

The empty space.

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**College of Fine Arts**

The University of New South Wales

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

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**RESEARCH PAPER / DISSERTATION**

**THE EMPTY SPACE ©**

Francesca Mataraga

Painting

December 2007

## **Abstract**

The Empty Space project aims to explore the interior and exterior space of an object through the use of Perspex. The solidity of the concrete or minimalist art object and the space that it physically occupies will be challenged by the use of visually ambiguous material.

Physically solid yet visually transparent or reflective, perspex challenges our perception of solidity - what is internal and what is external. It is by nature a subversive and ambiguous material. The visual transparency of the material contradicts the physical presence of the object it creates. It creates a play between presence and absence.

It is this spatial contradiction that this project exploits in order to create physical and visual tension. The solid physicality of the objects will directly draw on the tradition of concrete art and the language of minimalism. The visual transparency of the material will however, subvert this language both conceptually and literally. This will make the relationship between internal and external space more complex, challenging the physicality of the art object and questioning the nature of solidity.

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## LIST OF TERMS USED

**Concrete** – Tate Gallery, UK website<sup>1</sup>

refers to art objects that place primary importance on their physical presence or value and have no direct representational or expressionistic value. Term introduced by Van Doesburg in 1930 '*Manifesto of Concrete Art*' published in the first and only issue of magazine *Art Concret*. Van Doesburg called for a type of abstract art that would be entirely free of any basis in observed reality and that would have no symbolic implications. He stated that there was nothing more concrete or more real than a line, a colour, or a plane (a flat area of colour).

**Formalism** – National Gallery of Art website, USA<sup>2</sup>

refers to the idea of formal composition both in a two dimensional and three dimensional format. Any art or art criticism that emphasizes compositional elements (colour, line, shape, texture) over content (subject, meaning).

**Minimalism** – Tate Gallery, UK website<sup>3</sup>

refers specifically to work produced primarily by US artists during the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s as it has come to be known in art histories of the late twentieth century. 'Minimalism' or 'Minimal art' is a form of abstract art that developed in the USA in the second half of the 1960s. It can be seen

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary>, as at 22 November 2007

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nga.gov/education/american/aaglossary.shtm>, as at 22 November 2007

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

as extending the abstract idea that art should have its own reality and not be an imitation of some other thing. It picked up too on the Constructivist idea that art should be made of modern, industrial materials. Minimal artists typically made works in very simple geometric shapes based on the square and the rectangle.

### **Post-minimalism** – Guggenheim website, USA<sup>4</sup>

Coined by the art historian and critic Robert Pincus-Witten, ‘Post-minimalism’ refers to a general reaction by artists beginning in the late 1960s against Minimalism and its insistence on closed, geometric forms. These dissenting artists eschewed the impersonal object for more open forms. The first, developing circa 1968, emphasized the manufacturing of art and the use of unconventional materials, frequently manifesting a newfound consideration of themes and media previously deemed too feminine or soft according to the Minimalist canon. The second, beginning circa 1970, reassessed the applicability of theoretical constructs to art production, which exist as descriptions until they are realized by a second party. The third, beginning around 1968, involved the physical presentation of concepts and intentions via the artist’s body, which in effect became the medium. Artists grouped under this category are often also associated with Land art, Performance, Process art, and other forms of expression that resist the authority of the singular art object.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/Movements>, as at 22 November 2007

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## INTRODUCTION

*“The occupation of space is the first proof of existence”* Le Corbusier<sup>1</sup>

The work created for this project was exhibited in June 2006 at the Tin Sheds Gallery – Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney. To accompany the exhibition, a catalogue and artist’s statement were created stating the intentions behind the work. These two pieces of writing serve as a concise introduction to this thesis. They both capture the main ideas, theoretical and physical, that informed the development of the work.

The artist’s statement explores ideas generated by the work, the development of those ideas, the process of production and the resulting changes in the perception of the work by exhibiting it in a gallery space.

### **Artist’s Statement:**

‘The concept of reductive or empty space is often present in minimal, concrete and abstract art. The colossus of minimalism, Donald Judd, commented that *“the space between can ... be...more definite than the two objects which establish it”*. My investigation into empty space is based on

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<sup>1</sup> Le Corbusier in Findley, L., *Building Change: Architecture, Politics and Cultural Agency*, Routledge, 2005, page 5.

this idea of space between objects. The solid forms of the composition act as brackets to the space between them. What is usually perceived as empty space is in this instance articulated as a solid object – a mirrored or transparent box that makes us acutely aware of the space that would normally be a void.

