

# POST-FORMALISM

## In Recent Australian Art

ARTIST NOTES BY BILLY GRUNER

It is reasonable to claim that a secession from a mainstream of contemporary art world thinking may have taken place in Australia art. And, that happened during the height of the post-modern period. However this did not involve a majority of artists, only a few. Yet any claim of alternate character must acknowledge a series of complex shifts and moves staked out in a prior history of reductive practices. These had been carefully worked through in preceding decades by a long list of important Australian artists - with hard-core approaches.



Helen Smith & JV Ploeg, SNO 06

The question now is: What impact has a deeply critical realist appraisal of 'international influence' had on present day understandings? Given that Gary Catalano, writer of 'Years of Hope – Australian Art and Criticism 1959-1968', claimed by the beginning of the eighties a debate over the scrambled semblances of unsolicited foreign influence versus a defining parochialism led to 'International style' being considered unsavoury. From that, you may ask what are local reductive practices like then after Post-modernism? Especially considering there has been further qualifying and rejections of (supposedly unsustainable) formalist concerns for similar, if not identical rationales. This opening commentary leads into a host of post-colonial issues, and a few of these need to be discussed if others would like to fathom how an array of formalist styles of art making survived between the 1970s to 1990s and beyond in Australian art; in a less than responsive staging. Tilman, an artist and friend from CCNOA in Brussels nowadays more familiar with this subject defines it, "...an Australian mystery".

First, I would argue an essay about formalist activity in Australian art needs to identify the significance of the denial of reductive styles of practice therein, as that has not often occurred if at all. I would also claim it needs to paradoxically acknowledge the across the board utilisation of abstractionist languages in virtually every other kind of 'convergent expression'. And that is exactly what the insightful signatories of Bernard Smith's 'Antipodean Manifesto' had done on a daily basis since the 1960s. In clarifying, Bernard Smith is possibly the most famous art historian in Australia. Brilliant and highly respected, he and the other artist co-signatories of the now infamous Manifesto written around 1959, like Charles Blackman, Arthur and David Boyd, John Brack, John Percival and, Bob Dickerson, remain some of the best known arts personalities today. As a consequence, ultra modern forms like abstraction, non-objective art, concrete art *et al*, are seen as the same thing by most in the regional visual arts arena as non-figuration – that's it. As claimed, for most, those very sizable chunks of distinctly different visual art vocabulary are regarded as remnants of a single, dead, reductive stylistic language.

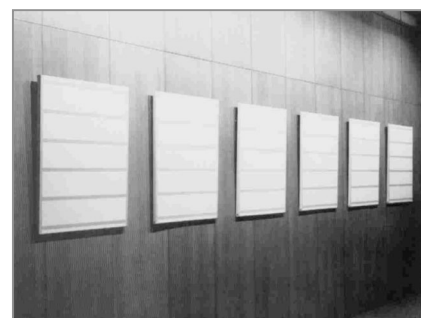
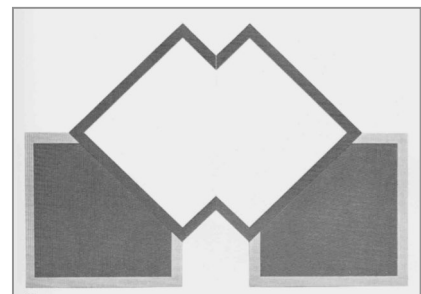
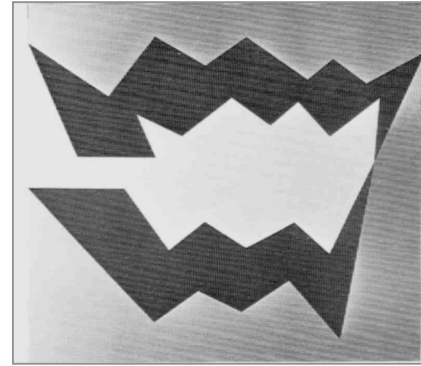
To explain: The highly discreet models that comprise the notion of Abstraction *per se*, are more often than not considered homogenate components of a dastardly non-ironic, non-figurative style. This is the paltry nationalistic legacy left by the preposterously opined Antipodeans who considered 'abstraction' for its own sake of little if any mystagogic import. The same may also be said for many local historians, critics, artists, curators, and the like, ever since. There were and still are many other artists and critics and so on who disagreed of course such as, Paul Haefliger, Elwyn Lynn and, Patrick McCaughey in differing ways. Yet it was the persistent championing of Smith's idea about the innate duty of the valiant mystagogue personality that enabled a deep-seated ultra-nationalistic impulse to seep into the substrate. With that idea Smith understood a

foundation stone of truly Australian art had been laid. And he did know this. To quote Smith, "We live in a young society still making its myths. The emergence of myth is a continuous social activity. In the growth and transformation of its myths a society achieves its sense of identity. In this role the artist may play a creative and liberating role. The ways in which a society images its own feelings and attitudes in myth provides him with one of the deepest sources of art".

