



Drawn to Paint

Materiality and Transcendence in the work of Kathy Barry

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Kathy Barry is an Auckland-based artist, trained in sculpture, a sensibility she brings to her drawings in the attention to the structural properties of her materials—the dripping fluidity of the watercolour, the light, lined ghostliness of the pencil grid and the subtly buckling receptivity of the paper. The sculptural references are carried through into the content: the references to folds, to gravity and to spatial relationships constructed through manipulation of tone, colour, shape.

In a world that extols post-studio practices and participatory projects for their ostensibly implicit institutional critique and conceptual cache, what does it mean to immerse oneself in a studio-based practice, steeped in materiality? A practice like Barry's that produces aesthetically gorgeous abstract works on paper might seem idiosyncratic, but it has emerged along with a growing questioning of the assumed conceptual and political authenticity enjoyed by post-object work since the late 1960s-early '70s. According to Benjamin Buchloh, institutional critique was decoupled from post-studio practice once mainstream museums, educational and funding institutions absorbed the practice into their programmes.¹

We can therefore decouple claims of critical authenticity (and by extension, canonical legitimisation) from one practice or another, recognizing that artists cannot claim critical cache merely by virtue of working in situational ways, and neither can their practice be dismissed for working outside that arena.

Where then does criticality lie in Barry's practice? Jan Verwoert and others argue for grounding

criticality in materiality and process. In his ontology of painting, Verwoert uses the term 'emergence', by which he means its structure, derived at through a slow, searching process of *becoming*.² The emergent property (water's wetness for example) cannot be deduced by examining the individual elements (hydrogen and oxygen bonds) and so the finished (art)work represents an unanticipated outcome that only reveals itself once the work is done. 'Emergence' describes a condition under which something arises out of crisis, moments when a decision is required. In a critical environment where painting no longer enjoys implicit justification and its discrete taxonomies have been dissolved, the artist sets up criteria, rules to guide the process and to facilitate a state of receptivity and self-reflection, rejecting blanket solutions in favour of contingent decisions.

Barry's work expresses this in emergent, it(in)erant, fractal folds, her original ascetic criteria becoming increasingly complex and deconstructed as the materials and composition assert their own logic. Both her graphite and watercolour drawings express folding and unfolding in the Deleuzian sense—a sense of iterant accumulation, of contiguous movement.

Unfolding is not the contrary of folding, but follows the fold up to the following fold The model for the sciences of matter is the 'origami', as the Japanese philosopher might say, or the art of folding paper.³

In her graphite drawings, the bands begin on the left-hand side, direction and angles determined by the graphite's susceptibility to smudging. They begin to unravel on the right, playing optical games that prompt allusions as diverse as digital distortion, woven basketry or double-sided tape pulling away. Illusory three-dimensional forms are constructed

(opposite) KATHY BARRY *Ribbonwood* 2010
Graphite pencil on paper, 650 x 480 mm.

(below) KATHY BARRY *All We Have Broken Shines* 2009
Watercolour, gouache & pencil on paper, 700 x 1000 mm.

through the convention of tonal contrast, only to be confounded through Escher-like strategies, as in *Ribbonwood*, or in the watercolours' inconsistent fluidity, opacity and hue. In *All We Have Broken Shines*, bright mid-green in particular bears no spatial relationship to the adjacent coloured shapes. The colour palette is complex, hues pushed into discordant relationships with the addition of white. Penciled triangles are flooded with chlorine green which shifts to leaf and forest greens, saturated red shifts to maroon, pink and mauve while green and red combine with white gouache to form raw paper-brown.

Formal, material/ist, taxonomic, political and conceptual binaries are continually being broken down in contemporary discourse⁴ and this is played out in Barry's practice. She steps away from the patricidal endgame, hosting the ghostly graphite grid of geometric abstraction that underlies her drawings in the domestic space evoked by the small scale, the anti-monumental status that drawing enjoys, by references to craft: weaving, plaiting, quilting and the watercolour medium of 'lady painters'.

The work has an intimate, handcrafted, real-world experience in the context of a media-saturated capitalist simulacra delivered via the mediums of photography, film, print and text. Barry's physically static, optically dynamic images represent a point of difference between a handcrafted practice and technologically generated, delivered, and consumed work.

These images skirt the commodity cycle associated with painting in their built-in obsolescence—as opposed to the consumerist logic of built-in obsolescence in say, light bulbs, art commodities are traditionally valued for their archival properties. Over time, the materials will break down and merge back into the environment.

Offsetting the conservative associations of a return to 'craft' in painting—a misleading reading in this case—the craftiness in Barry's work, as in Penelope's web,⁵ lies in the making and unmaking (becoming and unbecoming). Beauty and facility with materials trip up on each other, holding at bay those who would claim closure by overpowering and foreclosing the delicate balance achieved in a body of work that interweaves media, processes, categories, references and modes of representation (and non-representation).

