

ARTIST INTERVIEWS

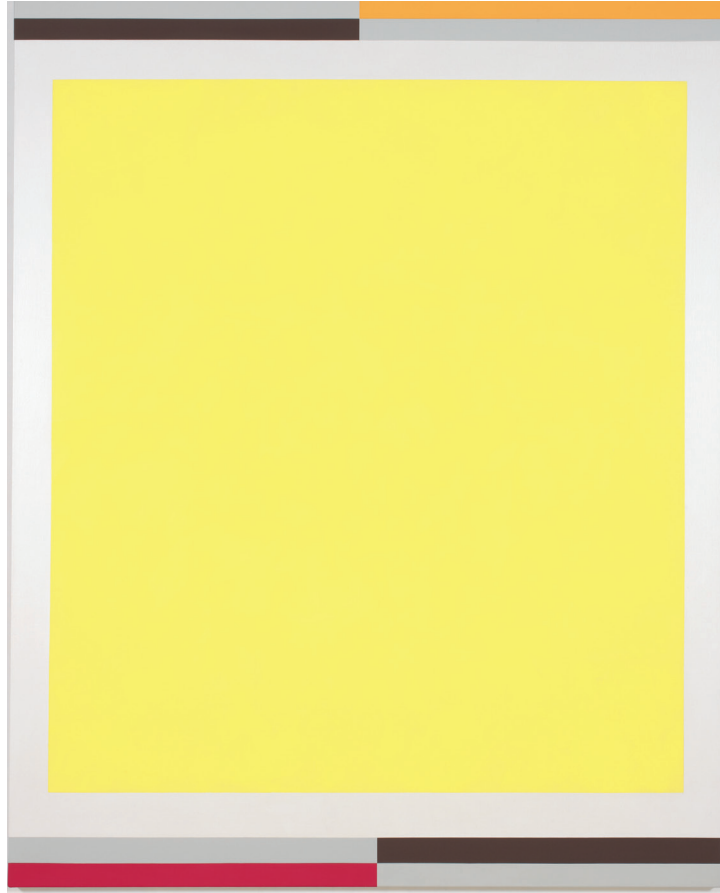
A B S T R A C T I O N

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ALLAN MITELMAN, JOHN PEART, JAMES ROGERS, PAUL SELWOOD & AIDA TOMESCU

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1. Artist's name:

VIRGINIA COVENTRY



Virginia Coventry, *Untitled (yellow)*, 2009, acrylic and vinyl with micaceous pigment on Belgium linen, 180 x 145 cm.
Collection: James and Jacqui Erskine, Sydney. Image courtesy the artist and Liverpool Street Gallery, Sydney.

2. What was your earliest intimation that you were going to be an artist?

Standing at a child's easel. I'm about five years old and playing with long-handled brushes and pots of thick red, yellow, and blue paint. Sunshine. Blue sky. White concrete stepping-stone path across mown grass.

3. As a young person, was there a work, or more than one work, which revealed to you the power that art can have?

Other than looking at reproductions, the first painting for which I felt deeply was a small portrait. From my second year at art school, I sought it out often. Profile portrait of a lady (Italy, c. 1475) in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria is painted in tempera and oil on a poplar wood panel (image size 38 x 25 cm). I thought everything was right in that painting, and I still admire it.

While a post-grad student in London (1967/68) I remember looking intensively at Cézanne's Large Bathers (of 1905), Duccio's Maestà predella panels, Vermeer's Young Woman standing at a Virginal – all in the National Gallery. But I also haunted the British Film Institute's screenings – seeing seasons of Buñuel, Bresson, Godard, Antonioni, Kurasawa.

4. Who were the most important of your teachers?

Murray Griffin (life drawing 1961/62) – “finding the axis” (i.e. an abstract way of thinking from the inside out) and equally important, Griffin's energetic demonstrations of drawing, standing at an easel. This performance of the act of seeing and drawing gave me an approach that supported all my subsequent work.

James Meldrum (2D composition, or some such title, in 1961) – introduction to flat space as opposed to the conventions of pictorial space made up of illusory depths and volumes.

Rod Clarke (painting and life drawing, 1963/64) – qualities of colour: from a still life of silvery fresh fish and some paper, as I remember it, “make a painting of rich colour” ... “sour colour”... “paint a black painting”... “a white painting”. He introduced me to the life drawings of Matisse. These were an antidote to some of the tics and habits I had acquired during my two previous years’ training in Illustration.