For decades since, practitioners of discreet styles of abstraction have continued dealing with that questioning and, how they have or have not sustained any interest in attending Smiths discourse justly provides another story altogether. There are for example many who have achieved much regardless, and who have each in their turn faced a grand and eloquently argued opposition to the paradoxical character of 'imageless systems' - within consecutive contemporary arts arenas. There are some valid reasons for a rejection of non-image based work that are known all too well, mostly concerning what is supposed to be meant in abstract expressionism and so on. But, a masterful broad stroke bias towards figuration has never been more steadfastly clung to as a 'call to order' than in certain environs desperate to stake out their cultural uniqueness - in places motivated to promote the truly exotic characteristics of its art makers - but generally speaking only those who will best pronounce on cultural identity and, are willing to be seen doing it. In quoting Bernard Smith directly again from the closing lines of the 'Antipodean Manifesto', "...the first loyalty of an artist is to his art. Today that loyalty requires, beyond all else, the defence of the image".

Understandably any local art after that point that wilfully demoted nationalistic identity in favour of a more cosmopolitan or internationalist position by proxy, could and often did find itself placed outside a vastly promoted mainstream sentiment - a controlled system of approvals for images of itself to uphold. Concerning Formalism in Australian art, most of the battles centring on Abstractionism had in fact been waged before and some after the cliché of late 20<sup>th</sup> century 'contemporary art' became the massively conservative convention that it is today. And without doubt, lingering questions were made into utterly cliché concerns long before a new generation emerged out the universities in the 1990s. It was around that time that a few emergent artists began re-focusing on these issues, questioning assumed debate, and managed to begin a process of presenting a refreshed critical outlook through practise. As such, a renewed critique of the submerged nationalistic values underpinning so much considered important in the regional context, not so curiously appears.

The very late *formalistic* positions or those primarily established after the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can find themselves out of a strange inevitability pitted against a knowing and overt art-critical elitism presiding over the Australasian visual arts. In



short, any artist who decries now submerged values established in the Mystagogic anthem of the 'Antipodean Manifesto' must in some way face off against a longstanding cultural distaste - for the purely abstract - because it is *distasteful* International discourse in disguise. Conversely, an academic refusal to comply with the requirement of the image is understood as ignorance, or worse, arrogance. It is tantamount to an act of treason with real life implications for the genuinely abstract Australasian artists. As such, it is a significant issue if an artist wants or deserves to be considered, a contemporary artist.

In a more progressive sense, if we are to understand why few if any know much about Australian formalist art making and, its unique history, we need to think about why it has been so poorly promoted since its an apogee in the late 1960s. What is most important is to understand the nature of a regional bias that can still provide a unilateral benchmark of conservative assumptions. And seemingly for some, those may never be crossed again. The original title for this essay was 'Surmounting Regional Art Historicism', a title that alluded to a line drawn in the contemporary art sand drawn long ago. In my opinion, more current concerns over formalism amount to very little actually. As any unsolicited or unwarranted international influence may be prohibited in one style of art making, but not in others, without comment. The facts of our own art-historical precedence bare this claim out. Ultimately, a question that really begs is, what is formalism? A fiction! If so, isn't all art making constructed information delivered for view, no matter how emotively felt, thought out, or journalistic by intent. Smiths own manifesto proclaimed art had to be an utterly considered process.

Yet it is exactly this double standardisation of conventions and the inestimably complex negotiations that have profoundly affected artists in Australia for the last hundred years that need addressing. It is my aim in this essay on Australian formalism, or what I prefer to call Post-Formalism since the ending of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to draw attention to a fantastic story that has unfolded around a nationalistic enterprise of suppression, and the utter ignoring of any value to found in regional 'purist' aesthetic interests. Recently, that same principle has operated in a renewed interest shown in the now dated 'anything goes' Popist assumptions, of the 1980s; as chiefly described by the Australian writer and editor, Paul Taylor.

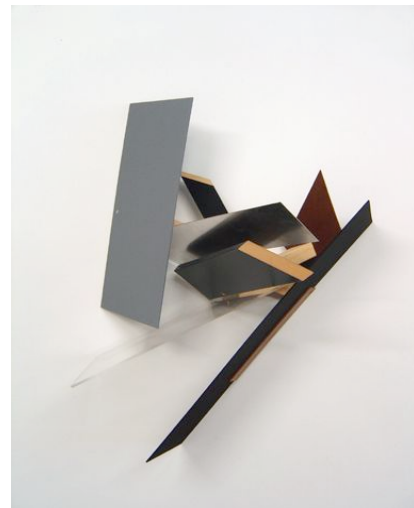
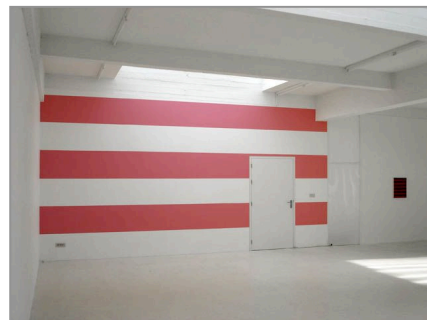
The sophistic process of art critical review is common enough, yet its neglect can lead to critically damaging side effects. I would argue that some of these are perhaps never been more deeply felt than in post-colonial environs. As such, contemporary Australian art appears in many forms but not all of it is understood as, contemporary. Or, qualified, which is an accompanying issue that has dogged and bewildered several generations of reductive artists in this region since the inter-war years. Yet overall it is reasonable to note that Contemporary Australian Art today barely registers its' important reductive artists within an overtly cautious system, a editorial process that seeks more Popularist entertainment within a strangely conservative industry nevertheless bent on the international promotion of selected regional or local styles.

