

Let's talk about abstraction

Today many young artists are seeing the field of abstraction as ripe for reinvention. Sue Gardiner compares their journey with that of pioneers like Gordon Walters.

As a young artist working in New Zealand in the 1940s, Gordon Walters' journey towards abstraction was hampered by the country's isolation, World War II, the need for full-time employment, haphazard exposure to international role models like Paul Klee and the lack of a widely-informed local community. Time spent living in Sydney and Melbourne for short spells between 1946 and 1948 (and again in 1951) made an impression on Walters, but when he did finally become totally absorbed with abstraction, he was shocked at the outcome.

Dr Francis Pound, who's an art historian and author of an upcoming book on Walters, describes the artist's reaction to his first koru paintings of the 1960s: "They frightened him," Pound says. Wracked with doubt about what he'd done in his koru works, Walters confessed in a letter to Michael Dunn in 1978 that: "There was no precedent locally for my way of working and often the directness and brutality of my way of painting scared me. To counter this brutality of method (or so I saw it) I became fanatical in adjusting the relationship between forms, all the time looking for the ultimate in refinement; and so this was what took me so long and why I could hardly bear to show the work even when I had worked it out in the early 1960s." (Gordon Walters' letter to Michael Dunn, 1 May 1978, p. 3, in Michael Dunn, thesis, p.130.)

Walters' *Painting No. 2*, 1966, is an example of the works the artist referred to. "He had returned from overseas in 1951 at the age of 32 as an abstractionist, yet it was career suicide really," Pound explains. Apart from the pioneering work of Milan Mrkusich, who had his first one-man show of abstract paintings and drawings in 1949, there was little awareness of the language of abstraction in New Zealand. There were few public gallery shows of modern art because gallery directors blocked the work from being exhibited and had a clear preference for art which aimed to express a New Zealand identity. Abstraction was linked to internationalism and associated with the foreign and exotic.

After returning from Europe, where he saw works by Mondrian and Jackson Pollock, Walters made new works such as *Untitled 1952*, but was largely alone in his pursuits. The New Zealand literati didn't write about him, few knew of his work, and as Pound explains, most telling is the fact he didn't exhibit at all for 17 years. From his show in the Wellington Public Library in 1949 to the New Vision Gallery exhibition in Auckland in 1966, when Walters was 47, not many people knew what he was working on, apart from friends such as Theo Schoon, Peter Webb and Ross Fraser.

Pound recounts an interesting anecdote about Walters during the war years, when he remained in New Zealand

Opposite page: Kathy Barry, *Fold*, 2012, graphite-pencil on paper, 715 X 585mm. Courtesy of the artist and Antoinette Godkin Gallery

due to ill-health and was 'manpowered' to the New Zealand Ministry of Supplies. He tells of this unit being full of European refugees who talked about art, writing and music all the time. Here Walters heard about Mondrian, Kandinsky and many other European artists. For the first time, under strange circumstances, Walters was surrounded by constant discussion about modern art.

The experiences of young artists working with abstraction today couldn't be more different. Many of them are studying at art school where they're supported by lecturers/artists focused on non-objective art forms, such as Jeena Shin, Simon Morris, Bill Riley, Simon McIntyre, Noel Ivanoff and Simon Ingram. Young artists today have the chance to exhibit and travel widely, and most importantly, to access the internet. While rare and precious catalogues, books and magazines fed Walters his early knowledge of international work, young artists like Christchurch-based Charlotte Watson, spend a lot of time on the internet reviewing art and architecture blogs and accessing millions of images.

Watson, who has an upcoming project for Christchurch Art Gallery's *Rolling Maul* project series at their temporary Madras Street Gallery, reflects on how images are seen on screen and thinks the internet is having an influence on the current generation of abstractionists. "The graphic nature of web-based design is coming through as an influence," she says. "I sense we're in a time when young artists are taking a fresh look at abstraction."

