

Could non objective art be the 'next big thing'?

Reminiscence on the occasion of the 100th show at Sydney Non Objective (SNO), December 2013 by Brian Mahoney

"Forget painting; it's dead. Video, performance, installation – that's where art is headed."

That was the conventional wisdom as we entered the 21st Century, with art spaces, museums, universities and commentators all facing in that direction when searching for contemporary art's next big thing.

A series of 'Constructed Colour' shows of painted constructions in 2001* in Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle, however, was one of the straws in the wind that indicated painting wasn't finished. It was simply stretching its legs before getting back on the wall and pulling more surprises out of the hat.

In the ensuing years the evidence mounted that painting in general – and abstract art in particular – would continue to be re-engineered, using an established 'language' to refresh earlier ideas and communicate new concepts. There were still plenty of directions for abstract art to take.

The tiny proportion of art students in the 1980s and 90s that persisted with paint and sought out the European beginnings of abstract art for inspiration were seen as reactionary. In hindsight, though, they look more like our own 'secessionists', offering an alternative to the two predominant 'stories' of Australian art. The first widely-accepted story tells of a linear progression from a colonial view of the landscape, to Streeton-Roberts impressionism, to Nolan-Boyd antipodean retro-classicism, leading automatically to the next generation of figurative painters. End of story.

That figurative stream was the mainstream alternative to the second 'story' of art evolution: conceptual art, tumbling into experimentation in video, performance and installation, progressing to digital new media, or computer generated work.

But there was a third stream, personified by Sydney Non Objective (SNO). This took as its starting point the rich heritage of abstract art, going back to Malevitch's 'Black Square' of just 100 years ago. Its emphasis was on painting, but it also was open to everything the conceptual-digital stream could offer.

Looking back now it's apparent that an event that occurred on Friday evening of March 25, 2005, at a small industrial workshop at 11 Faversham Street Marrickville was a

significant milestone in the progression of abstract art in Australia. It was the first exhibition of Sydney Non Objective (SNO). Eight years on, SNO now celebrates its 100th show in its 175 Marrickville Road centre.

The Factory 11 Showroom was in a dark brown two-storey brick fronted building with a wide roller-door shutter at the front and a concrete apron extending to the street. It was part of the unassuming, pragmatic architecture of small business premises that sprang up in the low rent Sydenham-Marrickville corridor post-War. It was surrounded by vehicle panel beaters and engineering workshops, an industrial dry cleaning operation and a bowling club. There was another reason it was economical as an artist-run space. It lay directly under Sydney's flight path.

As the sun set, each plane approaching Sydney airport was a massive roar that killed conversation, a gleaming fuselage emerging over the building like a slow-moving alien creature with flashing lights and wheels that seemed near enough to touch.

A brazier burning chunks of wood in front of the open roller-door served as a sausage sizzle. A shallow, three-walled space beyond the opening glowed with non objective works by Kyle Jenkins, Andrew Leslie, Vincente Butron, John Nixon, Tony Triff, Pam Aitken and Billy Gruner.

The second show featured David Akenson (Brisbane), Trevor Richards (Fremantle), Salvatore Panatteri (Sydney), Justin Andrews (Melbourne), Sarah Keighery (Sydney), Giles Ryder (Sydney/Brisbane), Simon Morris (Wellington), Stephen Bram (Melbourne), Beth Kirkland (Albany), Helen Smith

(Fremantle), Melanie Khava (Sydney), Jurek Wybraniec (Fremantle) and Tilman (Brussels). An outside wall work by Daniel Gottin (Basel, Switzerland) was the first of a series of exterior wall projects.

The geographic diversity of the second show signaled an important aspect of SNO: it would operate as a global network of hundreds of non objective artists – a rallying point that surprised by the sheer number of artists engaged in non objective practice. Links that John Nixon had formed with European concrete artists were consolidated and extended by Kyle, Billy, Sarah, Andrew and others becoming enthusiastic world travellers. International artists were drawn to exhibit and visit the SNO 'showroom'. Dialogue ensued.