Reductive practice, like the many variants found in the non-objective or non-figurative genres overall, remain uniquely specialised activities that have developed into a kind of regional history of, and for, its own making. Peculiarly, those who are interested in contemporary art generally do not consider reductive practices as part of any justifiable account. The poor valuation of important abstraction in Australian art testifies to that claim every month in the auction rooms more readily obsessing about the value of a Fred Williams or a Nolan, as examples. In short, the real value is invisible. Yet both systems interconnect with a necessary criticality. And that requires either module belonging to a far greater system of assessments to be broken up into a significantly complex vista. Or, range of super-individuated activities within that. That is, each artist in the end is required to provide some kind of 'alternate character' from the rest, if we are to actually understand each other's meaning. Again, generally speaking, there are many prior movements, debates, and as many critical concerns that can be readily linked in the Australasian arena, back to traditions familiar to American and European audiences. In summary, there are interesting regionally specific concerns that began diverging into art-historically obscure zones decades ago whose tenets should still be easily understood elsewhere. Yet, formalism is usually defined in the

regional context as an exotic response to a demoted 'international' tradition. Oddly, that literally implies any local formalist style of production, itself identified as an exotic concern regardless, would however remain unfathomable to a disinterested mainstream looking for identity in more nationalistic signage, imagery, and ideas that exist someplace beyond that very same internationalised system that all attend.

In restating my observations about what I consider to be inept conservatism rampant in the visual arts, what is still interesting for many today is indigenous art. Somehow that genre which may be encapsulated when considered another myriad of local traditions and specialised discourses, has despite the odds evolved with all of its universal values and individuations from homogeneity intact, into the present. Arriving with a massive force these important indigenous traditions of making, marking and telling have been around a very long time. But since the 1970s it is an area that has been much better handled by an attentive arts industry. Just as a massive worldwide growth of interest in Western Desert acrylic painting illustrates how meaningful any tradition of painting can be for example, when seen from an others' generously shared cultural perspectives. It is a lesson and gift of unbridled impact. In any regard, the worlds' recent discovery of that rich tapestry principally testifies to the spectacular cogency of the idea of art making itself and, how wonderful and surprising 'a special currency' may be when it appears into better view after being presented correctly. It is interesting to note that it was only last week that the Australian Government finally formally apologised to indigenous Australians for the untold damage done to their culture since colonisation.

Importantly here, little has been said in theoretical terms about the death of this or that art since the 2000's began. These were always rather banal claims that could not be sustained for very long in my opinion. Evidence would always appear to contradict. In this refreshed outlook I would like to further point out that there are other fascinating accounts from the Antipodean realm waiting to be discovered, to be looked over, pondered, and better considered in their own terms - for what they are, not what they are supposed to be measured up to. As such Christoph Dahlhausen from Bonn needs to be congratulated for taking a large group Australian artists to German audiences in 2007 and 2008 without a single cent provided by Australian arts agencies. So far that show titled 'Australia. Contemporary Non Objective Art' has been received by amazed audiences abroad who knew nothing of the depth and character of the genre of non-objective art making in Australia. Further, if we briefly consider how Australian formalism developed as a significant sideline of modernist narration within and without the regionalised context of realist predilections, we quickly discover another





history that provides a crucial deepening of knowledge. In brief, it's another good thing to know about.

The impact and ramifications of Internationalism or, as it was locally termed cosmopolitanism, and how that situation did or did not warrant development, is an account of absorption and localised development of renowned ideations that actually has undergone a slight overhaul of credibility within the Australian context since the mid 1990s, as the ACNOA show testifies. And much of that story outlined by Zara Stanhope in the ACNOA catalogue essay titled 'A Self-Evident Objective', is a valuable history slowly becoming more widely available through the activities of closely associated groups of artists. Especially those who began taking up concerns abandoned during the 1970s. It is these informing ideas and artists like the mature John Nixon, Robert Owen, Richard Dunn, Kerrie Poliness, Trevor Richards, Melinda Harper, David Thomas for instance, who have staked their careers within a narrowly conceived mainstream. It is these artists and the younger artists accompanying them like Andrew Leslie, Quentin Sprague, Justin Andrews, Sarah Keighery, Kyle Jenkins, Michael Graeve, Daniel Argyle, and Melanie Khava to name a few in the ACNOA show mentioned, that I personally feel deserve to be more thoughtfully considered by the art-critically inquisitive also.