Watson is not alone in her observations – many others have noted that abstraction continues to attract a new generation of artists keen to explore its inventive potential, and are in no doubt that abstraction remains vital and essential to contemporary art. Internationally, exhibitions and contemporary writing reflect this continued exploration into the art form and in particular, the materiality, or 'thingness' of the work and the processes of its making.

Watson traces her interest in abstraction back to a Melbourne exhibition she saw when she was an Invercargill schoolgirl. "As a 16 year old, I went to *The Guggenheim Collection: 1940s to Now* at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne in 2007 and I remember every work I saw there. It was such an eye opener; I fell in love with abstraction at that moment."

Watson graduated in 2011 and is now leaving this country to live and work in Melbourne, mirroring many generations of New Zealand artists before her. In fact, though it's little known, one of the artists who was central to the advancement of non-objective art in Melbourne in the post-war decades was New Zealander George Johnson, who studied at Wellington's Technical College and knew Walters. Johnson and Walters were in Melbourne in 1951, where Walters is said to have painted his first non-figurative works.

In the last year or so in Christchurch though, Watson has focussed on drawing, architecture and abstraction, exhibiting



Above: Gordon Walters, *Painting No. 2*, 1966, PVA on hardboard, 1220 x 910mm. The University of Auckland Art Collection. Courtesy of University of Auckland. Photo Sam Hartnett

Below: Gordon Walters, *Untitled*, 1952, oil on canvas, 484 x 360mm. Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki 1993. Courtesy of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki





Charlotte Watson, *Spearmint Ice Crush*, 2012, cut Formica table top, 1200 x 800mm. Photo: Sam McLeod



Charlotte Watson, *fig 4*, (from a series of 12), 2011 charcoal and pencil on paper, 610 x 860mm. Photo: Sam McLeod

her work and coping with the earthquake disruption. “Some of the work I showed at the end of last year was my response to the earthquake – to get it out of my system really. Now though, when I use angular lines in my work, people have been interpreting them as cracks in the ground – but I get in a cold sweat when they say that and want to shout, ‘No, not everything an artist does in Christchurch is an earthquake response!’ Instead, abstraction gives me a sense of freedom, and I seek ways to remove myself from abstraction’s history of symbolism and contextual meaning, or ideas of slickness and perfection. I remind myself always that I need to loosen up some more.”

Many artists develop strategies or systems that provide a structure or starting point for their work. “My strategy is that I don’t want to know the outcome until the end of a painting or drawing,” says Watson. “I thrive on the risk – I want to take chances and trust myself to the process.”

Instead of emptying out the world, perhaps abstraction today is full of the world instead. As Watson reflects, “Abstraction can be so much more than an isolated painting just existing on a gallery wall. If I find a work is becoming too austere, I tap myself on the hand and say ‘No, you can’t do that’. I want to push it outside; to introduce colour and activate the surface, bring in interactive elements and invite touch and play.” A recent interactive sculpture by Watson allowed viewers to actually make the work, using prefabricated elements to construct and compose.

“I like to work large and I like to work in series,” she says about a group of large-scale drawings recently exhibited in Christchurch which reflected her interest in impossible architectural structures. She used masking tape to map out the composition then worked charcoal into the paper surface.

Choosing materials such as old Formica tabletops, signwriters’ and flooring vinyl off-cuts is another strategy she employs which encourages her to not take things too seriously and to add a smile to the process. “Despite its roots, abstraction has the possibility to appeal to the wider audience. As long as you have eyes, you can pick up on it.” This interest in materials mirrors an idea expressed by a number of artists working with abstraction today – the desire “for a greater embeddedness in the world through materials and work”. (*Frieze*, #145, March 2012)

Looking back to the 1960s and 70s, there was little gallery support for abstraction other than the likes of Barry Lett Galleries and Petar/James Gallery, and mostly the public was indifferent to it during Walters’ day. Today gallerists, such as Antoinette Godkin in Auckland, have relentlessly helped build a contemporary audience for abstraction. Andrew Jensen and Emma Fox, who have galleries in Sydney and Auckland respectively, have been stalwart supporters of abstraction for many years, showing artists such as Helmut Federle, Callum Innes, Imi Knoebel, Leigh Martin, Winston Roeth, Fred Sandback, Geoff Thornley and Tomislav Nikolic.

