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 "Constructions Colour" shows of painted constructions in 2001* in Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle, however, was one of the stances 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 took more like our own 'eccezionist', offering an alternative to the two predominant 'stories' of Australian art. The first widely-accepted story centred on the "secessionists", offering an alternative to the two predominant reactionary. In hindsight, though, they look more like our own beginnings of abstract art for inspiration were seen as reactionary. In hindsight, though, they look more like our own 'eccezio

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 Tuscum, Australian pioneer Syd Ball, Jan Van Der Ploeg of Amsterdam, Christoph Dalilhausen from Bonn, Matthew Deleget of New York, Gerald Miller (Berlin), and Gerwald Rockenschaub (Vienna).

Likewise, a swarm of important Australian artists came together in the project's first 25 shows: Andrew Leslie, Lynne Eastaway, Syd Ball, Ian Millis, Dina Georgetti, David M Thomas, David Serisier, Jay Balbi, Karl Wiedbie, Kerrie Polinus, Ann Marie May, Alex Spremborg, Simon Ingram, Richard Dunn, Marco Fusinato, Stephen Little, Ann Louise Rowe, Melinda Harper, Helga Groves, Kate MacKay, Christopher Dean, Sophie Coombs, Julian Dashper, Elizabeth Purie, 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 art, has enabled an international artist to exhibit and visit the SNO 'showroom'. Dialogue ensued.

So for its 10th 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 packed 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.
over her just-completed work. Apparently the rules were not
that embodies those memories. Later viewers don’t see the
drawing, and paint technique of a house painter. Ralph Balson in
or many-coloured monochromes where each person
is invited to paint the entire picture surface with one colour.
art, under the general title of ‘collective monochromes’,
its position. The painting, composed of vertical white, orange and blue stripes, is the outcome – the product of the activity indicated by this little table surrounding it. Or is it? Maybe the documented process is the
art to remain within traditional forms of painting, drawing,
co-operative artwork that mocks the concept of the artist as
of individualistic ego in works produced by a collective,
questioning in Gruner’s work.

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
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 is now a part of a resurgence of abstract work around the world.

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 500 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 is now a part of a resurgence of abstract work around the world.

SNO’s 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.

Some personal favourites from the archive – worth a revisit:

www.sno.org.au

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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 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 table surrounding it. Or is it? Maybe the documented process is the
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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 one colour he provides, inevitably from a single 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 strict-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, 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, Sophie Egerchons, 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-dimensional 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 mottingle. It’s only the title that makes you realize it’s not a ‘painting’. Sure, it’s painted, but ‘the painting’ 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 tentacle seafood. To the gallery via the kitchen. Sarah has been concentrating on impasto, squig, salt and other natural food-related pigments since her days as Simone Logue’s catering organizer. Her work moves 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. Kyle Jenkins’ ‘Untitled No. 10’ of 2002 predates the formulation of SNO’s policy of innovation and integration of new ideas, often by presenting established and emerging artists together.

Andrew’s ‘Room’ 2010 is one of his signature pieces – a combination of sculpture and subtila light experiment; physical objects and reflected colour. There is an unseen painter 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 onto 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.