Generated circuitously from the real and the ideal, abstract art can be envisaged as an oscillation between the imagined and the concrete.⁶

Barry's abstract artworks draw together the phenomenological world, the world at the meeting of material and process, meaning and non-meaning, rationality and exquisitely honed intuition. In *Hold On Hold On* and *Porchlight* for instance, her initial drawings of faceted glass vessels are taken through

a process simulating digitalization that leaves its trace in the exploded grid, square pixels suggesting an artificial structure shaping the organic crystal clusters. In *All We Have Broken Shines*, the paper-brown templates signal the real, always lurking at the breakdown of the symbolic.

The struggle of maintaining the symbolic order and the sublime excitement upon instigating the risk of rupture, are communicated in the dematerialization of the shapes, the instances where the materials surrender to gravity. In *Passage over Water*, unfolding creased shapes, suggesting decorations, perform a playful structural collapse against a waterfall of coloured drips.

It is as though the structural strength of geometry *demand*s the weight that causes its own collapse into formlessness—as though one has taken up a system only to watch it fail.⁷

This strategy reflects and is a result of a process of gradually letting go of socialisation, culturisation, logos and designs and becoming increasingly sensitive to, and lead by the unspoken. In this aspect of drawing, Barry's work can be linked to that of Emma Kunz and Agnes Martin, as framed in *3 x Abstraction*—Kunz with her use of drawing as a map of a metaphysical reality, Martin with her paring down of nature to the barest minimum (lines, crosses), more interested in communicating a phenomenological and metaphysical experience than a visual and intellectual one.⁸

Much of it produced while in a caretaking role at Judy Millar's isolated artist's eyrie, Barry's recent body of work reflects the meditative, slow paced, environmentally sensitive approach that her solar-powered, sea-swept surroundings demanded. The evident slowness, contingency and thoughtfulness





(left above) KATHY BARRY *Passage over Water* 2010
Watercolour, acrylic, gouache & pencil on paper, 700 x 1000 mm.

(left below) KATHY BARRY *Hold On, Hold On* 2008
Watercolour & pencil on paper, 560 x 760 mm.

(opposite) KATHY BARRY *Porchlight* 2008
Watercolour & pencil on paper, 700 x 1000 mm.

in the process that shows itself in both the disrupted patterns, deconstructed grids and the overlaid crystals of colour, reflect the searching uncertainty that the enforced isolation raises.⁹

Barry's process is always repetitive, (searchingly so, rather than pre-determined) teasing out the sculptural property of her materials and subject and, in doing so, further 'fragmenting reality.'¹⁰ From the clustered cardboard constructions of her *Botanica* work, *The Language of Flowers*, to *Irma's Throat*, her Elam Masters graduation installation—painted dots of intense colour, photocopied, spliced and stacked, evidence



of a dense production process that incorporates hand-made with technology—her work abounds with references to human intervention in the cycle of nature.

Signifiers of flowers appear in Barry's recent work in the non-representational watercolour 'bloom', the sharp fractal edges formed when wet watercolour is applied to an unfixed field of paint. The blooms reveal her process of emergence, following where the materials lead, allowing them to breath life into the ancestral matrix of geometric abstraction, references to 'women's work' and to a '70s feminist fusing of the two.

The search for order, coupled with immersion in chaos, reflects a deep enjoyment of, and trust in the process, transparent through the veiled layers of watercolour and the searching lines of flight. Barry's approach reinforces the perception of drawing as the medium of thought, incompleteness, mapping and metaphysics.¹¹

The success in this work lies in the degree to which the artist has drawn together all the forces at play and met the challenge of collapsing the perceived divide between conceptualism and materiality. It is exciting work that plays with boundaries she has inherited, letting the process quietly lead the work in the direction it wants to go—a process of being receptive to the medium and its faceted nature.

1. See Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-69: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October* no. 55 (Winter 1990) pp. 105-43. Sabeth Buchmann draws attention to the entangled relationship between artists and institutions in 'Under the Sign of Labor' in Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann, editors, *Art After Conceptual Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2006, pp. 181-183.

2. Jan Verwoert. 'Emergence: On the Painting of Tomma Abts.' in *Tomma Abts*, Phaidon, London 2005, pp. 41-48, and Verwoert 'Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It's a Good Idea.' *Afterall Online*, no. 12 Autumn/Winter 2005, <http://www.afterall.org>. For a more in-depth explanation of emergence theory, see Mark Bedau and Paul Humphreys, editors, *Emergence: Contemporary Readings in Philosophy and Science*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA 2008 and <http://mitpress.mit.edu/emergence>.

