

TELECOM PROSPECT

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Gallery One: Judy Millar, Simon Morris, Seung Yul Oh, Miranda Parkes, Jeena Shin, Ngataiharuru Taepa, Rohan Wealleans

At first glance all the works in this space are abstract, but at play are seven very different formal and conceptual enquiries. All of the works fall within one of the curatorial thematic clusters of the exhibition: Quiet Riot—contemporary Abstraction. The title is a partial contradiction, how can quiet be riotous? 'Quiet Riot' may ring a bell, it is the name of an American heavy metal band popular in the 1980s, whose cover of the Slade 1973 hit 'Cum on Feel the Noize' was a huge hit. The idea of 'feeling the noise' highlights the complex connection between looking and feeling, between aesthetics and physical experience.

What 'abstract' means in relation to art has shifted throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Abstraction can refer to a removal from context; to abstract being to withdraw or separate. But a removal from what? From pictorial space, from narrative content, from specific historical associations? Perhaps the best-known champion of Abstraction is American art critic Clement Greenberg who wrote in 1944: 'Let painting confine itself to the disposition pure and simple of colour and line, and not intrigue us by associations with things we can experience more authentically elsewhere.'¹ This idea of a pure expression, separate and more elevated than other forms has been challenged continually since its inception. While the term Abstraction is most frequently applied to painting, it can also extend to other media, such as sculpture, film and video, performance, poetry, contemporary dance. Within the visual arts many different 'schools' or styles of Abstraction have been touted including Abstract Expressionism, Lyrical Abstraction, Geometric Abstraction; realised through different processes such as 'action painting' or 'colour-field' painting. So what does it mean and how much does it matter now? Can we separate out discussions of works using abstract forms from those using non-abstract forms?

Artist Judy Millar has argued that painting, no matter what painterly style or language is always illusionistic: 'You put a mark on a surface and immediately you have an illusion. Painting is a virtual medium; as a viewer you project yourselves into its fictive spaces.'² This view signals a shift from the mid-twentieth century drive for flatness, for the purest, most independent (from everyday life, from the ties of narrative or literary associations) visual expression. Many of the artists in this exhibition working with abstract forms are open to associations and inferences garnered from a mix of popular culture, the legacy of earlier schools of Abstraction and conceptual art practice.

Judy Millar's large, gestural paintings involve—with equal weighting—both the application and removal of paint, assertion and denial. Recently her work has included sculptural elements and a heightened emphasis on the placement of works within a specific spatial situation. The marks themselves, rubbed, smeared and agitated areas; dynamic tumbleweed roundels, black diagonal scrubbing-outs, knowingly draw on a loaded history of mark-making such as that seen in the work of artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, the Viennese Actionists through to Gerhard Richter.

Rohan Wealleans' *Cold Comfort* is one of a number of recent works using a more subdued colour palette, which may come as a surprise to people familiar with his more 'technicolour' works. Wealleans applies hundreds of layers of paint over the undulating ground of the painting, which increasingly includes protruding bumps or balls on stems. The drop of garlands from the central erect form is made from chips and chunks of layers of paint, strung together. The creamy-white tones of this work make it feel lunar, its surface pitted with gouges and craters, mountains and emissions.

1. Clement Greenberg, 'On Abstract Art', *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, John O'Brian (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 203.

2. Robert Leonard, 'Robert Leonard talks to Judy Millar about her New Gallery show', *Judy Millar: I will, should, can, must, may, would like to express*, Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 2005.

Jeena Shin's wall painting in canary yellow has a very different resonance. The refined linear forms derive from the folded compositions of paper. Colour is built up by applying meticulously different intensities of a single colour, some layer upon layer of pigment, which optically fool us into thinking that there is spatial depth. Shin complicates this further by often incorporating more than one viewpoint, resulting in a multi-dimensional form of the flattest order. The surface changes dramatically when we move past it due to the shifting qualities of light. It is both an optical and bodily encounter.

Seung Yul Oh's interventions extend this connection between the eye and the body to include the aural. His sculptures are animated, they can make sound as you come near, or they might come to life through movement. Oh weaves effortlessly between abstract and figurative forms, the geometric and the biomorphic, and he also shifts between media with his practice taking in painting, sculpture, drawing and video. His works often have a cartoon-like quality with his use of high-key colours and stylised animals, birds, people-like creatures. Here the reference to beasts or bodies are veiled and hidden (literally), as Oh leaves us guessing as to just what is inside that box!

This is the first time that Miranda Parkes' paintings and a video work have been exhibited together. *Crasher* is an eye-poppingly effervescent painting. Its blowsy folds and balloons of rucked canvas are coated in variegated vertical candy-stripes, punctuated by more solid slicks of dripping red, lime green and pale blue. The highly three-dimensional work sits between painting and sculpture with potential wide-ranging references such as retro dress fabrics or sheets, sherbet or boiled lollies, through to work by artists such as Frank Stella and Jessica Stockholder. *Breaker*, the tiny glossy red work is a viscous configuration, akin to the hardened skins of paint that form over tins of enamel in the garden shed. The video work *Bathroom Wall* assumes a more sickly pallor, the flickering fluorescent light encouraging us to look anew at the forlorn surfaces of our utility spaces.

Ngataiharuru Taepa's work, in contrast, has a statuesque stillness. The artist uses industrial materials (PVC piping or steel) for his structures upon which he paints delicate, complex forms that draw on the patterns of kowhaiwai panels. The large pou (meaning both 'figure' and 'post') *He Rau Kawakawa* is a lament for and a celebration of the lives of people that have recently died. It explores the significance of the kawakawa plant which for Māori has many spiritual (it is worn as a head-wreath during tangi) and medicinal properties (as a blood purifier, an antiseptic, a painkiller). Taepa combines aspects of customary Māori art and contemporary art, and also references commercial/industrial visual languages such as the high sheen customisation of car paint jobs, or the computer-generated crispness of a laser-cut sign.

Simon Morris' paintings take time. What may appear as an arbitrary journeying line is the outcome of a directed sequence. Morris sets up a framework intentionally restricting the scale, proportion and colour palette within which different formula direct the pattern making process. This can include the length of the passage of paint in any one direction, when to pause and change the form through alternating thickness or direction and when to stop. The artist explores how a pre-determined action, once initiated, can determine the making of a painting distinct from aesthetics. The dominant connection in Morris' painting is with the real—specifically with time and space. All of his work is made in relationship to the spatial qualities of the ground (or surface) they are painted on. While previous wall drawings and paintings have been made in response to architectural space, here the focus is on the relationship between the two paintings. Both encompass a passing of time and involve a line moving in one direction, but they differ crucially: in *Blue line here to there 2 hours 30 minutes* the line weaves its way from left to right and stops, while in *Blue line there and back 2 hours 24 minutes* the line returns to its point of departure. The titles include the time it took for the artist to paint the work, which directly references the physical act of making a painting.

For more information on these artists and to find out about events during 'Telecom Prospect 2007' go to: www.telecomprospect2007.org.nz



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