Driven to abstraction

Forget reason and embrace the colourful work of Virginia Coventry, writes Andrew Frost.

Virginia Coventry is one of Australia’s finest abstract painters and her exhibition at Liverpool Street Gallery is all about the optical experience of colour. In Untitled (Yellow) (2009), the viewer is presented with a large rectangle of yellow set against a white background. At the top and bottom of the canvas are grey, brown, red and orange stripes that frame the overall picture.

Elegant in its simplicity, Untitled (Yellow) is a Rosetta Stone for the entire exhibition, as each painting repeats, refines and then elaborates this compositional approach.

Working with micaceous pigments that add lustre to acrylic and vinyl colours, Coventry paints what appear to be solid areas of white and grey but which, upon closer inspection, reveal themselves to be subtly nuanced constructions, as though the paintings have been put together with architectural blocks, the opacity and density of the colour areas shifting as the viewer moves closer to the canvas.

A trio of smaller works, including Untitled (Orange/White) and Untitled (Red/White) (both 2010), offer the viewer energetic compositions that suggest a dynamic compression of the larger pictures in the exhibition.

Abstract painting with such a stringent minimalist style can often feel as though it is the work of a scientist testing out an obscure and baffling theory.

Yet Coventry’s work is about sensuous shifts in visual perception that are, in essence, as intuitive and passionate as the messiest abstract expressionist canvas. While it might be tempting to ask, “What does it all mean?”, the real pleasure of this excellent show is to forget the reason and simply feel the colour.

VIRGINIA COVENTRY
Tuesday to Saturday, until September 30, Liverpool Street Gallery, 243a Liverpool Street, East Sydney, 8353 7799.