

SOME WORDS ON *WORD OF MOUTH*

SARAH RICE

A shared word is always new.
Edmond Jabès¹

This seeming paradox is given voice by the recent Canberra Museum and Gallery (CMAG) show *Word of Mouth – Encounters with Abstract Art*, where the shared word is 'mentorship' as much as 'abstraction'; the language is that spoken at the ANU School of Art; and the result is a visual instantiation of Karel Kupka's definition of art's 'simple, noble function, indispensable to man, which is to communicate.'²

It's not only what's communicated, but how, that was important here. We were invited to listen in to an intra-institutional and inter-generational conversation: a dialogue among the teachers, current postgraduates and graduands of the ANU School of Art. This was an exhibition where artworks spoke to each other as much as to us, and they did so using the vocabulary and grammar of painting, glass, steel, wood, drawing and print. The works were cunningly arranged by curator Mark Bailey to amplify the conversation, with pieces by mentored and mentor oftentimes shown in an intimate tête-à-tête, or grouped together along lines of mutual influence and inspiration, so that the shared whisper echoing from room to room became a veritable chorus.

Word of Mouth, as a whole, rejected mentorship as monologue or dogma, proposing instead a model which could be likened to contemporary post-structuralist theory, where 'dialogue necessarily involves a mutual interplay between the participants, as opposed to a one-way imposition of one upon the other'.³ Such dialogue requires an 'ethical attitude of openness' which was evident in the teachers' willingness to learn from their former students.

Take the mentoring relationship between renowned painter Vivienne Binns and emerging artist Jonathon Webster, for example, where clearly a shared love and intense focus on the act of drawing wove their art practices together. Binns's commanding work, *Stark Knitting*, speaks of the intricate threads that bind teachers, students, communicators, and ultimately communities. Each strand is strengthened as it links with others, branches out, doubles back, and re-threads.

Mentorship in *Word of Mouth* was shown to be ongoing; any final meaning or 'house style' was constantly deferred. A clear analogy with contemporary theories of

language surfaced, where 'earlier meanings are modified by later ones', and each word must 'contain the trace of the ones which have gone before, and hold itself open to the trace of those which are coming after'.⁴ The younger generation represented in this exhibition inform and transform the practices of the School, and many have gone on in their turn to become mentors, inspiring and teaching the School's upcoming generation. The works themselves contain the trace of the institution, the instruction and instructor.

Word of Mouth also told a story of Abstraction, a story that began 'a long time ago', and many of the works bear traces of Minimalism, German Expressionism, Colour Field Painting, Op Art, Abstract Expressionism, and so on. But this was a 'New-Release' story; a whole new take on the Abstract; with multiple plots, narrative twists and

turns, and circuitous routes, as well as moments of pause within an otherwise studied communication exchange.

There were a number of points of interconnection that linked the works in this show, with the most pronounced, to continue the metaphor of speech, being the tension between totality and fragment, circle and void.

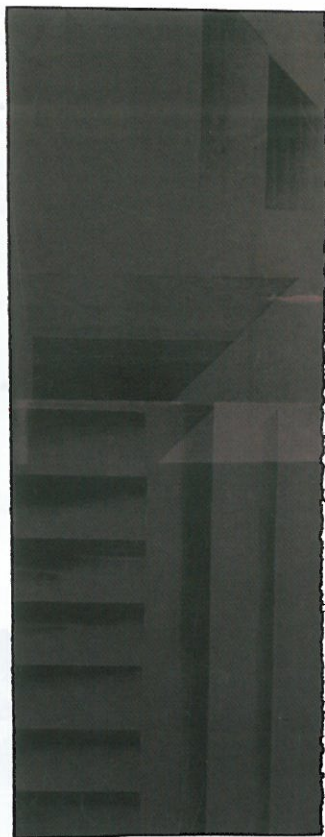
FRAGMENT

De- and re-construction is the name of the Abstraction game. The picture plane is beaten into and out of geometric shape with its accompanying patterns of cubes, planes, and grids – as in the graphically strong work of Binns; the dark geometry of emerging painter Emma Beer's monotype prints; the repeated colourful cubes of Bryan Spier's *The means to make*; Julie Brook's painted polygon series, *I can connect nothing with nothing*, that, like cells dividing and coalescing, references random molecular structures; or in the hybrid, honeycomb forms of Lionel Bawden; the shattered planes of steel in Dan Lorrimer's dynamic sculptures [see related profile, p.50], and the disorientating linearity of Richard Blackwell's MDF wall pieces. These works pry apart the tight grip of hard-edged abstraction.

