

Contemplating the non object

SNO 117 exhibition: four Western Australian artists: August 2015

By Brian Mahoney

Non objective art can have visual power, beauty, and impact. It can involve tremendous technical skill. But can it transmit feelings, or prompt thoughts about human existence and the grand themes of love, life and death that art has been preoccupied with over centuries? Can it summon thoughts of the sublime, the cosmos, the infinite. Or convey the feeling of a particular place or person?

Or is it an art form totally freed of meaning, simply revelling in a new unconstrained emptiness, having shaken the shackles of illusion, story-telling, perspectival tricks and accumulated rules for picture making? Purists will argue there is no purpose for it other than to exist; to be. The artist is an aesthetic scientist involved in pure research, experimenting with materials in her/his laboratory-like studio.

To be truly non objective, they maintain, visual art should have no objective other than to create a new object with no reference to anything outside itself. Entirely self-referential. It is about nothing other than colours, shapes and textures; matter and form. And the more pure and flat the colours, the more sharp and precise the colour boundaries are, the better.

There is a long history of artists generating abstract art by abstracting scenes or images from the world around them. The resulting paintings may carry only a residual trace of the objects that inspired the painting. Indeed, those objects may be unrecognisable to all, except the artist. But in a philosophical sense the resulting

painting remains simply one step beyond figurative art. And being a simple extension of representational art, it cannot avoid the questions one asks of figurative art: "What is it depicting?", "What does it represent?" and, ultimately, "What does it mean – I don't understand it?"

It is at this point derivative abstract art flounders. Here is an art that fails to show us a world we know. The general populace looks for meaning and can't see any.

A second stream of abstract art – which also enjoys a history of more than 100 years – started from a different premise. When Kasimir Malevich painted his *Black Square*, *White Square* and other non representational or non objective paintings, the connection with representational art was severed. At that point the question "What does it mean?" became meaningless. Because the underlying aim, the *raison d'être* of this type of art is to consider shapes and colours for their own inherent properties. No longer were these the tools to create pictures reminding us of bowls of fruit, nudes, landscapes or anything else. Shape and colour became the subject matter. Painting was freed of the job of reflecting our environment back to us.

Finally, it is the art work alone that is the object – it's not trying to imitate anything else; no longer derived from the world around us, but creating a new

world on its own terms. It is art set free of extraneous demands. That's the purist view. But like all utopian visions it's almost impossible to achieve.

The artist is subliminally influenced by her/his world. So this influence must show through, mustn't it? It is almost impossible to disassociate visual art completely from the visual environment in which we live.

Even when artificial intelligence takes over the art-making process from human artists, there will be parameters set that will dictate the type of art that AI produces. And it will be impossible to avoid those parameters from being based on visual or aesthetic guidelines grounded in the real world. How can a completely new aesthetic approach not trace back to concepts of how we see our environment?

Then there is another hurdle: the human brain craves connections and will look for them even where they don't exist. We search for the familiar, and for meaning in coincidences. We demand everything has a 'story' that can help us understand it. The groups of schoolchildren or adults being taken on an art gallery tour, for instance, will be told a story about what is pictured in a painting – such as the explosion in the railway tunnel that resulted in Arthur Streeton's *Fire's On, Lapstone Tunnel* 1891. It's an easier and more engaging way to provide connections and insight about painting than to attempt to

communicate aesthetic theories or construction techniques. No wonder figurative art gains the lion's share of publicity and attention, with abstract art not as widely appreciated.

The spark that ignited these thoughts was SNO 117, an exhibition by four Western Australian-based artists, with each occupying a separate room at Sydney Non Objective's Marrickville centre during August 2015. The diversity within this small sampling of contemporary abstract painters demonstrates non objective art is now a broad church – growing broader year by year.

Each of the four is creating beautifully made and consummately assured work. In seeking to find what lies beneath the surfaces of the paintings they brought to SNO 117, I find each artist thinks differently about their art practice and non objective art. And non objective art can indeed summon up thoughts of our reason for being, or be a pathway to nothing...

A Non Objective Primer...

It's no wonder people scratch their heads and complain about impenetrable 'art-speak', as the term 'non objective' is a perfect case of Orwellian double-think. Referring to art, non objective means almost the opposite of what it does in everyday speech.