So within the first 25 exhibitions we saw works by some of the world's leading exponents of non objective, or concrete, art: Olivier Mosset of Tucson, Australian pioneer Syd Ball, Jan Van Der Ploeg of Amsterdam, Christoph Dahlhausen from Bonn, Matthew Deleget of New York, Gerold Miller (Berlin), and Gerwald Rockenschaub (Vienna).

Likewise, a swathe of important Australian artists came together in the project's first 25 shows: Andrew Leslie, Lynne Eastaway, Syd Ball, Ian Milliss, Dena Georgetti, David M Thomas, David Serisier, Jay Balbi, Karl Wiebke, Kerrie Poliness, Ann Marie May, Alex Spremberg, Simon Ingram, Richard Dunn, Marco Fusinato, Stephen Little, Ann Louise Rowe, Melinda Harper, Helga Groves, Kate Mackay, Christopher Dean, Sophie Coombs, Julian Dashper, Elizabeth Pulie, Regina Walter, Tony Schwensen, Ruark Lewis and Robert Owen. Since then SNO has shown more than 400 non objective artists, forming a link between like-minded people

in dozens of countries around the world. New faces have enthusiastically taken on operational roles from the founders, several of whom remain involved. SNO has resolutely put the artist first, with an economic model that has tried to keep the cost of exhibitions and studios as low as possible, relying on volunteer managers, administrators and curators to succeed in this aim.

SNO's dedicated focus in promoting investigation into all forms of abstract art, particularly non objective, or concrete work has achieved several outcomes. It has become highly respected internationally as one of the world's important non objective art centres. In turn, this has raised worldwide awareness of non objective artists in Sydney and Australia and facilitated global conversations with their international peers.

SNO's approach of presenting the work of emerging practitioners together with established and revered abstract artists has helped generate dialogue between the generations. Activity has not been confined to visual art alone. SNO has run a continuous program of contemporary sound works with each exhibition as an important part of the project. It has staged performances and lectures, and survey shows of significant early abstract art and sound art pioneers, deepening understanding of Australia's heritage of abstract visual art and experimental sound work. And its example has prompted the establishment of other predominantly non objective spaces, such as Factory 49 and Articulate.

For its 15th show in April 2006, SNO moved to larger premises where it remains today: rooms above the hardware store in a 1930s 'arts and crafts' style building at 175 Marrickville Road. This enabled several showrooms for simultaneous individual shows. It also provided a couple of studios for local and visiting artists – rapidly diminishing in supply with the zombie-like march of high-rise development eliminating cheap-rent studio spaces in one inner city area after another.

With many artists sending work from interstate and overseas, the economy of the padded post bag dictated the size of much of the work shown. That restriction demonstrated that even small abstract works could be monumental – even though they lacked the figurative 'story' that is required for most people to 'understand' art. At their best they could command a haunting presence, verging on the spiritual.



COLOURS

The mix of artists in each exhibition, usually one to a room, consistently surprised with beauty, joy and delight. The fifth anniversary show, SNO 57, in March 2010 was one of those events. It summed up five years and 50 shows....

A paint-splattered old black trannie sits on the floor pumping white noise into the room, the dial stuck nowhere near a radio station. Brushes thick with paint sit on open paint cans and a mess of masking tape lies alongside them, pulled from the canvas on the wall above and strewn on the floor. Paint splatters are on the wall. The painting, composed of vertical white, orange and blue stripes, is the outcome – the product – of the activity indicated by this little tableau surrounding it. Or is it? Maybe the documented process is the essential work... what happened and how it happened. Is the way things happen more important than the product of the activity and the painting simply a part of the process? The title, 'Punk Painting SNO March 2010', is no help, as 'painting' could refer to either the object or the activity; noun or verb.

As with all artwork, if you fit it into the broader context of the artist's oeuvre you get closer to the answers. Billy Gruner's 'Punk Paintings' are rush jobs. Done at the same time as he's trying to hang a whole exhibition of a dozen different artists' work. Attacked with the same speed and gusto Jackson Pollock or Picasso would have used. Modest in scale. Rough and ready. "You want art? Just give me a few minutes..."

They follow Gruner's other conceptual contributions to art, under the general title of 'collective monochromes', collaborative works and exhibitions that Gruner initiated, dating back to a show he curated in 1997 at Curve Gallery, Redfern.

