, *by* them? How else to gauge improvement if no task is set? The TwoPercenters seem to have arrived too early and too easily, to have met no resistance. Many of the paintings look like they mean to *resemble* abstract painting. Few look as though they derive from depicted subject matter, either tenuously or at any difficult distance. They are not 'abstraction' in that sense. Their small scale I think is a telling indicator of their misapprehension of abstract painting. Abstractions do not have, inherently, to be big. But size was one of those things 'arrived at' as the artists

began to paint within a field that they related to physically and not exclusively optically: gesture-within-an-arena rather than images-within-a-window-frame; extent rather than depth. Minimal art, too, favoured works that were approximately human in scale: neither monuments that towered and nor small pieces too easily taken in, but works which addressed us with something of an equal presence.

Some paintings by Patrick Rees had a sort of charm: amusing, slackly casual daubs in gelati colours, grouped under the collective title 'Soft Serve Shrine'. Katie Barber's works were unable to arrest one's attention though the colour was pleasing. Two pairs of paintings, one red with yellow shading into smoky, cloudy cream, another dark green with yellow shading to grey-white. Rothko, one could think. But both lacked drama or tension. They looked like works settling for being 'impressions' of 'abstract painting'.

The small scale precludes much of what can be done: principally things to do with ambiguities around gesture and outline, drawing and shape, where a line can be big enough to have something of the weight and presence of a shape while retaining its character as directional, as graphic, as bounding an area, as crossing an areas. Size also allows gradations of intensity to be read, or read more extensively, as atmospheric, transparent or differently deep; it allows more to the unprimed canvas and to any basic priming colour beneath the later action; it allows, perhaps, more bodily identification with, or empathetic readings of, movement and gesture. These are not just matter of bigger being better able to be seen.

Timothy Hodge's works were mostly too busy, in an, again, unmotivated, drama-deficient way. Too small. Paradoxically some tiny works of his, not properly part of the show, unlisted on the exhibition sheet, had a more interesting sense of scale and of shape as inhabiting or challenging the canvas. Small, single gestures.

The TwoPercenters are not associated, I think, with abstract painting in any defining way. Perhaps here they were simply 'having a go'. There is more to it than they think—which they may have found out in the process: *what am I doing here?* must have occurred to some of them even as they worked.

Nicholas Elliott and Ben Sando (*Abstractions*, at Light Square Gallery) were far more on the ball. Both artists seem to be feeling their way into an appreciation of what the challenges are. Both were painting large: in Elliott's case this enabled him to work with shifting kinds of intensity, and with shallow distinctions in hue and suggested depth—all within a very narrow register. The paintings were mostly monochromatic, or at least seemingly so on first glance. Many of them (duo-tones: one colour on a base ground) floated a large field of colour over the rectangular picture surface so as to reveal, and relate tellingly to, the framing edge or to do so at one or two corners. The artist thereby established an ambiguity between the colour as surface or as mass, as shape or outline, as unity or as ensemble of subtly differentiated passages.

Elliott's paintings were, in most cases, a little short on incident or interesting complexity, but two seemed to me to genuinely hold their own. They were romantic, in a rather sad, muted, but suffering sort of way. Which is to import a good deal of anthropomorphism to the situation: but that is the pay-out when the work gains the eye's interest successfully: an investment, an identification, an attribution of meaning, a gamble. So, one or two beautiful paintings: 'Silver fabrication #27' being the one I liked most—a grey silver, with some darker blue moodily present, almost 'behind the scenes' in the grey. 'Silver fabrication #32' was nearly as good, and 'Red fabrication #75'. Another, 'Calling my name from...', black on tan, had some more Tuckson-esque wrestling going on in it than the others—which were confined to closely valued texturing or brushwork and subtle gradations of depth.)

Elliott talks, in his brief statement for the exhibition, of "the processes in these paintings ... lend(ing) substance to otherwise elusive aspects of our positioning... when faced with the experience of the anxiety of limits"—“(T)he

sum of the aggressive immensity of everything leads to the facing of edges and junctures”.