An objective is a goal or thing aimed at or sought. If you have an objective attitude or approach to life you are impartial, detached, unbiased or unprejudiced. You'd be expected to be even-handed, fair-minded, dispassionate or unemotional. So to be non-objective is the exact opposite: having a subjective approach based on personal feelings, tastes or opinions, rather than facts.

*The term 'non objective' was first used in art by Russian artist, Aleksander Rodchenko, in titling his paintings (Non-Objective Painting: Black on Black 1918). Fellow Russian, Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935), then picked it up, writing about 'non-objectivity' in 1919 and publishing the book *The Non-Objective World* in 1927.*

The meaning they wanted to convey was of an art that does not represent an object, person, place or thing. [More grammatically, they should have named it 'non object' art.] The shapes in their compositions are unidentifiable. In the non objective world of visual art, less is more, in terms of colour, structure and patterns. The aim is for purity and simplicity by reducing painting to its most elemental essence.

*Theo van Doesburg's *Art Concret* manifesto talked of line, colour and surface as the 'concrete reality of painting', spawning the term 'concrete' as another descriptor. Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Hilma af Klint and many who followed them worked towards objectless paintings.*

Perhaps influenced by Plato's belief that geometry is the highest form of beauty, much non objective art tends to be geometric, seeking the virtues of purity and simplicity.

*Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian and Frantisek Kupka were intrigued by the spiritual writings of Theosophists, particularly Madame Blavatsky's work, *The Secret Doctrine*. It sparked a brief interest in ancient wisdom, mysticism and spirituality that inevitably influenced their development of abstract art. Likewise, US artist John McLaughlin, who spent 1935-8 in Japan, was fascinated by the Zen masters' concept of the space between objects, the marvelous void, being more important than the objects themselves to facilitate mediation.*

So artists have attempted to find the transcendental, contemplative and timeless since non objective art began.

Brian Blanchflower:

In SNO 117, Blanchflower shows selections from the past decade: an impressive 2-metre long *Concretion 1:6 (green-gold)* 2007; a *Small Quartet* 2008 of brightly coloured acrylic on canvas rectangles; a silver-grey monochrome, *Grey 2*, 2004, and a suite of nine small *Coalescences (9 'cakes')* 2004-5, darkly textured paintings that stand off the wall. The *Coalescences* are mainly circular or square; dark greys, black and purple, constructed of oils, acrylic, silica and pumice powder on dark mesh, ply and canvas supports. No more than 26cm across, the highly physical nature of these paintings gives them a strong presence.

“While the paintings I’ve sent to the show are not the latest I’ve been working on, they present a cohesive view of my recent activity and were chosen to fit the space,” he says.

Comments from earlier discussions with the artist leave one in no doubt that, for him, non objective art can be concerned with vast abstract themes such as our existence in the universe, or a sense of place that goes beyond any individual locality.

“Landscape, I live in it. I’m not depicting it but absorbing it generally and that seeps into my work.”

Regarded as a master of the monochrome, Blanchflower admits his crusty colour fields are informed by something more than the paint: “The main ingredient in my paintings is the unknowable.”

Discussing the consistent rebalancing of paint, space, matter and colour and how some paintings take him many months to complete, he says: “The more energy invested in a painting, the more energy it emanates. And the more physical they become, the less knowable they become. My work is as much to do with that as colour, form, format and process.” Then he adds, “But what they are about and are pointing towards is the spiritual.”

In 1961 Blanchflower went on a three month walk across the south west of England with friend and fellow artist, Bob Brighton, using ordinance survey maps. The following year he took another 1,000 mile walk on his own through south west England and Wales, taking in Stonehenge and dozens of other megalithic pre-history sites. The walks were formative experiences.

“The whole nature of walks is that you see everything. It becomes a deep experience and a source for later work – maybe even now. The stones, the light and other mysterious aspects of those ancient sites... what are they trying to tell us? What were they set up for? All of that is relevant to what I’m trying to do in painting. Unless we are looking beyond to that, then what? ...the spiritual quality; that’s the important bit.”

Trevor Richards:

“Each of us has developed our own practice over time and there is no cross-over between us, other than we all work in non-representational, non figurative art. This show demonstrates how it is possible to develop a personal language within the non objective field, and how it is open to personal interpretation in so many ways.