More broadly, the story of how formalist styles of art arrived and were slowly developed in the Southern Pacific region is rich tapestry in its own right, and well beyond what can be coped with here. Suffice it to say that while comprised of many localised responses to an array of international influences since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is a genre that has over time become a truly exotic development in its own right. However, in localised terms, non-objective art making is without question a difficult genre to engage critically for all the abovementioned reasons. And those who succeed in ways deserve praise in my opinion. Australian formalism, if it can be defined as such, is based upon a system that has alternately developed within a deeply critical oftentimes ridiculously hostile arts environment. This explains its almost hermetic state today and, its complex structure of self-appraisal that occurs within a much broader 'Contemporary Art' system virtually unaware of its thriving sub-existence. It is exactly because of that situation, born of bizarre necessitation, that bespoke language becomes formalised into dialect. Just as it may help explain why or, how, a complex and highly self-regulatory milieu has evolved over the last few decades into an almost cult world of activity. In brief, easy *entrée* into that exotic world is likewise not a given either way.

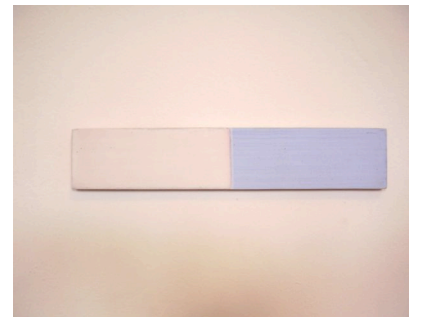
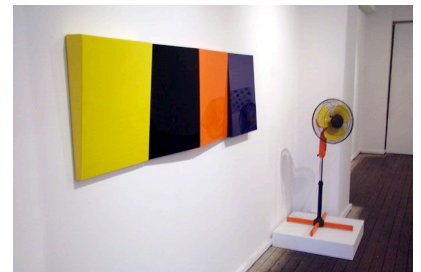
What I believe underpins the validity of another realm of contemporary art making is that it has especially evolved over the last 4 or 5 decades into a gently spoken rebellion against contemporary art norms. It is in fact that idea about 'Secessionists' as I like to name them that personally



interested me the most when I was studying. It is similar if perhaps less obvious matters like why I am uncomfortable with the post modern apologists that have likewise kept me engaged since. Most importantly, this series of brief notes can only allude here to a remarkable story that continues to harbour unique developments and that matter will likely remain foreign even to the most considered of regional audiences. That strange distancing is especially understandable for those abroad who could not possibly be expected know of it in any detail. This may be so despite it being a genre long sought after and collected by a savvy art-critical *cognoscente*. Ian Burn, the renowned conceptualist from the Art and Language Group days who died tragically in the late 1980s is one other example of a fine Australian formalist style painter whose few early works, done abroad in the late 1960s, inspired me considerably in the 1990s. Likewise, works such as 'Yellow Premiss' or the 'Blue Reflex' works from around 1966 are now highly cherished in Museum collections like Daimler Chrysler.

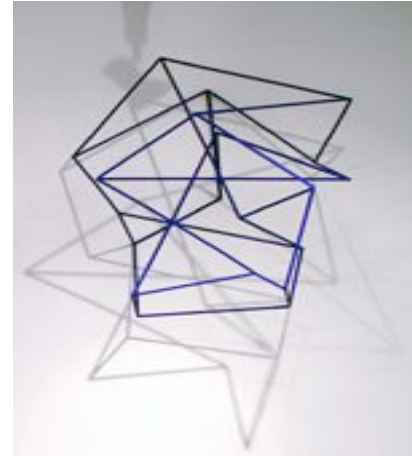
In fact, I would read a current surge in *formalesque* and fundamentally far more interesting radical/developmentalist approaches after minimalism, as a much deeper wave that appears to have caught an over sure, art-critical elitism, off its guard. Especially those who steadfastly believed and taught that formalism (spelt with a capitol F) had not just been abandoned but utterly abolished from any art-critical agenda during the post-modern era. These are likely the same group who would continue to claim any reductive art found in a non-rhetorical state today, is another failing end of minimalism. What seems of no interest to many is the fact that the Minimalists likely got their ideas from the longstanding prior history of reductivism in art and, very importantly, honed concerns over object hood from a then ongoing but more secreted Concrete Art movement - as founded by Delauney and Van Doesburg in the 1930s. Almost astonishingly, most Australasian artists today use the language of abstraction or ultra reductionism that includes the ongoing influence of as many formalist styles of engagements as a norm. A given, a glib appropriationist/barbarist conventionality if you prefer that in my opinion has formed into a poorly achieved characteristic of contemporary regional art appraisal, as elsewhere. Again, and despite ongoing criticism and dismissals, any formalist expression *per se*, when it is engaged in the local context without an ironic twist, seemingly remains a bad-art overhang of the last few 20<sup>th</sup> century decades.

