



Christopher Dean, *Spraygun virus & nembatal rock*, 2002
Oil on felt and canvas
Private collection

SNO 61

FROM NEW ABSTRACTION
TO POST-FORMALISM

A project co-curated by Rhonda Davis
and Camila Téllez

Opens Sat 3 - Sun 25 July 2010
3 pm

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Abstracting Objections: The ties that bind

Rhonda Davis and Camila Téllez

Abstraction has always had an uneasy history and reception within Australia. Perceived as sitting outside the inflections of Australian culture, abstraction has been largely viewed as aberrant to the nationalist agenda that has superimposed the bush/rural metaphor upon the Australian psyche. In a postcolonial context this situation is beginning to wane, particularly given the detrimental environmental effects upon the rural landscape that has taken place over the past two hundred years. Yet, paradoxically, the overwhelming positive reception of Indigenous art practice – that uses abstract motifs as symbols to relate the Dreaming for public consumption – is a visualisation of an Aboriginal world view and order.

Historically, the new abstractionists unnerved and rocked the foundation of the Australian art establishment during the 1960s. Perceived like a disdainful foreign mass landing on our provincial shores, the new abstractionists, like their predecessors, the early modernists, embraced the vernacular of internationalism. What started as a small collective, spread across the nation, as many young artists began to convert to the style and philosophy that lay behind the New Abstraction. As an art movement, it gained faster momentum in the latter part of the 1960s, as the claims being made from the Antipodean push were simply rhetorical – this became transparent to a younger generation of artists trying to make their way through the dominating force of figurative art, based on a nationalist and male dominated viewpoint. Culminating in its institutional acceptance through the groundbreaking exhibition *The Field* of 1968, the new artistic movement served as a platform for major artistic developments, such as the Sydney Biennale, to take shape.

Central Street increased the stakes with their high level of professional practice in overturning the pastiche style preferred by the boutique galleries. Galleries such as Central Street and the Pinacotheca Gallery in Melbourne set a timely and legitimate precedent in which galleries like SNO continue to operate. Presenting exhibitions with a devised curatorial program that supports discussion and debate outside the system takes tenacity and commitment. Like the Central Street Gallery, SNO asserts a critical contemporary stance where the gallery space provides a context in which to show their relational artists' works as opposed to simply coming up with an idea.

SNO

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Significantly, as SNO continues to place internationalism – within a regional framework - at the forefront of their operations, it has successfully carried forth Central Street's program in new and renegotiated ways. As Patrick McCaughey said in 1967:

An embrace of internationalism has not by any means spelt anonymity or lack of artistic individuality. Quite the reverse: with these painters a new excitement and sense of discovery suggests that Australian painting is only now coming of age.

From an international perspective and for the Australian group, the notion of a post-formalist aesthetic opens the door as a way of encountering the world that can be extracted and processed art encircling the living and being of that particular reality/world. The full thrust of Central Street's impact that had earlier spawned a generation of artists who continue to relish the process of making art, remains to be seen. Reaching behind the narrative of the subjective, post formalism catches the glances, the non-sequential, the irony, the glimpses of pop culture whilst re-vision-ing and re-practicing the processes of Concrete and Constructivism. This places post formalism at the interchange of contemporary art practice.

In the tradition of Concrete art and post-painterly abstraction, post-formalist paintings are not representations but objects within their own right, bringing forth the object hood – by act of signification. At its height, with the invention of the shaped canvas, the object is no longer a window into representation, but an entity unto itself. It just is.

Without the clutter or the burden of the search for meaning, a liberating effect has taken place upon these artists, so that, to use the words of writer Ben Curnow, "the world has become a studio".¹

The regenerative powers of re-engagement with process, coupled with objectification, rather than succumbing to the stream of emotional renderings, have ensured that the generational line remains intact. This is what we see at SNO through this exhibition that demonstrates the corresponding links between the past and the present.

1. Dr Bill Gruner, Tilman. Australian Post Formalism, and a Journey into regional art-historicism, S.N.O. Group, Sydney 2005 http://www.lookawry.com/spip.php?page=text&id_article=29