“None of us see ourselves as regional. Non objective art is a world-wide movement and the scope of non objective art is broadening all the time.

“It’s impossible to be totally uninfluenced by the space you inhabit. My interest is mainly in architectural space – the built environment – rather than purely painting shapes, or attempting to express the sublime, or nature.”

“This exhibition reflects how non objective art is now far more open to interpretation in so many ways and how it is possible to develop a personal language within the broad scope of non objective painting,” Richards says.

Richards is showing an imposing on-site wall-work, scaled up to 3 x 4 metres from a small painting on canvas, hanging in the centre of the opposite wall. He talks of this massive scaling-up as a transfer, or projection, with the colours and proportions of the tiny canvas and the giant painting on the wall being more or less identical.

The extreme contrast in scale continues his interest in colour, pattern and its relationship to architecture and the built environment, though he labels the group from which the small painting is extracted as ‘*Character Studies 1-12*’, each painted with a different close friend or family member in mind. It is impossible, of course, for a viewer to see any connection between the four coloured stripes of the composition and any human person or other object. Nor is Richards asking viewers to look for any connection. But it’s instructive that the artist mentally associates this most geometric, hard-edge painting with a particular person.

Brian Blanchflower is highly respected and has a long exhibition career, showing extensively in Sydney and Melbourne. Trevor Richards, who curated the show, regards Blanchflower as “the elder statesman of abstract art.” Critics and curators including Daniel Thomas, Tony Bond, Terence Maloon and Sebastian Smeed regard Blanchflower as one of the world’s top painters. He has been dedicated to abstract painting since the early 1960s and is represented in all State collections, the National Gallery of Australia and collections around the world including MOMA and the British Museum. His work was shown earlier this year in the Oslo National Gallery, Norway, and the Wesfarmers Collection at the Ian Potter Museum, Victoria. In 2013 he was included in the landmark ‘Australia’ survey at the Royal Academy of Art, London.

Tom Freeman:

Freeman’s four sculptural constructions and five ink drawings in the SNO 117 exhibition were mainly created during 2014-15, together with two small paintings from 2013. The joyous sculptures are completely without meaning or reference to anything beyond themselves. They are the most automatic, process-driven explorations in the exhibition, inspired by nothing more than the fascination to experiment with materials.

Freeman has developed an almost automatic process of experimenting with paint as sculpture, by repeatedly dipping hessian string into red, yellow and blue acrylic paint, gradually building layer upon layer, resulting in an amorphous shape covered in rings of alternating red, yellow and blue.

“My general approach in the past two years changed from earlier work I was loading with references and meaning. I made a decision to concentrate on purely abstract art, even though it was a whole other realm I didn’t have a background in, or a history of studying,” Freeman says.

“In earlier video and figurative drawing the textures and surfaces had begun to take greater precedence and started driving my artwork. So I let that come to the fore. Then the materials and processes became the work. It was a natural progression.

“The structures I’m making with paint and string and wire are the most abstract, as I’m not putting any form or references into that. The process itself is forming the shapes, taking things a little more out of my control.”

The ink drawings are meditations on, or representations of, the more reflexive process involved in building the sculptures, although some drawings are taken further. They have overtones of X-ray examinations of the onion-ring structure of the sculptures.

His two paintings are the transition pieces that ended an earlier preoccupation about his grandfather’s history and led to Freeman’s present pure, abstracted work.

Trevor Richards is an esteemed abstractionist with a 30-year exhibition history. His practice has encompassed painting, sculpture, video, photography and installation. He is widely recognised for his formally structured, minimalist approach to painting, a sustained engagement with a limited range of colours, and an admiration for the commonplace. In the past decade he has shown extensively in Europe. Trevor’s work has been acquired by the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of WA, Artbank, University of WA, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University, BankWest, Royal Perth Hospital, Kerry Stokes collection and several other corporate and private collections.

Tom Freeman has been exhibiting for 10 years, his practice includes painting, photography and sculptural works, which in the past have included plaster, wood and beeswax. Curator of SNO117, Trevor Richards, notes that Freeman’s work is often organic and intuitive.