Perhaps this paltry reading can only exist because it is just not assumed to be dated, at all! Nor, the actual failed end of minimal art critical responsiveness itself. There are many artists who should be self-conscious of this concern who are not, and then others who are and continue taking formalist art making to new levels of achievement - this has been especially marked during the finalisations of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century - and well after. The mature local figures that have interested myself like Sydney Ball, Lynne Eastaway, John





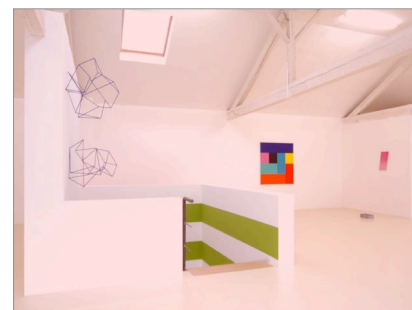
Nixon, Ron Robertson-Swann, or Robert Owen and Ruark Lewis to mention a few are those who still work closely with younger or emerging sets of artists. This is because they are likewise interested in formal 'developmental' approaches, common language, and bespoke development of ideas; not copyists. As claimed, the thing that is interesting about most of these people is that they are proud to openly pay homage to those they find inspiring, and clearly enjoy working towards a clearer less emotive art-critical appraisal of such practices in the present. I would call these artists Post-formalists overall, just as they are very different kinds of participants in a unique account that has transformed into an engaging contemporary art-critical arena across a number of Australian cities simultaneously.



Notions of *the* abstract in Australian art *are* belatedly undergoing some consideration through museum activity, archiving, and the like. Local artists like Christopher Dean have had much to do with that though he is rarely credited publicly. But perhaps the standout and most defining cultural moment for this type of Australian art came with the collapse of the 'New Abstractionist' movement of hard-edged painting and sculpture by the 1960s end – such as the Field exhibition held in the National Gallery of Victoria in 1968 - Sydney Ball participated in this for example. It was after that point a massive hiatus concerning formalist art making ensued, and especially during the 1970s when the nationalistic Antipodean movement of figurative cum abstract art took complete control of a more general public mindset. The virulence and hatred generated during the 1980s fiasco in Melbourne concerning Ron Robertson Swans publicly commissioned geometric sculpture named 'The Vault', and daubed 'the Yellow Peril' in the press, loudly and vulgarly reminded that there are rules in Australian art.



What few may realise however is that a variety of related styles of art making in Australian art survived out of a slightly earlier period - when the *Trans-Avant Garde* and Post-Object artists who were also deeply critical of any overhanging of supposed Greenbergian dogma. Those artists superseded the fragile credibility of a once diverse history of regional formalist expression. During the revisionist 1980s and 1990s certain post-conceptual and post-modern ideas did make a significant impact on contemporary art circles and, associated critical thinking also. But in its turn becoming a stalwart satellite system of recensive philosophical debate that has continued shaping and informing how most in my own generational group have come to appraise things. A complex subject indeed! However, non-objective art making was truly a subject most of us actually knew very little about. And things like learning your own history within that foreign modality can certainly take time – especially when no one in the institutions selling other dogma want to tell you anything about it.

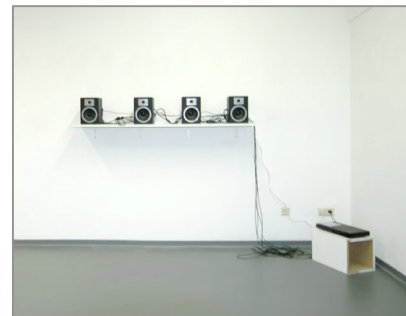


As an example, I now work in a space dedicated to non-

objective art that was set up out of sheer wilfulness, but hardly a day goes by that I don't discover yet another significant Australian or New Zealand artist I should have learnt about at University, but didn't. Curiously, it is really only since the ending of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that something ultimately changed in regional terms, and today there are small but highly committed groups of artists who have taken up hard-core formalist approaches. These same artists are very interested in finding and exhibiting with mature artists in an attempt to forge closer and more binding links with a wide range of associated artists rightfully belonging to a specialised field. This current investigation for the want of a better terminology is, unauthorised. It is achieved by artists groups and some commercial interests overall. In typifying terms, these same groups remain interpreted by a local critical arena as fundamentalist, factional by nature, and purposely remote to central conventional thinking they accept as reasonable. All within a broader regional debate that has traditionally sought to almost fanatically underline three important nationalistic ideals - concerning the garnering and promotion of cultural identity. Contemporary art properly belonging the region must somehow pay homage to notions of place, taste, and local tradition. An anathema it might seem to traditional notions of what non-objective expression is all about. This however I aim to show is in a fact a furphy, and the very ideal that characterises what flavour and spirit is to be found in a regional field of non-objective art making. What it is all about is the staking out of notions of place, taste and tradition. See the late Tony McGillick or David Aspens' impressive oeuvres in that last regard.



Perhaps a motivating development of a later set of artists involves the investigation of supposedly fundamental concerns within a same inwardly evolving 'contemporary art' frame – a system of surety and art snobbishness profoundly critical of such things. And central to understanding that local concern is a linked questioning of ideas that had already been prised open up by an array of post-conceptual concerns out of the 1990s. As it is elsewhere, different approaches to the language of formalist styles of art making and criticism are more readily understood today as interrelated approaches.