Ben Sando's works were more apparently a kind of assault on—or plunge into—the abstract painting situation—so as to find and establish the givens. Where Elliott's paintings were reminiscent of the early sixties (more or less all-over, diffuse, closely registered or compressed range of colour, with gesture and any suggestion of the graphic suppressed), Ben Sando's series recalled the late 80s / early 90s painting of, say, Scully and Halley. They eschew the tortured or heroic slugger phase of abstract expressionism to move straight to the more literalist 'new' game—of Stella, Ryman and numerous others—as it was later addressed by artists such as Scully and Halley. (Elliott, by contrast, brought to mind Olitski, Poons and others, maybe a less gothic Clifford Still, maybe Susan Rothenberg. His statement would seem to wish for an emotional investment akin to that anticipated by Robert Motherwell and the romantic end of the Abstract Expressionist crowd, the 'abstract impressionism' of Guston.)

Sando's artist's statement describes his forthright approach to the matter of feeling his way into the... well, the 'problematic'. “When I started making these large paintings,” he says, “I was trying to paint images that created their own kind of energy. I considered that the large size would help with this and would also provide a field for contemplation that not only filled the view, but required the viewer to almost physically travel from one end of the painting to the other... I painted squares into the pattern of the picture to create a vibration between the ground and the squares and then I squashed the squares all together to create a kind of visual battery. Then I simplified the paintings to just the stripes, which I hoped still vibrated... And I began to paint with some simple rules—every stripe should be a slightly different width; each end of the picture should... (etc)”

Plainly, and unlike Elliott, Sando is keyed to a slightly later version of 'the situation'—to Stella's “what you see is what you get” attitude and its legacy. Elliott seems closer to those artists seeking to somehow capture and ride the “morphology of feeling” to quote Susanne Langer's attractive formulation.

Sando pushes our humanising identifications away; Elliott would endorse them. I'm up for either sort of experience if the work will get me there.

As with Elliott's paintings, only a few of Ben Sando's pictures really bring these tensions to a sufficiently interesting head. But they do and the ensemble as a whole looks like a record of his attempt to attain that tense and energising formal entente. Squares and stripes, of black, white, yellow and red, on the walls of the Light Square Gallery they look cheerfully energetic.

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It is an interesting set of ambivalences and required leaps-of-faith that make up the situation of this kind of painting. Abstract art seems largely to have been born out of modernism's pursuit of purity, self-definition, 'necessity'. And in many ways these abstract styles pertain to the point at which the reductivist end had come or was at least near. What remained was futility, or some grand acceptance of both impossibility and of the nihilistic idealism required to commit to making these things: *the artist is involved with what, in doing what exactly?* And why should it mean anything, in what way is it compelling? And yet it can seem to be.

Sometimes abstract painting can seem compelling in its acknowledgment of the huge negation it attempts to surpass. At other times, indeed for most of the more thoroughly contemporary in the art world, it truly does seem, now, curious and irrelevant: the modernist game has been played and superseded: you can string a curtain across the Grand canyon, talk to a coyote or a dead hare, build a giant puppy out of flowers, film a kid skateboarding before a mounting storm engulfs him, create prophetically tragic biomorphic genetically engineered organisms: why make paintings?

One reason is that, with modernist painting, in principle every inch counts (inflected, closely valued, but variously worked). You can waste those inches,

as Kenneth Noland perhaps did, yards and yards of them. (Noland might have been willing to curtain the Grand Canyon with a painting, if he'd had the nod from Greenberg. But no.) Every inch counts. Or can count. Some may remain neutral—but these are inches that can easily turn quickly negative and an area of anxiety for the painter: hence the attraction to and difficulty with the painting's edge.

'Every inch' does *not* count with an installation, for example, not with any certainty. Nor with a performance. Which bits are meant to be clunky, which are we to ignore? The new media: is the screen too small, too up-to-the-minute? Are we meant to notice that? Must we pretend not to? Are we having an experience or are we constructing one (noting this, ignoring that)—and attributing the sum to the artist?