5. Where did your most significant learning experiences occur?

As a student at RMIT in classes with a life model. Courses in the early 1960s had titles like “Life Drawing”, “Life Painting”, “Head Painting”, and “Figure Composition”. I worked directly from the life model for about 14 hours a week over four years. All this look-and-put experience was about much more than learning representational drawing skills, about more even than the knowledge we gradually acquired through exercises in mixing paint to match local tone and colour... We were learning to see, think about, and judge relationships between part and whole, to understand human scale and proportion, to educate our intuition so that we could devise our own questions as artists.

During 1963-64 I was very involved with making lino-cuts and etchings. Artists such as Fred Williams, George Baldessin, and Hertha Kluge Pott used the RMIT printmaking studio on an informal basis in the evenings. There was an entirely democratic arrangement whereby students who stayed after hours, along with the aforementioned artists, took turns working at the acid baths or waited to run plates through the etching presses: works-in-progress were not private. As a young student I observed the way Fred Williams transformed into art landscapes that were familiar to me since childhood (i.e. the You Yangs and the Otway Forests in Victoria). That workshop offered a space for concentration and commitment.

Printing colour also taught me other ways of thinking about colour. Hours of mixing printing inks and planning colours in layers is a different experience to additive mixing on a palette or ‘wet-into-wet’ as the painting develops.

At the Slade School, where I was a post-graduate student in 1967/68, Harold Cohen gave a lecture in which he proposed that colour and tone be thought of as one term. Getting rid of the “and” was liberating.

In July ‘68, I saw the Matisse retrospective at the Hayward Gallery.

“Significant learning experiences” have occurred far away from institutions:

- A slow trip via unsealed roads across the Nullabor in February 1964 was formative. The experience of being surrounded by the horizon, the exhilarating feeling of spatial expanse, and the intense quality of the light of this great plain became deeply embedded in my imagination.
- Seeing Monet’s *Nymphéas* in the oval rooms at the Musée de l’Orangerie, Paris, in 1968.
- In Mexico, in August 1968, walking among the pyramids of Teotihuacan and climbing the Pyramid of the Sun; it seemed to me that the Teotihuacanos had wanted to frame the sky, to have it come within reach...

6. When you make a work, what are the qualities you would like it to evidence?

Openness. Vitality.

9. Who in your estimation are the greatest artists?

Based on sporadic opportunities I have had to see original work: the Etruscans, Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Rubens, Velasquez, Goya, Manet, Rodin, Monet, Cézanne, Atget, Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi, Mondrian, Pollock, Newman. Obviously my knowledge of art is founded on the European tradition, but for the last four decades I have also looked closely and regularly at work from the Central and Western Desert Aboriginal painting movement -- so that, collectively, the Papunya Tula painters channel their knowledge of traditional, ceremonial, body and sand painting into my pantheon of “greatest artists”.

10. The greatest modern artists?

Atget, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi, Mondrian, Lucie Rie.

11. The greatest abstract artists?

Their work nourishes me, whether or not they are “the greatest”: Kasimir Malevich, Hans Arp, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Charles Pollock, Mark Rothko, David Smith, Alexander Calder, Carl Andre, Eva Hesse, Agnes Martin, Ann Truitt, Richard Serra, Hanne Darboven, Lygia Clark, Helio Ottitica, Charlotte Posenenske.

12. Which Australian artists do you admire and respect the most?

Not including living artists: Grace Cossington Smith, Ralph Balson, Grace Crowley, Ian Fairweather, Tony Tuckson, Clement Meadmore, Robert Klippel, Emily Kame Kngwarrye.

13. Which of these artists have influenced you longest and deepest?

Piero della Francesca, Matisse.

14. What are the qualities you prize in your chosen medium/media?

Material colour– physically present as thin or thick and all the etceteras–belongs most to painting... The operation of colour has the potential to make me feel present to space / light / time / weight.

A painting can beckon you into the lived experience of another person, offering the trace of another's will and thought and desire.

It always takes time to be in accord with what a serious painting is– to get it fully ... to move, by attending, through the structure and appearance of a painting into the impulses of its "making".

15. What are the advantages of specialising in a medium (as opposed to making "art" without media-specificity)?

Daily practice hones intuition, inventiveness, "fitness". (You make the work; the work makes you).

My own trajectory as an artist has involved shifts of focus between media. When I stopped painting in 1970, everything I knew as a young artist fed into the way I worked for the next decade with the medium of black and white (silver-based) photography. I had an ambivalent relationship to photography, but as I began to return to painting, my camera and dark room experience, together with my reading and thinking during that period, made my "old" medium of painting fresh to me. While the transitions between one and the other were difficult to negotiate, the experience of not painting has informed my subsequent approach.