Ok that's fine, but in regional terms ideas or influences currently being radicalised out of known art-historical models have somehow become emblematic of a growing divide. That's between the referential post-modern, the classic 'abstract' art maker (who may be converting realist imagery for instance into iconic form - therefore abstracted), the post-conceptual abstractionist (out of that same tradition), and a hard-core set at another location. A fundamental contemporary formalist approach appears from out of a very uncertain equivalence.

What I am not saying is that one approach is better or more rational, engaging etc than another. To do that would be to unravel the intended usefulness of a term like post-formalism - which is proposed to cover all these aspects within a far generous reading of possibilities than has previously existed. What I am saying is the three share common links to local and international concerns, and it is this idea about common influence, revisionist and post debate, convergence of 20<sup>th</sup> century art styles, and as yet unspecified language found to be occurring within



contemporary discourse, that is much is better understood when considered in anthropologic terms as, a culturally evolving convention overall. A new found discourse actually, with much currency in terms of how we are going to culturally on-read and learn to properly appreciate arts true variety of narration.

It is exactly that situation being carefully worked through in artists run spaces like AC4CA, SNO, and NOT in Australia and H29, CCNOA, PS or Hebel 121 and other spaces scattered around the globe equally dissatisfied with certain overarching late 20<sup>th</sup> century rationales. Perhaps it is especially the dating meta-narrations that utilise formalist concerns as a foil to contextually reframe as many failure debates, i.e. the Death of Painting and the like that covet the former the most. This kind of discursive arena may appear a waste of time to some, while to others it's about ideas deserving to be more thoroughly engaged. So what actually, who really cares anymore when all and sundry use this language regardless of their ethics, morality, stratagem *et al.* Well some do, and that's their right also.

What has survived in places like Sydney and Perth and Brisbane like nowhere else in the region is a fascinating questioning that begs for those working within disjunctive and utterly elitist contemporary art frame. That is, there are those who are convinced it is possible to have a hard-core formalist approach and make quality contemporary art. This look at doubt square-on could only come after the seeming conclusiveness of as many late 20<sup>th</sup> century revisionist debates that have operated negatively, and on as many levels as possible simultaneously, for decades. Yet providing simple solutions to accepted criticism, built on being utterly conclusive in the first and, last instance, is not really a credible task as my Professor Richard Dunn often stated in master's seminars. This is simply because surety and intentionality in contemporary art are as he suggests, always complex and vastly intriguing matters explored by each and every artist, critic, writer, management person, public viewer and so on, irrespective of any collective value system in place.

For instance, it is a possible yes to conclusiveness when in a post-modern sense an artist chooses to straightforwardly provide a readable stratagem via the abridgment of any style, language, and/or influence - an act that defies anything short of a rhetorical stance. For example, for many there is a shared belief that relevant 20<sup>th</sup> century traditions and legacies converged into a single, reductive, minimalist, language stream, and that semantic ideal when isolated as either 'abstract art' or 'minimal cliché today, is considered readily convergent with any other discourse - seen as already defeated, usurped, lost language. Therefore, any aspect utilised has likewise supposedly been deemed a dead language (not owned) when placed into an irredeemable conversion modality or, new fictional construct based on surety. That very literary process, which most artists use to create the idea that something is new, is in fact a classic formalist concern. It is formalism! Just as that is normally reviled by those critical of 'fictioneering' in art; as opposed to Smiths' supposed value placed in myth making. But the answer is also a stolid no for some. That is, when a formalist practice is approached from a more fundamental position of critical engagement or, direct involvement with stated traditions and legacy. However, the former is itself only acceptable to mainstream convention within constrained limits. Just as the latter practitioner may only be seen in the end by both public and critic alike as, an anathema to post-modern conventionality - ideas established during the 1980s and enshrined as a credible overarching critique worldwide throughout the 1990s for as many self-validating institutionalised reasons.

For this last reason alone it is not unreasonable to claim that at least two camps of formalist activity naturally occur in post-colonial environs like Australia and New Zealand, and a third group of critical post-conceptual abstractionists have merged within these supposedly remnant but seemingly conflictive discourses since the 1970s. The plethora of interesting works of the post-conceptual abstractionist and the realist oriented post-modern-formalist artists, who are nevertheless still interested in citing formalist languages through a seemingly endless array of strategic defrayments, are considered the most contemporaneously acceptable. I think so because they the most readily available to be scripted by curators with influence. In regional terms that more favoured style of practitioner has certainly succeeded at all levels of public,

private and museum based showing. As such, the 'old school' abstract prone or 'new school' strategically citation-based practice is not considered out of keeping with a particular but powerful regional art-historical bias or, organic respect for local figurative cum exotic mystagogic expression. Subsequently, for a great many in the Australian visual arts, a genuine loathing for the concrete in art exists historically, in a 'naturalised state'. To show that distaste in an artwork is in fact often applauded as clever. For myself, it's the worst kind of arrogance. Its stupid.