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The attraction of abstraction remains, clearly. Elizabeth Newman is one who began in the 80s to invest in the tailings of late-modern abstract painting. I initially took her paintings to be rather mean parodies of (male) high modernist ambition: like cheeky slurs on the idealism, or vaunted idealism, of the 'post-painterly abstraction' gang. In a way her paintings were deliberately gauche, rough around the edges, journeyman mock-ups of big sixties abstracts. They were small, made from fragments of material combined with painted colour. They seemed cartoon reductions—parodic deflations—of Barnett Newman and others. Playful and decorative, winningly under-achieving, witty. (Very Melbourne, too. Abstract counterparts of the figurative, faux-dud figurative works that Linda Marinon made at that time.) Newman's paintings got immediately under your guard: you liked them as you tried to formulate your objection. They reminded me of a brief phase that Alun Leach-Jones's work passed through. But Newman stayed with that area and has continued to successfully operate within those original terms.

Am I wasting words? Perhaps I have been mostly describing my reactions to her work, or my memory of it. These have coloured my subsequent readings of her work, which I always look forward to seeing (and re-run in my mind)—for the tweeking, renovation and adjustment the new work will make to my response. Interesting: it is as though one's experience or reception of the work is ongoing, like a novel you put down or take up after a break. You continue with it.

Apropos the Alun Leach-Jones works: Newman's were much less flat. Newman's works had and have the air of respecting no shibboleth, or of doing so only 'in the breach', acknowledging them and meeting them as they broke them or 'transgressed' them. Their strongest suit, their achievement, is their attaining the state of Play and a kind of innocence or guiltlessness. Which calls into question my sense of the early works as smirking.

Elliott works tensions between the options offered—that we can see the shapes as inhabiting and/or constituting the rectangle of the painting—can see them as an atmosphere (or a 'surface') that continues, by implication and by feel, beyond the paintings' edges. The best, I think, tend to play down or deny this latter reading.

Ben Sando's assaying can seem an exploratory exercise setting out to establish parameters. One could imagine a Master Chef maestro-Scully saying, Okay, good! Now, *do it again!* The perfunctory quality—watch me do this, I-think-I-can-do-this-surely!—is part of the charm of Sando's work in *Abstractions*. The works are not magisterial or summative as, for Halley say, they would have to be. But, by the same token, they have reckless bravado.

The sculpture at *On Abstraction* very much resembled the Ab-Ex sculpture of the American 50s—of which someone once joked, that it was the kind of wishful foolishness that saw a vulva-shaped piece of driftwood "mounted on a pedestal and called 'Departure'."

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There is Outsider art at the SASA gallery—*From Margin to Centre*, July 5—August 5). Inevitably exhibition of such work raises the same arguments for and against the category and the misconceptions that allegedly attach to it, the more preferable conceptions that are on offer, etc. Here the term proposed—after first, and helpfully, alerting us to the American preferred term “self-taught”—is “visionary”. Good. Artists whose lack of, subversion of, or avoidance of ‘sophistication’ enables them to *trust and present their vision*. Which begs a lot of different questions maybe, but I’m happy to go with it. (The only thing I’d say is that some artists, because of their very big brains, are similarly able to think and imagine outside and beyond the confines that sophistication at any one time is proposing. Beuys? Picasso? Adam Cullen?)

Anyway, a lot of the work in *From Margin to Centre* looks terrific: entertaining, witty, ‘otherish’—possessing conviction, slyly witty, and, in fact, ‘visionary’. It doesn’t address the contemporary art world—and the contemporary art world’s terms don’t have much traction in dealing with it. The work looks voodoo, naive, sometimes absolutely undoubtable as genuinely offered testimony or, again, as ‘vision’ or proposition. There are three very good works by Anne Marie Grgich—fantasy portraits, I guess. One of these in particular, a stylish pixie-like face, is extraordinarily beautiful: graceful, exquisite, and with boldly decisive decoration that reminded of fashion drawing, of Cocteau, and of Baxt and other designers’ work for the Ballet Russe: a similar transposition of folk elements, or naive elements, into a very distilled language. These were large, full-face portraits that offered themselves as bejewelled icons. Their glaze—or was it something derived from some plastic sheeting used in the production?—gave the works the appearance of extreme delicacy and fragility. In fact they were quite tough constructions. It also afforded them a transparency in which colours, and elements collaged onto the portrait, could live as if afloat but under the surface of the painting.