The concept of empty space is present in many religious, philosophical and scientific texts. Chinese Taoist philosophy embraces empty space both in philosophy and art, viewing it as essential – the place where energy exists. In ancient Greece the philosopher Leucippus asserted that there could be no motion if there was no void and he inferred that it was wrong to identify the void with the non-existent. In Judaic and Christian philosophy empty space is an integral part of creation. Viewed as a space filled with infinite light having no beginning or end, in Judaic texts it is known as “*the light of Ein Sof*”. Recently a US court heard a case challenging the empty space or ‘nothingness’ in the rotunda of the Judicial Building as an endorsement of atheist belief, alleging that the ‘void’ space or ‘nothing’ in the rotunda constituted the government’s establishment of the religion of “*non theistic belief*.” The court ruled that the empty space demonstrates government neutrality toward religion.

Empty space has also been viewed as a pseudo-scientific space, filled with promise. In America before the explorations of Lewis and Clark, Thomas

Jefferson and other geographers had filled in the empty space on the western map with hypothetical features based on rumors, legends, distorted versions of Indian information and a certain amount of wishful thinking. Similarly in our own country the settlement/invasion policy of Terra Nullius, designated the Indigenous territories as empty space, spaces available to be claimed. This idea of Australia persists. Our vast natural landscape and comparatively low population often lead to descriptions of the outback as empty.

The point of all these examples is to illustrate the multiple instances in which empty space is neither inactive nor a void. It is always filled with something – fantasies, theories, time. Empty space can be filled with any number of meanings. At the very least it is the space in which our thoughts exist. Often it is loaded with meaning.’<sup>2</sup>

### **Exhibition Room Sheet:**

‘The MFA (Master of Fine Art) project is an ongoing investigation into imaginary and negative space. Solid forms act as brackets to the space between them.

This usually empty space is articulated as a solid object through the use of clear acrylic and mirror.

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<sup>2</sup> Mataraga, F., *Artist’s Statement – The Empty Space Project*, Tin Sheds Gallery – Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney, 2006, Appendix 2.

The space between two entities, bodies, buildings or objects is often seen as empty, devoid of meaning. And yet it is this very space that determines the way we experience the spatial relationship between the solid shapes. It is the negative space that activates the things it separates. The void is not a dead space but rather a space in which we as the viewers are situated, an active and interactive space.

According to astronomy there is no such thing as ‘empty space’ anywhere in nature. There are only apparent ‘voids’ that seem not to contain matter or energy. At the level of the quantum world, even ‘empty’ voids are teeming with activity as particles come and go.

In Eastern philosophy the idea of empty space is an integral concept.

*“Clay is molded into a vessel, but the usefulness of the vessel depends on the space where nothing exists.”* Empty space is one of the founding elements of Taoism. The ancient concept of the void or emptiness denotes the origin of being. Qi (Chi), a principal concept in Chinese culture, signifies spiritual energy and life force. This is represented by emptiness.

This emptiness is not absence but the presence of life and energy.

It is believed that the empty spaces reflect the positive images within the composition. It is precisely this activation and reflection that is explored in these sculptures. The space the objects occupy is simultaneously both

present and absent, active and inactive. The multiplicity of space created through the reflective and the transparent surface extends the physical presence of the objects.

Reductive space, emptiness, the void, is the space in which our thoughts exist. It is the space we invest with meaning.’<sup>3</sup>

The artist’s statement and the exhibition catalogue set the philosophical parameters that informed the work. Both documents were intended for a gallery audience, with no presumption made about that audience’s art knowledge.

This thesis explores the theoretical references that have informed the MFA project. It charts the development of the work through the use of material and its historical relationship to other artists’ work. The premise for the thesis is to investigate how the *concrete* art object or sculpture could articulate the idea of empty space through the use of material.

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<sup>3</sup> Mataraga, F., *The Empty Space Project: Exhibition Catalogue*, Tin Sheds Gallery — Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney, 2006, Appendix 1.

# CHAPTER 1

## Historical context

The catalogue that accompanied the exhibition of *The Empty Space Project* talked about empty space and its philosophical references. Specifically, negative or empty space and the importance of emptiness in activating space between objects. This idea that negative space activates the elements it separates is an important aspect of composition in the history of painting and sculpture.

Negative space is something that is utilised by almost all artists from pre-classical times. The use of negative space allows the artist to create tension within the picture plane or in the space surrounding a sculpture. Whether the artwork is a two-dimensional work (painting, drawing, photography or film) or three-dimensional work (sculpture, relief, room installation) negative space plays an essential role in activating the composition of the work. The space around a work or between its compositional elements allows the viewer to see the objects depicted – the elements of the composition. The eye travels around the picture plane or around the three dimensional objects

absorbing the texture, colour and compositional value of the artwork. The pictorial intentions of the artist are communicated through compositional devices.