I think of my engagement with photography on a formal level as a long meditation on the frame. The initial proposition of the photographic projects was "what can you tell from what you can see"? But gradually the intention to bear witness shifted to a critique of the medium's claims to truth. I wanted to re-engage with colour and with a paradox of painting which for me is to give expression, in visual form, to the non-visible, through the language of abstraction.

16. What are the things that attract you to abstraction?

Abstraction is antithetical to the operations of both illustration and spectacle.

17. Modernism, Abstraction, Abstract Expressionist painting, Constructed steel sculpture all tend to be regarded as historical phenomena, associated with epochs that many consider to be impossibly remote and out-of-bounds. How would you argue against this assumption?

The practice of non-representational painting now inherits all the themes of modernist thinking– Cartesian geometry, biomorphic shapes, 20th Century psychological theories, Phenomenology, Existentialism– and their deconstruction by feminists and theorists and artists. Contributing to a continuity or being in dialogue with the ancestors is now a matter of temperament rather than ideological adherence. I'm not interested in purity and exclusion.

18. How do you feel about the term "formalism" being applied to your work?

In my mind the term belongs to old wars and to ways of thinking that thrive on unproductive binary oppositions. As in "form or content". And its use as a pejorative term closes down receptiveness to sensory and intellectual pleasures available through looking attentively...

In beginning a painting or a suite of paintings I establish a "formal" structure that may tend towards a system. Subsequent process always subverts this and leads to something I hadn't thought of at first. (You can't think colour relationships. You have to see them).

19. Is there anything that makes you uncomfortable, that you think leads to misunderstandings, in the notion of “abstraction”?

Outside the art world, I think the term abstraction is associated with reduction and loss. Paintings that are not pictures worry some people. Artists may think we are working with affective elements, but many people are made anxious by an absence of narrative. Stepping out of the flow of ordinary life to contemplate and commune with static objects that challenge us to “invent our own reception” (see Roland Barthes, question # 20, below) becomes more difficult as our lived spaces fill up with ever more actual and virtual noise and movement... Yet that is exactly what I love to do.

20. Is your art-making relevant to “Australian art”? Does it have a place in it?

I have been making art for almost five decades within the physical and cultural conditions of Australia rather than some other place. While paintings from here are not necessarily of here, qualities of light and lived spaces, and deeply connected social memory, keep producing “me” in my work, and therefore situate my paintings.

21. Who are/were the writers who have been most important to you during your lifetime?

Roland Barthes (during the 1980s)

– The Pleasure of the Text

“... What is it for me?”

– The Eiffel Tower

“... the bird’s-eye view ... gives us the world to read and not only to perceive; this is why it corresponds to a new sensibility of vision ... (and) permits us to transcend sensation and to see things in their structure.”

– Shock Photos

“... overconstruction ... dispossesses us from our judgement ... we can no longer invent our own reception...”

Gaston Bachelard (as his writings began to be published in English translation).

Henri Focillon

– In Praise of Hands (1934) in *The Life of Forms in Art*; Zone Books, 1989

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

I read *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible* while a member of an informal study group of four women (artists and art curator/historians) circa 1994.

Rosalind E. Krauss

– *Grids* (1978)

– *Sculpture In The Expanded Field* (1978)

– *This New Art: To Draw In Space* (1981)

– *Notes On The Index* (Part 1, 1976; Part 2, 1977)

– *Reading Jackson Pollock, Abstractly* (1982)

in which Krauss shakes out several binary oppositions and the guilt-tripping accusation that abstract paintings are ‘mere decoration’.

She writes: “in the great Pollocks... matter becomes light”

– *The / Cloud /* (1992). Essay in *Agnes Martin*; exhibition catalogue published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1993

Frances Colpitt

– *Systems of Opinion*. Essay in *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*, Frances Colpitt ed., Cambridge University Press, 2002. (I read this only in late 2008)

Briony Fer

– *On Abstract Art*; Yale University Press, 1997

– *The Infinite Line: remaking art after modernism*; Yale U P, 2004

Griselda Pollock

– *Vision and difference : femininity, feminism, and histories of art*; Routledge, London ; New York 1988

– Agnes Dreaming: Dreaming Agnes. Essay in the catalogue published in association with 3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing by Hilma of Klimt, Emma Kunz, and Agnes Martin. (Exhibition curated by Catherine de Zegher in 2005)

Kathryn A. Tuma

– Enhancing Stillness: The Art of Agnes Martin. Essay in the catalogue published in association with 3 x Abstraction: new Methods of Drawing by Hilma of Klimt, Emma Kunz, and Agnes Martin for an exhibition curated by Catherine de Zegher in 20

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