The classical commitment to geometric perfection is questioned in the exquisite paintings by Ruth Waller, *Head of Painting* at the ANU School of Art. Waller demonstrates how the illusory space of her source imagery, taken in this instance from the European



Richard Whiteley, *Illuminate*, 2010, cast glass and metal, 57.5 diameter x 17cm; image courtesy the artist; photo: Greg Piper



1/ Emma Beer, *and I ain't gonna lose my skin*, 2010, (detail) screenprint and drypoint on paper; unique state; one of six parts, each 76 x 30cm; image courtesy the artist

2/ Gregory Hodge, *Magazine mystics*, 2012, (detail) acrylic on hand-made paper, one of sixty parts, each 50 x 38cm

3/ Mel Douglas, *High tide #3*, 2012, blown coldworked and engraved glass, 26 x 56 x 56cm; image courtesy the artist. Images courtesy Rob Little Digital Images, Canberra

Renaissance, can be shattered and elegantly reconstructed into a pattern of colour, with more than a nod towards Op Art. By changing the view, as if through a kaleidoscope or lens, the image fragments, and breaks the spectrum into shards as can also be seen in Helen Shelley's luminescent paintings on Perspex, and Spier's fluorescent, futuristic envisioning in *Beginning of a new kind of day*.

The energetic vibrancy of the final room was intensified by the explosive colour works of Dioni Salas-Hammar, and by Greg Hodge's multi-panelled work which encompassed an entire wall. Comprising sixty sheets, Hodge's *Magazine mystics* demonstrates the very methodology of fragmentation. Drawing eclectically from visual and popular culture, from the sublime to the 'trashy-mag' ridiculous, the work reads like a temporal palimpsest of layers sliced apart and exhibited in spatial proximity.

FULL CIRCLE

The circle was a shared word reiterated throughout the show yet many works in *Word of Mouth* disrupted the circle's notion of unity or totality. In Blackwell's striking MDF work *North Columbus Drive* a portion of the circle is absent, reminiscent of a gigantic jigsaw with a missing piece; a break in the circuit.

Glass artist Mel Douglas's work speaks the language of Minimalism; her elegant semi-circles invoke a balance and serenity closest to Classicism, and yet, her large, black, spherical bowl *High Tide #5* rests on a tilted angle, teetering off-centre in a way which recalls poet Emily Dickinson's admonition to 'tell all the truth but tell it slant'. Richard Whiteley, Head of Glass at the ANU School of Art, also seems to offer the viewer a light-filled bowl in the centre of his contemplative cast-glass circle *Illuminate*, and yet what appears to extend forward is actually carved in from behind. These circles are not

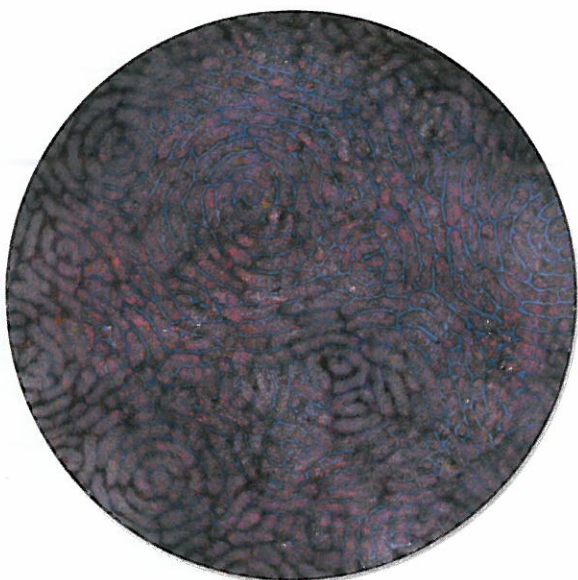
always as they seem.

The stillness evident in the glass works was fractured by the frenzied hive of activity within the circular confines of Liz Coats's *See, hear, know #1* (which greeted viewers at the entrance to the show); as if a magnifying glass were used to reveal the hidden life of cells or germs crawling across the painted surface. And what of Whiteley's stately glass ellipse *Oblique*. To quote, again, Jabès: '[t]he oval may, after all, be but a circle that has – from negligence, daydreams, forgetfulness? – delayed its closure.'⁵ There is openness and closure here; presence and absence; light, negative space, and void.

Most telling however are the circles that have unraveled and slipped into spirals, echoing post-structuralism's claim that the 'process of difference in language can be traced round infinitely'⁶. Something of this operation can be seen in Julie Brooke's ten-part series *Strange Objects*, whose neat, geometric studies turn on a dark axis; wax and wane by gradations and rotations. *Swirl* is a series of coloured pencil drawings by next-generation artist Jonathan Webster where endless spirals spin crazily outward, overtaking even the paper and its confines with a wobbly, uneven line. Inspired by the knots of trees and their ever-expanding life-rings, Webster's works present a mesmerising whirlwind of colour; their swirling vortexes also reminiscent of early television magic acts of disappearance, the screen-saver fade out.