Auckland’s Artspace will show the work of two abstract painters: Dunedin artist Kim Pieters and Auckland artist Anoushka Akel (from 13 July to 19 August). The show reflects on abstract painting and its poetic and philosophical implications through an encounter with two generations of artists and two differing techniques. St Paul St Gallery’s director and curator, Charlotte Huddleston, is developing a future project based on the non-objective practices of New Zealand artists Kathy Barry, Monique Jansen, Alex Kennedy and Sarah Munro, which aims to focus on women artists and to place the discussion within a wider international context.

A 'test piece' for Huddleston's project was held by the artists at Antoinette Godkin Gallery in March 2012.

Many observers have noted the rise of young women working in contemporary abstraction. In New Zealand we've seen recent work by artists such as Scarlett Ciblich (who's part of the Snake Pit group), Imogen Taylor, Marie Le Lievre, Kathryn Stevens (who shows at Auckland's Whitespace) Selina Foote, Miranda Parkes and Amber Wilson (who recently showed at Anna Miles Gallery) and Jessica Pearless, to name a few.

Kathy Barry, the current McCahon House artist in residence (until 26 May), notes this 'gender conversation' and recognises the gender imbalance of the past. "The non-objective art scene clustered around a network of art spaces around the world could historically be recognised as a 'boys club' in the past," she says. "It's another area to open up, and to look back at some women artists who worked in isolation, such as Emma Kunz who was a contemporary of Paul Klee."

Influential too are international artists such as Mary Heilmann and Tomma Abts. Abts won the 2006 Turner Prize in London for an exhibition of abstract paintings which she later described as being concrete experiments that are anchored in the material she is handling. (*Frieze* #145, March 2012)

Though looking back into art history to study women artists has been productive for Barry, ultimately her work is

very much of the present as she's aware of the role of time, crafting, progressive decision making, scale and process in her work, which focuses primarily on drawing. "Process is very important to me as is a meditative routine for drawing."

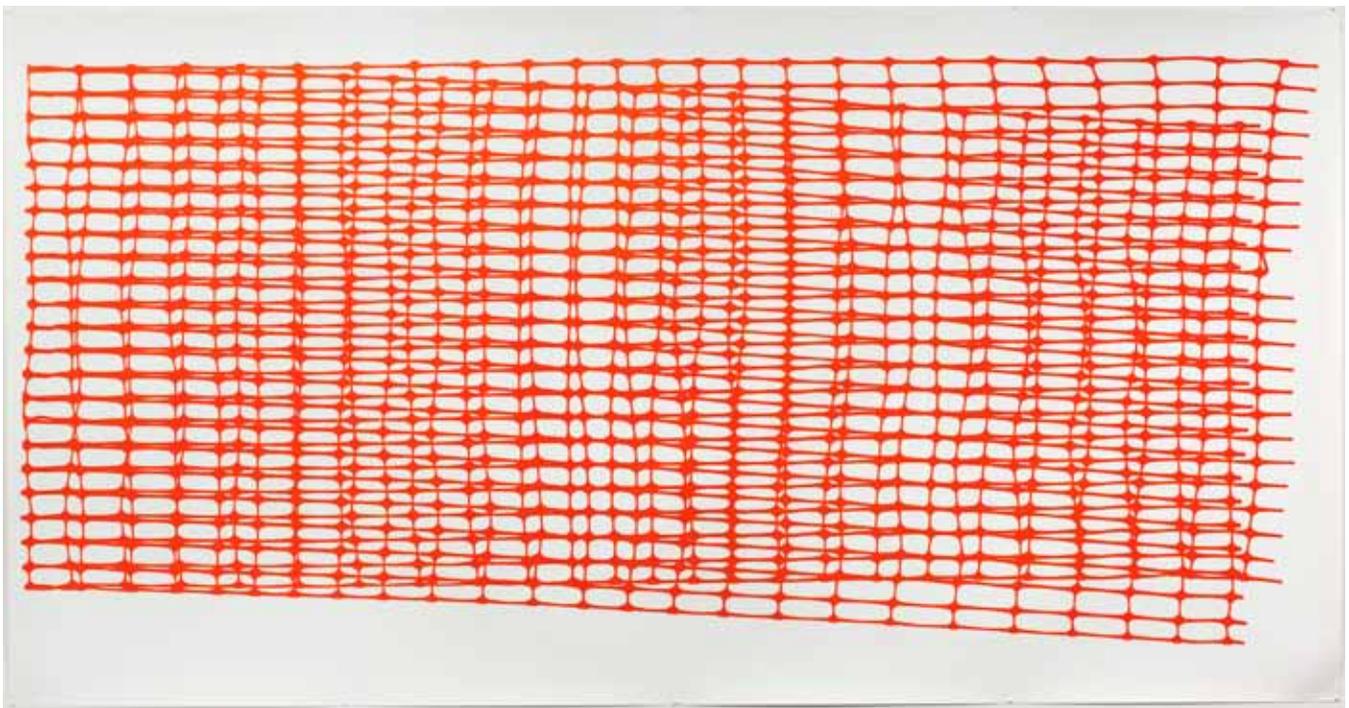
Barry is interested in the notion of 'emergence' which was described by Berlin-based contemporary art writer Jan Verwoert in 2005. Verwoert says this is when the structure of a work is derived through a slow, searching process of becoming, thus decisions are required on an ongoing basis.