Michele Theunissen:

Theunissen builds up her paintings with pigments and acrylic, as well as artists ink, often strengthening the fine ink lines on the surface with several layers. The eight paintings on canvas in the SNO 117 exhibition are comprised of five small, two mid size, and one larger work, painted from 2012 to this year.

“The recent paintings are based on a hexagonal structure. I build this out to a point where a disruption occurs and causes imbalance. Then I focus on developing the surface until it resolves into a new state of equilibrium.

“While Tom’s process may be more scientific, mine is a matter of working with what is in front of me and making responses until it is complete.” So when does she know a painting is complete? “It can be difficult to know. Sometimes it’s a rhythmic structure that’s emphasised; sometimes it’s a sense of colour balance.”

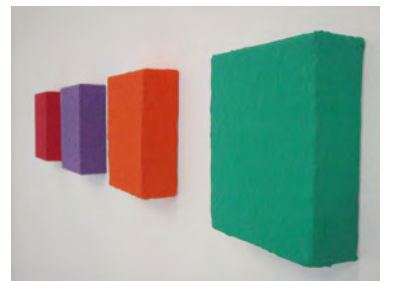
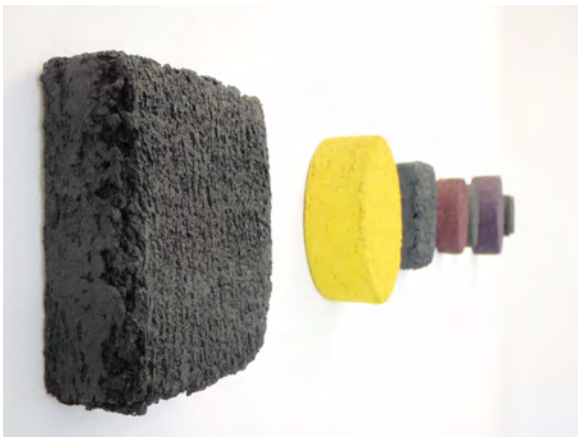
Titles of her earlier paintings such as *Ways to Nothing* could indicate the artist is attempting to reach an extreme of non objectivity. The reference, however, is to the philosophy of Buddhist philosopher, Acharya Nagarjuna (150-250 AD). His views on emptiness and nothingness – which refer to the interdependence of all things – fascinates her.

How much of this thinking finds its way into her paintings? “The principles inherent in the philosophy influence my approach to painting, but get left behind in the act of painting,” she admits.

“Non objective? To be honest I don’t believe in absolute non objectivity. Anything an artist creates has to be subjective in some respects – the materials chosen, choice of colour and the choices made in terms of building the surface plane even though sometimes the reasons for choosing are less obvious.

“I’m interested in the entanglement between the subjective and objective. My experiences and beliefs are filtered into the making of abstract work. Use of materials and the way they are applied extend my subjectivity into something that is also not me. It’s kind of reaching for nothing.”