VOID: BLANK PAGE, WHITE NOISE

We are well acquainted with the whole disarming history of the void: from Malevich's 1913 *Black Square* through to Reinhardt's and Rothko's black paintings, and the white works of Robert Rauschenberg. Such works are the visual counterpart to literary silence, which found visual correlation in *Word of Mouth* in those black and



Liz Coats, *See, hear, know #1*, 2007, acrylic media on wood, 110cm diameter; image courtesy the artist

white works which punctuated the show. The glass wall-pieces of Nadège Desgenétez are akin to free-floating full-stops, commas, or even the thought-bubbles that hover suspended over characters in their child-like, pre-verbal imaginary. These works require a vast visual absence or blank wall, in order to assert their presence. The *trompe l'oeil* effect of both Douglas's and Whitely's tonal glass works, where light and shadow are harnessed to carve space out of nothingness, are yet another example of how the exhibition handled 'void'.

Emma Beer furthers the conversation of/in black, with her painstaking exploration of black's refractive capacity, warmth, and tonal quality in her print series *and I ain't gonna lose my skin*. The work presents layer upon layer of blacks, causing spatial planes to be pushed forward and back in an illusion that the paper is folded, concertinaed, and rippling with shallow shadows. Beer's black examinations share a common discourse with her mentor, painting lecturer Peter Maloney, whose work *The Tuesday years* is a black-and-white meditation on mortality and memoir. The sweeping gesture of this large painting seems to be at the same time an erasure. These are the marks of negation; of word or image censored. The resulting effect is one of illegibility, white noise, or static.

UNSPOKEN/ INEFFABLE

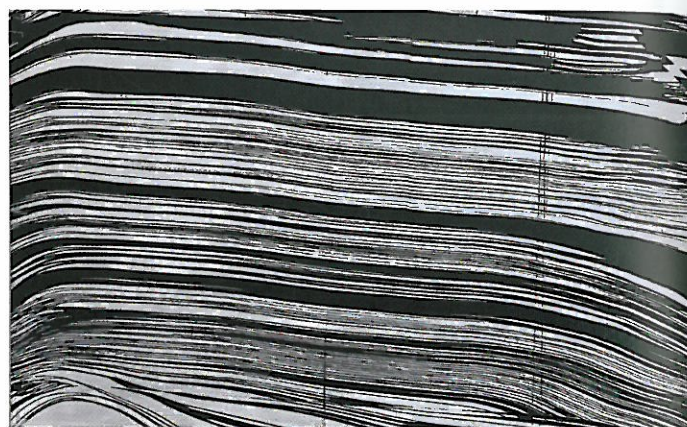
The unthought – what eludes thought and even the question of thought – is perhaps an infinite passive patience at the edge of the void.

Edmond Jabès⁷

In his catalogue essay, Mark Bailey indicates that *Word of Mouth* is an exhibition committed to the present; to abstract materiality; but also to the ineffable. There is a quasi-spiritual quality here, as seen in the deconstructed transcendental sublime of Waller's icon-inspired paintings; the altarpiece look-alikes of Helen Shelley in painted acrylic, and of Lionel Bawden in sculpted coloured-pencil. Christopher Carmody's exquisite series of paintings are Rothko-esque in their rectilinear reverberations of glowing colour and their mystical force. The covers of stacked books as they fade by degrees in the sunlight are the source of his inspiration. The surface of these works shimmer with an iridescent aura, as if the ephemeral spirit-of-the-book is



Bryan Spier, *Beginning of a new kind of day*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 200cm; image courtesy the artist



Peter Maloney, *The Tuesday years*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 259cm; image courtesy the artist; Images courtesy Rob Little Digital Images, Canberra

haloed even as the book-as-object is caught in the very moment of de-materialisation.

As with Maloney's work, Carmody's paintings are evidence of temporality. They explore how the past eludes preservation, and how history leaves its indelible mark on the material, physical, corporeal. Carmody's warm, translucent paintings are somehow bodily; the glowing apricot-pink is almost skin-like. And indeed, the body is not entirely eclipsed in this survey of contemporary abstraction. Marie Hagerty's amorphous figures twist, turn, writhe and dance from the walls in stark black and white, contrasted with plump, pale pinks. Nebulous, daunting, erotic; poised between colourful spontaneity and dark restraint, these paintings are evidence of the 'word made flesh'.

1. Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, (trans.) Rosmarie Waldrop, University of Chicago press, Chicago, 1993, p. 115.
2. Karel Kupka *Dawn of Art: Painting and Sculpture of Australian Aborigines*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965.
3. Christopher Falzon, *Foucault and Social Dialogue: Beyond Fragmentation*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, p. 7.
4. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p. 128.
5. Jabès, 1993: p. 42.
6. Eagleton, 1983: p. 128.
7. Jabès, 1993: p. 17.

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