Barry says her work expresses this emergent approach. "Both the graphite works and the watercolour drawings/ paintings express a sense of construction and unravelling, folding and unfolding, providing a sense of iterant accumulation, and contiguous movement," she writes.

Her 'unforgiving' drawing process, using pencils ranging from 2B to 5B, is immediate, direct and initially quick. Like doodling or automatic drawing, it emphasizes the hand-drawn nature of the process. Then her process slows down, becomes labour-intensive and increasingly complex. "I don't know what will be unveiled, but the works become like a code or puzzle to me. I think of them as drawings that are self-reflexive about their status as drawings, as is apparent in their qualities of provisionality and the sense of proceeding ad-infinitum, as opposed to the more final and developed form of painting.



Adrienne Vaughan, *Monith*, 2011, oil and enamel on canvas, 505 x 605mm. Photo: Sam Hartnett, courtesy of the artist and Anna Miles Gallery



Monique Jansen, *Orange Safety Moire*, screenprint on synthetic paper, 1300 x 2500mm. Courtesy of the artist and Antoinette Godkin Gallery

I don't know what they are while I'm doing them – any meaning can come later.”

Not defining meaning from the outset is central to many artists' abstract practices. For painter Adrienne Vaughan (who is in her third year of an MFA at Unitec and recently had an exhibition at Anna Miles Gallery in Auckland) it's important to not define meaning, or conceptualise the work before she makes it. “I want to make it first and then people can draw threads from it later,” she says.

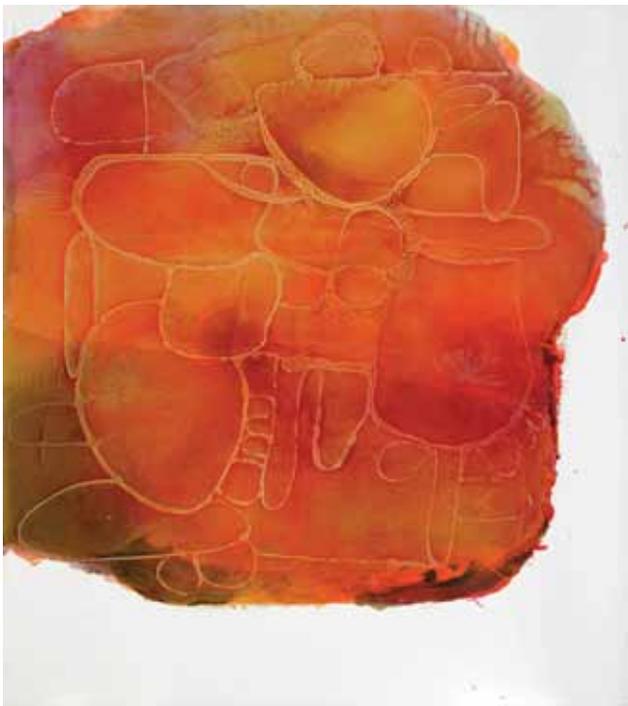
Vaughan raises an important point about the difficulty of verbal language and the visual language of non-objective abstraction. “What's important for me is to recognise that abstraction is a non-linguistic art form – one that's not easily expressed or talked about. It's better when it's less referential; when I can paint and develop forms that become my own