In representational art these spatial relationships were explored through the pictorial depiction of space – perspective. The placement of the figures on the ground or the physical dimensions of a sculpture were determined by the perspective used. Traditionally, these notions of spatial value were part of the construction techniques used to build a picture.

During more recent developments in art and the expansion of pictorial representation, these abstract values of image making have been explored as themes in themselves. The exploration of space within the picture plane as the subject can be seen in the work of various early twentieth century representational and abstract artists.

Giorgio Morandi is one such artist. His still life and landscape works clearly depict representational imagery. His subject however is that of spatial relationships. “*Morandi’s still lifes instruct us how to look*”.<sup>4</sup> His work creates the space in which the objects exist, revealing volume and space. Although his work is representational, it relates to the MFA project because

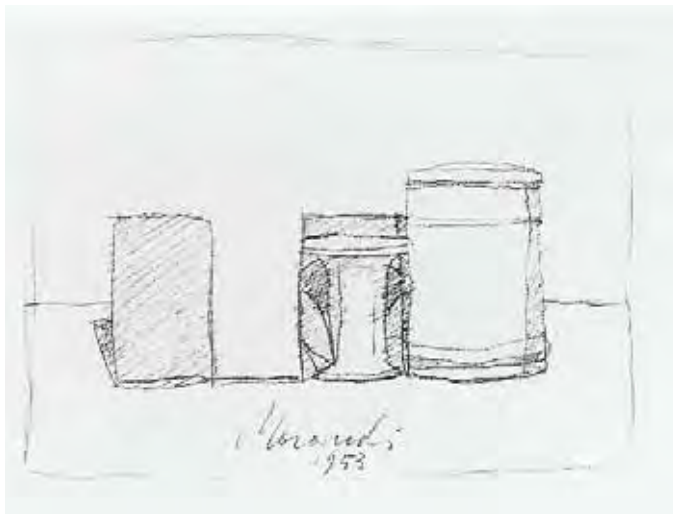
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<sup>4</sup> Klepac, L., *Giorgio Morandi – The dimensions of inner space*, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997, page 18.

he is looking at the empty space between the objects depicted. Morandi is investigating the space 'between' objects and its pictorial meaning.



Above: Giorgio Morandi, *Still life with very fine hatching* (1933), etching on paper, 24.8 x 23.8 cm.



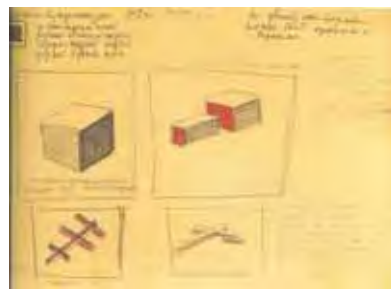
Above: Giorgio Morandi, *Still life* (1953), pencil on paper, 32.5cm x 24 cm.

Other early twentieth century artists whose work relates to the MFA project and who look at spatial relationships using abstract language are Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian. These artists looked at the purity of the



geometric form and developed a visual language that has become the foundation of minimal abstraction. The subject of their work became the relationship between geometric forms for its own sake, emphasising the 'concrete' nature of the work.

Kasimir Malevich, in seeking a new way of expression in art, used the purity of abstract relationships in an attempt to break free from figurative representation. Malevich, for the first time, insisted that the viewer look at the value of the geometric shapes for their own sake. The geometric forms he used – rectangles and squares – to create formal pictorial compositions investigating spatial tension within the picture plane directly influenced the development of the MFA project.



Above left: Kasimir Malevich, *Eight red rectangles* (1915), oil on canvas, 57.8cm x 48.5cm. Above right: Table No 1. Formula of Suprematism (after 1920), watercolour, gouache and graphite pencil on paper, 36cm x 54cm.

The formal compositions of Piet Mondrian also influenced the development of the MFA project. His linear compositions were used as a reference to create a body of work titled *The PM Project* that directly contributed to the

development of the MFA work. Mondrian created visual tension through the interaction of line and the rectangular shape on a two dimensional plane. The tension in the MFA work is created from the interaction of the cubic rectangular form and the angular linear shape surrounding it, in a three dimensional plane.



Above left: Piet Mondrian, *Composition with blue (Unfinished)* (c.1934), oil on canvas, 60cm x 50cm. Above right: *Composition (Unfinished)* (c.1934), charcoal and oil on canvas, 57cm x 55cm.

Some initial drawings for the MFA project were developed as direct responses to Mondrian's work, these are referenced in the next chapter.

