

Complex beauty

Karl Wiebke - Painting 1994-2012.

ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Kingsley Street, Acton. Until May 20

Reviewer: **Sasha Grishin**

Karl Wiebke is a German-born and Hamburg-trained artist who migrated to Western Australia when he was in his late 30s, in 1981, and who moved to Melbourne about two decades later.

Wiebke is primarily concerned with what one terms the "materiality of painting" and works within a basic minimalist aesthetic frame of reference. In other words, he explores the physical properties of paint, in his instance mainly enamel

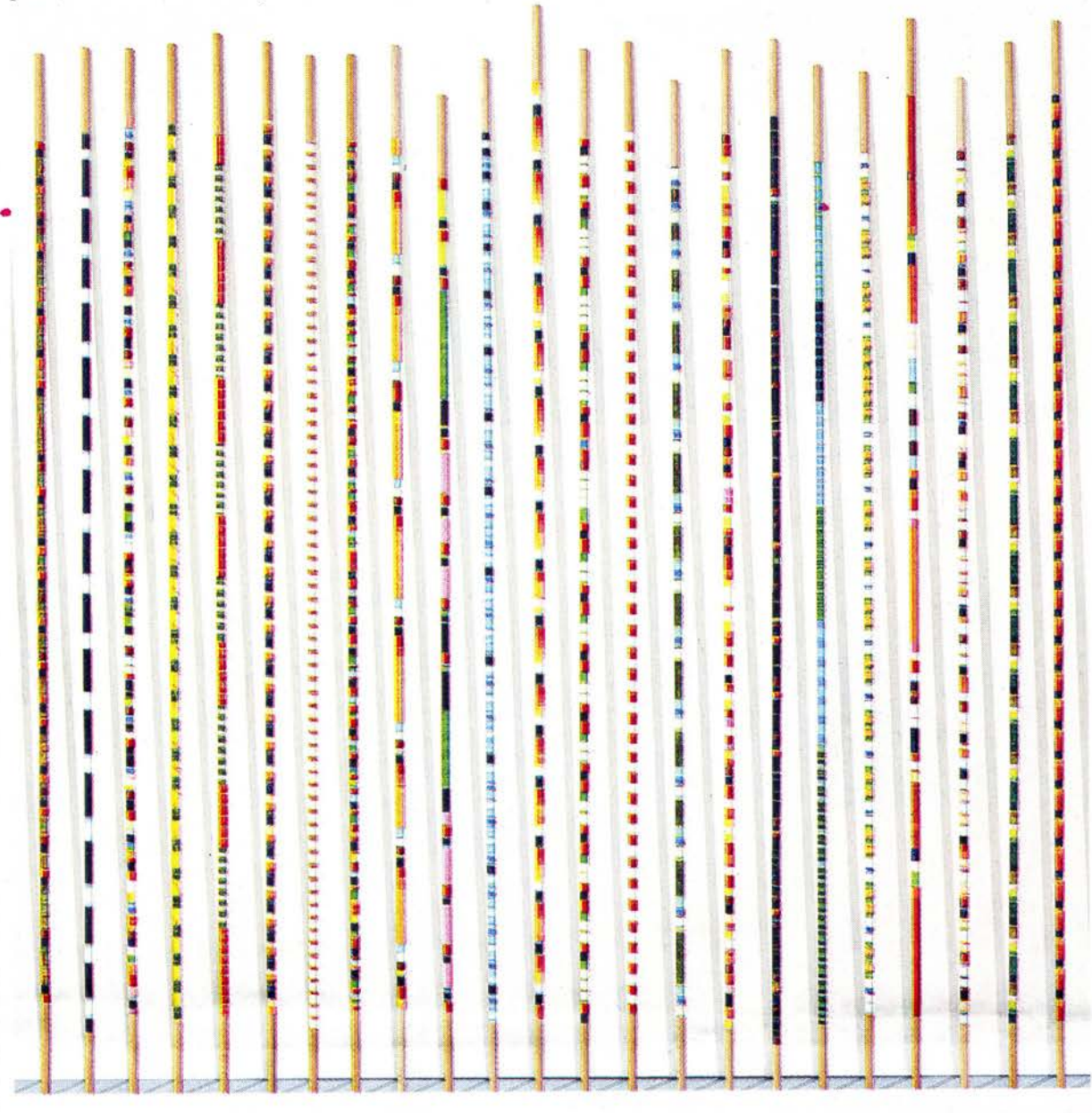
and acrylic paint; of colour, the quality of the surfaces on which it has been painted; and the nature and shape of the support on which the paint has been applied, whether it be panels, canvas, pieces of dowel or wooden hoops.

It was an approach which was particularly popular with the American minimalists of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Sol LeWitt and Robert Mangold.

One of the difficulties which I have with reductive painting is that in many cases it is too predictable, and that by deliberately setting to leave out most of the elements of traditional art you are left with a skeleton, or at best an anorexic

corpse, which holds few surprises. The beauty and strength of Wiebke's art is that, almost in spite of the artist's stated intentions, he arrives at quite complex, sophisticated and beautiful paintings.

His encrusted canvases, which in most instances took a few years to develop, are not simply a build-up of layers of enamel paint over a number of years to create thick 3D surfaces, but also become little microcosms which reflect the atmosphere and weather conditions in which these works created outside experienced. They are about process and growth, repetition and continuous action, but they also embrace chance and the intervention of that which cannot be programmed – like drops of rain or the landing of an insect. All of this





contributes to the final resolution of the work. There is a quiet lyricism, rather than a minimal austerity about these works.

Some of the circular paintings, which have a certain resemblance with Aboriginal art, are pretty rather than profound, but what I find particularly rewarding is the *Buildings* series, which become quite concrete and striking urbanscapes in their own right. Born of a city environment, they have a tangible power like a slice of an urban view. It is not so much an attention to detail that is a feature of this work, but it is detail itself which cumulatively builds up and becomes the work.

The resolution of the edges and the space beyond the frame enhances that which is within the frame.

A small commercial exhibition of Karl Wiebke's work was held in Canberra's hole-in-the-wall avant-garde art space, Everything Nothing Projects, which I think was open for a couple of weekends and which I was fortunate to catch.

URBAN ART: Karl Wiebke's *Sticks*, far left; *Circular Building 4*, above; *32-05 red/white on green*, below; *Buildings B/11* 2004-2008, bottom.