vocabulary and not refer to anything in particular. This is a much more open process – when there's nothing to pin it on, nothing to refer back to. I want to achieve mark making with purpose and intention and to just keep working until something emerges which I can hold on to.”

“There's a lot of talk about 'hovering between abstraction and figuration'. I hate that demand on you to use words to explain or locate your position. That's the trouble with language – it's too powerful. I don't want to introduce a narrative for the viewer – through the painting or even its title. When you break down representation, which is not at all real anyway, abstraction becomes more real than anything else to me. There are so many images in the world, it's good not to have to replicate the world – it's not about replication. It's an intuitive process and it takes a long time.”



Left: Simon McIntyre, *Over And Under*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 555 x 760mm. Courtesy of the artist and Tim Melville Gallery. Photo: Kallan MacLeod



Marie Le Lievre, *Orange Smoke*, 2012, oil on canvas, 1760 x 1570mm. Courtesy of Bartley + Company Art



Amber Wilson, *Lunar Rille*, 2012, oil on canvas, 600 x 600mm. Photo: Sam Hartnett, courtesy of the artist and Anna Miles Gallery

Developing a painting practice today, Vaughan is aware of the challenges of painting something not seen or experienced before. “The history of abstraction can be a heavy burden, but I’m seeing young artists putting a new, relevant spin on abstraction. Sure there are the fundamentals of a formal abstract language such as colour, line, shape and form but there is heaps of mileage in it yet. So I think abstraction is more valid than ever.”

It’s fitting to finish this article with words from one of Auckland’s most experienced teachers of abstraction. Simon McIntyre is Head of Visual Arts and Senior Lecturer in Painting at AUT University in Auckland, and has an exhibition of new work, *There and Back*, at Tim Melville Gallery (until 19 May). Noting that contemporary artists are finding ways forward for abstraction, he says painting has always had this potential to have a life as a thing in its own right, which speaks beyond representation of something else and is relentless. Artists have given up worrying about whether their work is ‘abstract’ or not, or ‘hovering between one thing and another’, and are sick of the question – “What is it?”

Recently he compiled a series of lectures on contemporary abstraction for his students, and this list from one of the lectures gives us a glimpse into some of the current strategies for abstraction he and his students have identified:

- Made by instruction
- Robot, machines
- Everyday – utilising pre-existing visual sources
- Process, action, performativity
- Objecthood, literalness, viewer participation
- Deconstructing modernism
- Temporality, time and space
- Zero degree – reduction to basic elements
- Site responsive
- Readymade

As McIntyre stands in his studio surrounded by his own work, he reflects on how it’s important for him to locate

his motifs in the world – be it shadows, architecture, found patterning or the slippage between positive and negative spaces. “I use the world around me, and this gives me a sense that the paintings are ‘located’ in some way.”

He also reflects on his past meetings with Gordon Walters, commenting on how constrained the artist was over so many years. “Working in his studio, isolated from the art world, only interacting with a small, knowing audience, he determinedly kept doing his own thing – each work being a tiny development on the last. Gordon Walters, bless him – it’s hard to get past him.”



Miranda Parkes, *Pounder*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 960 x 1000 x 290mm. Courtesy of the artist and Antoinette Godkin Gallery