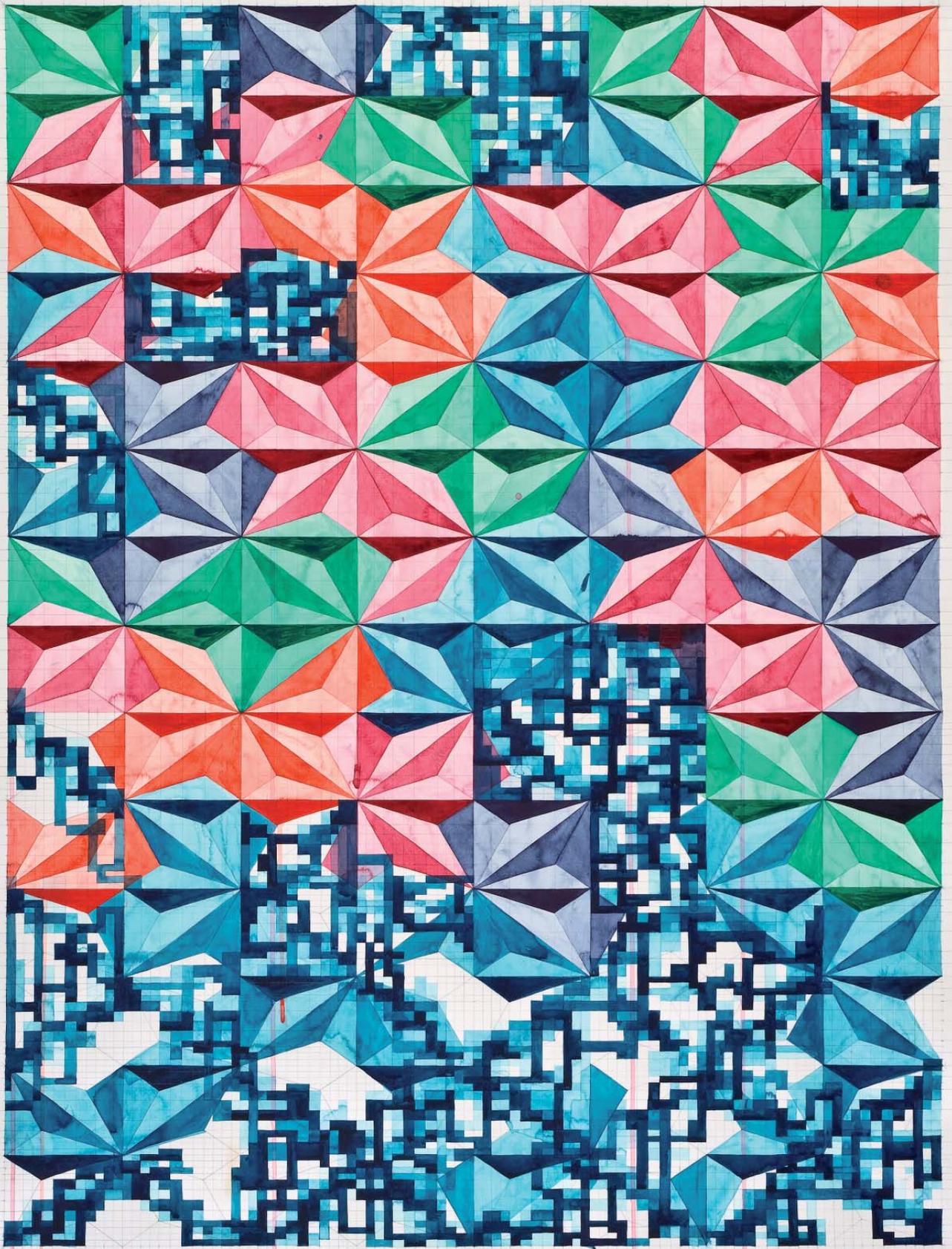
3. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Athlone Press, London 1993, p. 6.

4. See for example Bob Nickas' introduction in *Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting*, Phaidon, London 2009 and Robert Storr, 'Thick and thin', *Artforum*, pp. 174-179, 238-244.

5. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, devised a strategy to keep the overpowering suitors from claiming her (and by extension, sovereignty of Ithaca) during the long years Odysseus was away. She wove a shroud by day, promising to marry once the weaving was finished, but each night she unravelled it. 'Penelope's web' refers to something which is forever being done, but never completed—the emphasis is on the process.

6. Catherine de Zegher and Hendel Teicher, editors, *3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing*, The Drawing Centre, New York and Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2005. De Zegher goes on to link the oscillation between *form* and *no form*, between 'what is transparent to consciousness and what is external to consciousness', to a twentieth-century concern with how meaning is generated in

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language—the complex and contingent relationship between the signifier and the signified. She argues that the imaginary structure of the Symbolic replaced previous centuries' religious and spiritual explanatory systems, and explores the ways that the symbolic system of abstraction has been used to structure 'philosophical, linguistic, scientific, and transcendental ideas' in the work of Agnes Martin, Hilma Klint and Emma Kunz, p. 23.

7. Artist's statement.

8. *ibid.*

9. Justin Paton and Judy Millar discuss how the 'anti-comfort' aspect of her studio home precludes living by habit, demanding an 'openness to possibilities', 'Changing Space: Judy Millar talks with Justin Paton' in *Judy Millar: You you, me me*, Kerber Verlag, Germany 2009, pp. 130-131.

10. Zara Stanhope, 'A Curious Collection of Flora' in *Botanica* exhibition catalogue, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington 2001, p. 10.

11. Emma Dexter, *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing*, Phaidon, London 2005.