In the same exhibition Jungle Phillips has a wall of paintings of various sizes and shapes. These, too, were often quite beautiful: entertainingly busy yet

compositionally resolved. I was reminded of 1980s German painting like Penck's but with a more fully evolved and deliriously decorative sense of colour. There were strong sculpture pieces: a series of figures from José dos Santos, built out of chanced upon, salvaged wood, fallen branches etc, kitted out in cast off clothes, given oddly characterful heads and footwear. A harbour-scape, in palest shades of pink and cream by Vittorio Ban was wonderfully dreamy.

Via *From Margin to Centre* 'the Other' returns to our galleries—and Paul Hoban is notably involved, co-curating the exhibition with Professor Colin Rhodes, Dean of Sydney College of the Arts.

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Elizabeth Newman and Nicki Wynnychuk showed at the AEAFF recently—the reason, I suppose, that I have been thinking of Newman's paintings. Their *room for plan B* (May 20—June 18), was also something of a 'return'. In fact it is part of the current AEAFF's agenda of revisiting works and modes of the institution's first, animating focus: post-object, conceptual, and ephemeral, transient, collaborative and improvisatory art-making. It does this partly in the belief that such impulses are again alive (internationally) and relevant. There is also some presumption that these modes and qualities are somehow central to art that is 'experimental'.

room for plan B pitched painter/fabricator Elizabeth Newman with Nicki Wynnychuk—to collaborate in the gallery space. (Melbourne artists, though Wynnychuk only more recently so.) The result was interesting. Wynnychuk's usual mode is Minimalist constructions that reveal, make apparent, their structure: simple materials leaned, stacked, piled—the process meaning to be 'read', transparent. A kind of guilelessness, a kind of literalness. They have also tended to be small: like models for public sculpture or ceremonial architecture (monumental forms, gateways, arcs de triomphe), the reduced scale, the simple materials, being, probably, slightly mocking, deflating. A larger project of his, a thematic running pursued through much of his work is to

re-use, resuscitate used materials, give them another life—and to make of them a dusted-off, jauntily confident reproach to Power and the Militaristic: to plea for a Post-Heroic epoch. Elizabeth Newman, too, confines herself to simple, cheap, readily available materials.

Together in the AEA gallery space the pair followed their plan: a series of arches, eight foot high maybe: big enough to look imposing, 'public', slightly heraldic in affect. These arches were not quite identically structured, though at first glance they could seem so, and they were coloured front or back in different bright, primary colours. In one case this meant a slight aura of reflected colour that could be sensed on the reverse, but not with certainty till you were making your return trip through the gallery..

These structures lined up to partially frame the wall at the far end of the gallery—on which was an array, arranged like a painting (a grid of rectangular swatches of colour—patterned fabric, paint, ply wood, blanket). This array recalled Elizabeth Newman's own paintings. And was surely meant to. The arch structures suggested frames, a line of sight, if one were to line them up, that would focus on the Newman feature at the gallery's end, and yet I don't think they did, literally, frame 'the Newman picture'. But the idea was effectively planted.

A further interesting effect was the way in which these arches (handsome, slightly bland structures) 'adverted' *so efficiently* to that end wall. The far was brought immediately near, given intense focus. It made the two-dimensional quasi-painting seem more 'material' than the bigger three-dimensional structures that intervened. (These archways were large, not quite monumental, and with their object status further undercut by having their structure reveal itself as in fact quite flimsy.) Their intense colour (one white, one blue, a red? a yellow?) linked them, almost too easily—a kind of 'look-it's-easy' gesture—to the colour at the 'Newman painting' end.

Was this all a little slight? Was it a kind of reduction of the 60s/70s 'experimental' mode to an easy formula? It seemed to me an uncomfortably parodic reduction-to-formalism of the post-object and 'experimental' mode. Fingering the experimental as a mode should be embarrassing, right? I was reminded of the art in TV shows, where a house is renovated in 12 hours and an 'artist' is told, "Something for this wall please—to suit an 'outdoor' type of couple in their thirties." And something is duly whipped up—and praised—as art—no objections brooked. This was better than that, hip, but it seemed it might be "essentially aesthetic" in a way the (A)EAF had, at one time, regarded as anathema. Back in the day.