The 'collective monochromes' include multi-authored stripe paintings where Gruner offers individuals in his audience the opportunity to paint a single vertical line of a painting, leaving space between their line and those either side. Using only the colour he provides, inevitably from a simple can of house paint. How you paint the line is up to you...

Or many-coloured monochromes where each person is invited to paint the entire picture surface with one colour. Each, in turn, obliterates the work of the previous person. The hand of each artist is present but hidden in the final work. It's a collaborative work done to strait-jacket rules, a co-operative artwork that mocks the concept of the artist as a talented individual producing unique objects. Anyone and everyone can do it. Why shouldn't art be for the masses? Yet it is also unique, and as of-the-moment as a photograph – an historic record of the making of the work, documenting the artists and others who were together that day in that place. Each of those involved carries away the memory of the act of painting in public. Billy carries away the painted object that embodies those memories. Later viewers don't see the process, or the social interaction that occurred: such as the time in Brisbane that one girl attacked another for painting over her just-completed work. Apparently the rules were not clear that night. Or the cheap wine may have had something to do with it.

Sydney Non Objective artists are extending the themes explored in concrete art, colour field, and other forms of early radical abstract art. Billy's practice does this, but also goes further. It questions the need for art to be precious in order to be valuable. He takes a new approach to concerns that artists have largely avoided since the 60s and 70s, when the avant-garde rebelled against what they regarded as the restrictive embrace of the commercial galleries, museums and large auction houses. Mammon in those days called for art to remain within traditional forms of painting, drawing, prints and sculpture to be collectable. The spirit that created artist-run spaces, which spawned installations, performances and happenings in non-art environments – and the eruption of conceptual work at that time – continues as an intellectual questioning in Gruner's work.

Cy Twombly might paint with eyes closed as a way to fight against the control and the aspirations of perfection that most artists seek. Gruner's approach is to adopt the mindset and paint technique of a house painter. Ralph Balson in reverse. Despite this denial of authorship and the eradication of individualistic ego in works produced by a collective, Gruner's artworks are identifiably art objects: useless pieces of matter that manage to exude purpose and a unique personality.

But, back to the SNO 5th anniversary show. To the left of Billy's tableau, acid-sharp colours zing diagonally in 'Untitled, 2008'. It's a work that graced the entry page of SNO's website that year when its creator, Sophia Egarchos, was the first to work in SNO's artist studio, after one of the six show rooms of the upstairs gallery was converted to a studio space.



On the wall opposite the window in Room 2 an orange ochre, landscape-dimensioned rectangle sits alongside a similar rectangle in black. Joyous and restful, day-and-night. While each rectangle is monochrome, each has its own subtle texture and mottling. It's only the title that makes you realize it's not a 'painting'. Sure, it's painted, but the 'paint' in this case – as with all of Sarah Keighery's work – is derived from food. 'Saffron & Squid Ink Painting' 2010. A beautiful, classic double-monochrome, made from food colouring (not the crocus flower saffron) and tentacled sea creatures. To the gallery via the kitchen. Sarah has been concentrating on spices, sugar, salt and other natural food-related pigments since her days as Simone Logue's catering organizer. Her work roves from tiny palm-sized, hand-crafted canvases held to their stretcher with tacks that rust from the hygroscopic qualities of some of her ingredients, to multiple large-sized platters ascending two story walls.

Two of the other founders of SNO are in Room 2: Andrew Leslie and Kyle Jenkins.

Andrew's 'Room' 2010 is one of his signature pieces – a combination of sculpture and subtle light experiment; physical objects and reflected colour. There is an unseen painting on the reverse side of a row of vertical strips of aluminium that levitate just off the wall surface. The 'painting', which is often a single word or alternating bands of colour, is therefore seen only as a glow reflected on to the wall between the aluminium strips. A solid block of wood at the end of the series acts as a counterpoint to the repeated musical notes of industrial aluminium.