As such, those expressing a fundamental orientation within any kind of formalist genre have themselves naturally tended to work in small groups, to make work for each other as Rene Berger claimed via pockets of resistance, and who are patronised meagrely via a small collector base. As a consequence, they represent a difficult but very interesting sub-set who nevertheless forged interdependent associations on a national and international front. Importantly, this is paradoxically read as a non-exotic pro-modernist style of milieu. Who despite criticisms and charges brought against them, remain definitively interested in deliberating alternate frames of reference. Albeit, within an exclusivist contemporary visual arts system that assumes them to be, very, very stupid.

In recent times lesser known hard-core groups have attempted to succeed the perceived limitations of regional art-historicism. In this manner they subsequently attempt to generate 'alternate' regional discourse. Specifically, on the topic of whether or not formalist or dare I say it, Purist expression, provides any local cogency. For them, I assume, cogency in aims does matter. For others, I can only guess at the response to such a suggestion. Perhaps what is most challenging for contemporary Australian non-objective artists is how the specifics of a regional tapestry and more current activity are to be art-critically interpreted after the 20<sup>th</sup> century, given there is next to no appropriate criticism or up-rated terminology in use within a disinterested and dismissive mainstream of theoretical criticism, curators, writers, administrators, and academics. And all of that while most aspects of abstractionist minimalist or whatever you wish to call it art making, remains a language utilised by degrees by all and sundry.

As a further instance, virtually any works currently produced out any of the three modes discussed as comprising the Australian non-objective field, are readily confused by the unwary with those derived from 1980s and early 1990s style post-modern concerns irrespectively. But, 'post-formalist' work, which is a term I love to use but many around me dislike, demands greater scrutiny regardless. This is because it attempts generosity of spirit. It is intended to provide a fresher theoretical means for delivering up historical, mature, and emergent sets of artists whose highly reductive works within an open-ended and far less opined framework. A system is suggested by this title that may provide a platform for those requiring new readings. For this reason I feel any blanket terminology like 'post-formalism' could be useful for artists who may want to establish points of difference from say, a classic modernist or post-modern artist influenced by formalism. Or, any artist wishing to manoeuvre through these arenas for whatever reasons they see as justified. As such, within an anthrop-style methodology it may be more useful as a 'transitional term'. At least it is one idea placed on the table that may allow an array of newer approaches, divergent critical positions and, significant personal readings to be catered for in a present day context.

Importantly, I feel if Australian contemporary formalism is to be understood for what it is, it follows to keep stating that there appears a much greater distance between classic post-modern artists who subsume formalist concerns on stylistic/strategic levels, and a much more complex array of post-conceptual abstractionists whose ideas also fall under a 'post-formalist' umbrella. In my opinion, there are at least three modes who do share similar criticism as stated, but the development of 'alternate characteristics' are concerns that the latter two groupings do not have most in common with the third or, seemingly more purist inspired styles of approach. Further, it is only reasonable to state that the post-modern style abstractionists can be readily perceived today as pictorial realists operating within another agenda altogether, certainly very different in meaning to the former two for instance in their presentation of abstractionist styles of imagery. And a classic post-formalist may be much more direct than either as stated, but not necessarily. In

closing, it is complex arena, but easily fathomable if more appropriate discourse can be further developed.

The portrait shot from the SNO archives shown in the introduction introduces another important and distinctive factor concerning the post-20<sup>th</sup> century formalists. It illustrates Jan Van Der Ploeg from Amsterdam and Helen Smith from Fremantle, standing in front of a collaborative painted wall-work. This was a temporary site-specific installation filling two rooms of SNO's Contemporary Art Project rooms in Sydney, in early 2006. This particular image was selected because it is an example of similar convergence or, local and international post 20<sup>th</sup> century formalist expression. It is also typical of a confluent style of activity that now more than regularly occurs between likeminded artists from the northern and southern hemispheres. The existence of this kind of purist-oriented work flowing between spaces in London, Bonn, Amsterdam, Dusseldorf, Basel, Provence, Auckland, Sydney, Melbourne to mention a few sites on a now expanding global route, underlines the social nature of a network of contemporary art makers. In brief, what could appear to some as a highly fundamentalist painting based work directly points us to some of the more interesting locations where a variety of contemporary formal concerns are nevertheless finding exacting and critically demanding praxis. One artists work concerns pure design, colour, form, the other influences of the everyday world. The 'body', 'place', 'local tradition' are enacted.

It is obvious to state there are more kinds of artists than ever before visiting Australia's once distant shores. However, most of those come at the behest of an institutional body or curator's long term planning for example, but not all. What is unique about the post 20<sup>th</sup> century situation is that there are emergent genres that are able to produce alternative forms of traffic. And independent artists and groups such as, SNO in Sydney, AC4CA in Fremantle, and NOT in Toowoomba outside Brisbane, as mentioned, manage one aspect of this kind of 'flow' regionally. For a number of years now these social associations in particular have begun surfacing in very different communities in order to provide a necessary but missing function. That is, to be able to meet and work closely with artists they themselves consider significant, and to do at that a much greater speed than institutional channels choose to afford.