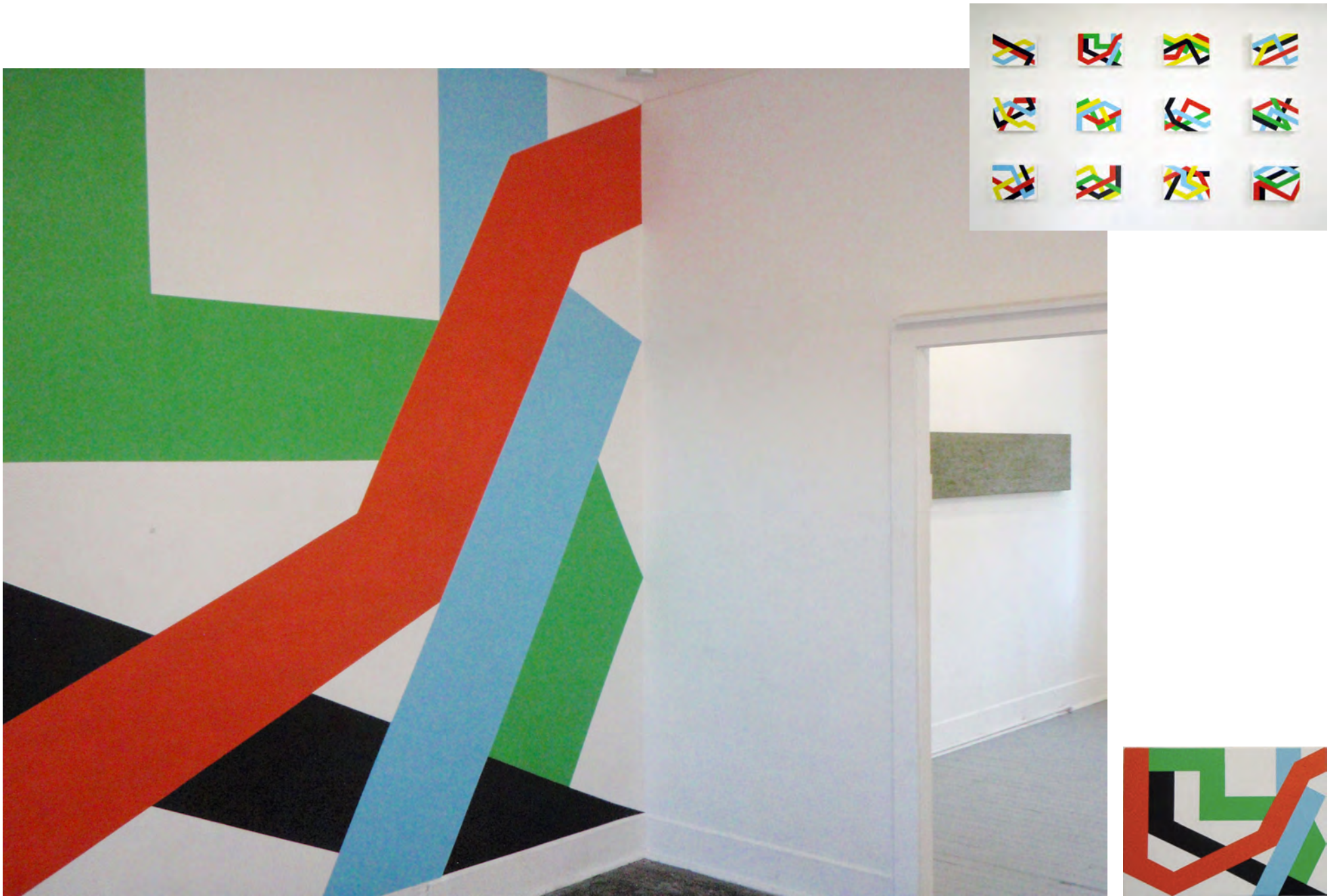
Michele Theunissen, creates delicate and often mysterious paintings composed of fine filaments of colour overlaid across the canvas. Her work features in collections such as Art Gallery of WA, Artbank, John Curtin Gallery, Wesfarmers, BankWest, King Edward Memorial Hospital, Princess Margaret Hospital, Holmes a Court Collection, University of WA and private, institutional and corporate collections. Theunissen has been exhibiting for 20 years and recent exhibitions include Abstracting the Collection, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and a film installation at PICA as part of the Perth International Arts Festival.



Above, Brian Blanchflower, L-R: *Coalescences* (9 'cakes'), 2004-5; *Concretion 1:6 (green gold)*, 2007, micaceous oils, acrylic, pumice, silica on polyester/cotton canvas 36.5 x 214 x 5.5 cm; *Small Quartet*, 2008, acrylic and silica on canvas, each 13 x 10 x 4 cm with 10.5 intervals.

Below, Tom Freeman, L-R: *Black & white ink circle* 375 x 55 cm; *Kettering library 3 (20)*, 2013, 14 x 14 cm; *Yellow blue red dip (3 together; 3 separate; upside down)* 2015 [Last two photos Bo Wong]





Above, Trevor Richards, main: *SNO Projection 2015 Part 2*, acrylic on wall, 300 x 400 cm; top right: 12 *Character Studies*; lower right: *Part 1*, acrylic on canvas on board, 22 x 31.5 cm.
 Below: Michele Theunissen, left: *Pink and white lines*, 2014-5, acrylic, pigment, artist inks on linen 140 x 120 cm; upper right: *Organic geometry #4*, 2012, 61 x 61 cm; lower right: *Orange 2015*, 30 x 30 cm.