Kyle Jenkins 'Untitled No. 10' of 2002 predates the formation of SNO. A vertical painting of four broad, horizontal bars, it has a pleasing 'complete' feeling, despite its apparent simplicity. Alternating pale grey-blue and mid blue stripes. The work dates back to the time of his 'Constructed Colour' project, which assembled the raw materials of non-objective art almost as ready-mades. In those exhibitions, seemingly arbitrary piles of coloured wooden off-cuts were jumbled on the floor and a cube painted in Kyle's broad horizontal stripes stood in the space like a minimalist's cubby-house.

Along with the 25 other artists' work in the SNO 57 exhibition of 2010 was the contemporary sound work that is part of each show, in this case an opening night performance by drone guitar group, Silvertone.

While SNO's focus is primarily on visual art, it has championed contemporary sound work alongside the visual, with Ian Andrews and Ruark Lewis steering this aspect.

SNO's website proclaims that it selects projects that "generally reflect a wide variety of approaches to the plastic arts, new media, or any form that may provide a deepening of the contemporary investigation into non-objective, concrete, and abstract art in general. SNO attempts to critically balance different levels of artistic experience, and the specialist program aims to sustain a policy of innovation and integration of new ideas, often by presenting established and emerging artists together."

The centre has successfully championed artists focused on reducing art to its essential elements of colour and form to create new objects or experiences of inherent integrity and beauty. It is part of a continuing exploration of pure abstraction. This puts it as part of a long line of abstract practice that has continued over the past 100 years from Malevich's Black Square and Suprematism, De Stijl, Constructivism and the Bauhaus in Europe, to Colour Field, Hard Edge, Minimalism and Op art. It now is part of a resurgence of abstract work around the world.

Will SNO's championing of non objective practice help turn this purist form of art into the 'next big thing'?

There's no way of knowing. But the inscription above the entrance to the Vienna Secession building may hold a clue: "Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit." ("To every age its art. To art its freedom.").

* 'Constructed Colour', 2001 at Newspace Rozelle; Penthouse & Pavement, RMIT, Melbourne; NEA Newcastle, and Artspace Sydney, curated by Kyle Jenkins, with works by Kyle, Billy Gruner, Karin Lind, Jan Van Der Ploeg, Peter Holm, Beata Geyer, Daniel Argyle and Jurek Wybraniec.

SNO 100

Some personal favourites from the archive – worth a revisit:
www.sno.org.au

SNO 28: David Serisier's grey-blue adjacent squares – empty but complete in a Zen sort of way.

SNO 34: A trip back to the beginnings of NC art with constructions by 'Boyd Turner' (AKA Andrew Donaldson), plus Clint Doyle's warm confections.

SNO 35: A good example of the variety of every SNO show, with Stephen Little, Bernd Schurer, Roger Crawford, Tony Triff and Andrew Gutteridge.

SNO 36: Emidio Puglielli's erased photographs turn time into timeless.

SNO 37: Beata Geyer creates a blue paradise in a stack of paper.

SNO 39: Nigel Lendon's enigmatic small wooden crate.

SNO 40: Absolute care and finesse in Lyn Eastaway's red, grey and white.

SNO 51: Gilbert Hsiao, John Aslanidis and Susie Rosmarin reinvent op.

SNO 54: Richard Roth sculpts shape from illusion.

SNO 56: An historic Tony McGillick show all the way from Central Street Gallery days.

SNO 72: Soundwork by Gail Priest marries classical structure and experimentation.

SNO 79: 'The cement is just there for the weight, dear' – Vanessa and Laurie Scott Baker install and perform.

SNO 80: Sophia Egarchos in colour; Matthew Allen in black.

SNO 82: Peering into the miniature realms of Ian Andrews' 'Displacements' opens up limitless vistas.

SNO 85: Henriëtte Van 'T Hoog's cubes take flight; Suzi Idiens finds colour.

SNO 88: Richard van der Aa, Trevor Richards, Edgar Diehl and Kazumichi Grime – a significant, accomplished show.

SNO 92: Susan Andrews, Riki Mijling and Arpad Forgo take simplicity to disciplined limits.

SNO 93: Elizabeth Newman pairs canvases roughly cut from their stretchers, eliminating all but the colour fields.

SNO 99: PJ Hickman, Craig Easton and Stephen Wickham state their gratefulness to Malevich for making the world safe for black squares 100 years ago.

...And many more. Make up your own selection!