What the appearance of specialist 'artist run spaces' highlights, and especially those dedicated to what is defined by affiliated artists as more 'modern concerns', is not a closed or dated reading of important and informing art-historical debate. What I have witnessed is a diversification of contemporary values through specific engagement with discourses and opinion about valuations considered incontrovertible in the Australian visual arts. Further, the unregulated growth in specific exchanges and an independently achieved deepening of critical support for specific local concerns for instance, indicates that the development of non-aligned contemporary visual arts discourses in general, may belong to a kind of peaceful, slowly developing, secession. Or, amount to a deepening disregard for conventional authority, the wavering cadence of collective wisdom, and the almost impenetrable nature of already heavily secured governmental support systems. Thankfully in Australia the state government bodies are very helpful through their strategic initiatives funding programs, and without that meagre funding, nothing would appear into public view out this arena.

In surmising, the topic of formalism despite being much underrated in many localised art-historical terms, has in Australasian terms curiously achieved a state of critical impetus since 2000. However, the latter is a type of approach that many in Australia appear to have little understanding as yet, let alone empathy; as outlined. And for those belonging to a local, national or an international audience interested in alternate aspects of Australasian art, it is hoped these notes may shed some light on what has undoubtedly become a specialised arena. In terms of establishing provenance for any regional claims of significance, it matters to note that what I have discovered is that few at all know the remarkable story of formalist art making unique to the region, and why an almost secreted account significantly foregrounds important activity. Tilman was absolutely right.

In closing, there are in fact a great many local artists needing to be mentioned if addressing all of the styles, influences, and specifics of milieu that comprises a fascinating and complex regional tapestry of abstractionist expression. And what I would like to do is provide a monthly update to Minus Space for that purpose. But what I feel should be noted here first is that a growing regional investigation of Post-formalist expression amplified during the later 1990s, and is possibly better defined as a resistant movement, as per usual. In explaining, what has literally underscored newer and now more straightforward formalist activity is a sporadic set of investigations that date back to beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Importantly, ideas inherent in the New Abstractionists of the later 1960s stand out but there were many other sets of artists like the more lyrical abstractionist of the time that can be investigated in Bernard Smith's Anthology 'Australian Painting'. But also, please consider later contemporary artists groups like the Melbournians like Paul Partos or, the Store 5 set like Rose Nolan, Marco Fusinato, or Stephen Bram in the later 1980s who like many others have continued working in divergent approaches out a same regional legacy of reductive practices.

From out of the many pragmatic positions, what has emerged is an increase in organised exchanges of shows between committed local and interested internationals. It is this naturally occurring process of art-cultural exchange that has proven to be highly motivating force for those currently involved. What continues to hold a certain sway for many artists involved within an otherwise disinterested visual arts community, is the certainty that a wide spectrum of prior readings and criticisms of the genre have been misleading. When it is considered that the vast majority of criticism associated with regional non-objective art making has been produced by those harbouring a bias to figuration and the primacy of realism in art (because it sells pretty well), then almost funnily, what remains at stake after so much effort to convince contrarily, is little more than a furphy.

List of artists and works in order of appearance (no special order) - from front to rear

Helen Smith & Jan Van der Ploeg,	SNO Wall Work Installation, 2006
Sydney Ball	<i>Zarzan</i> , 1968
David Aspden	<i>Field 1</i> , 1968
Tony McGillick	<i>Polaris</i> , 1968
Ian Burn	<i>Yellow Premiss</i> , 1966
Vicente Butron	<i>Limited Action No.210</i> , 2006
Kyle Jenkins	<i>Untitled Blueprint No.4</i> , 2006
Billy Gruner	<i>Concrete Floor Structure NO. 2</i> , 2006
Justin Andrews	<i>Untitled Model (Inverted Topology)</i> , 2006
Andrew Leslie	<i>Small Yellow Building</i> , 2007
Melinda Harper	<i>Untitled</i> , 2005
John Nixon	<i>Silver Monochrome</i> , 2005
Sarah Keighery	<i>Miso Line (LA)</i> , 2005
Richard Dunn, Quentin Sprague, Andrew Huston	<i>ACNOA, Raum 2810</i> , 2007
Daniel Argyle	<i>Untitled</i> , 2007
Melanie Khava	<i>Untitled</i> , 2007
Trevor Richards	<i>BYOG</i> , 2006
Lynne Eastaway	<i>Untitled Painted Wood Panel</i> , 2006
Andrew Huston	<i>Yellow - Mirror Series</i> , 2007
Robert Owen	<i>Vessel (Structure)</i> , 2005
Kyle Jenkins, Robert Owen, Quentin Sprague	<i>ACNOA, Raum 2810</i> , 2007
Quentin Sprague	<i>Skewed Painting. 07</i>
Billy Gruner, Trevor Richards, Kyle Jenkins	<i>ACNOA, Raum 2810</i> , 2007
David Thomas	<i>The Duration of Light</i> , 2007
John Nixon, Daniel Argyle	<i>ACNOA, Raum 2810</i> , 2007
Michael Graeve	<i>ACNOA, GKG Bonn</i> , 2007