The research that informed the MFA project also focused on the work of certain American minimalist sculptors, particularly those whose work included the use of empty space, the cubic form, perspex or mirrored surface. Artists such as Michael Heizer, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson and Tony Smith created large physical objects that forced the viewer to experience space by walking through, between or around primary

geometric forms. The phenomenological aspects of this type of sculpture, where the viewer completed the experience of seeing, became overt and explicit in the work of minimalist and post-minimalist artists. *'The perceiving body, physically present in time and space ... incorporated temporality and ephemerality into its vocabulary as a way to foreground the experiential nature of the aesthetic experience'*.<sup>5</sup>

Large-scale work, such as that of Michael Heizer, investigated the value of empty space in a very literal and confronting way. The work illustrated *North East South West* (1967–2002) is “*made literally of nothing, of negative space: the volume that traditionally defines a sculpture is described in these works by a void, by absence rather than presence.*”<sup>6</sup>

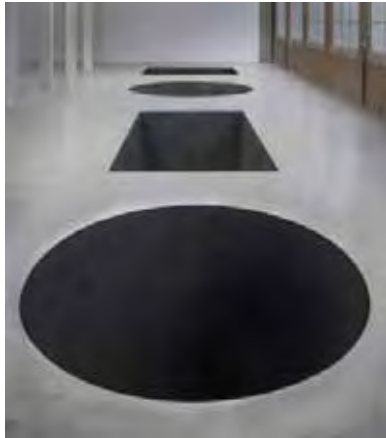
As an example of minimalist sculpture “*the sheer physical dimensions of North, East, South, West and its physical integration into, or displacement of, the fabric of the Dia building, force an entirely different viewing experience from that of traditional sculpture in the round*”.<sup>7</sup> This work, although vastly different in scale to the MFA work, relates to it because it deals directly with empty space as the subject of the work. Absence is the focus of the work. The geometric forms used are assembled in a deliberate and orderly fashion emphasising the spatial relationship between them. The viewer becomes acutely aware of empty space as the subject of the work.

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<sup>5</sup> Spector, N., *Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated): Art from 1951 to the Present*, Guggenheim Museum/Distributed Art Publishers, 2004, page 17.

<sup>6</sup> “Michael Heizer”, Govan, M., [www.diabeacon.org](http://www.diabeacon.org) as at 22 November 2007.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*



Above: Michael Heizer, *North East South West* (1967–2002), rolled steel, permanent installation *Dia:Beacon*, approximately 125 feet long x 20 feet deep.

In developing the MFA project a lot of time was spent looking at and absorbing the work of Donald Judd and other artists associated with the minimalist movement. Judd's use of industrial materials and his flawless construction techniques have become emblematic of the minimalist movement. His use of "*elementary, stereometric shapes*" in arithmetic sequences or arrangements, disregarded traditional criteria regarding composition.<sup>8</sup> Judd's work explored the empty space between and within forms. This investigation into spatial relationships within a single piece and between works was also a theme for the MFA work. Research into Judd's prolific use of the cubic form, colour, construction techniques and the use of perspex directly contributed to the development of the MFA work. Like Malevich and Mondrian, Judd continued to explore the spatial relationship

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<sup>8</sup> Dietmar, E., "Introduction" to *Donald Judd – Colourist: Exhibition Catalogue*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000, page 15.

between cubic or rectangular forms. Although he rejected formalist compositional values and the modernist ideologies of these artists, in the context of art history their work clearly has certain similarities.<sup>9</sup>

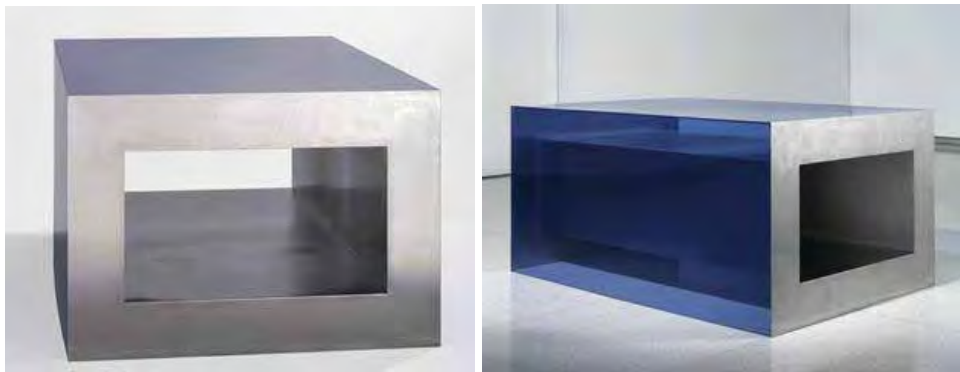


Above: Donald Judd, *Untitled* (1971), anodized aluminum, 6 boxes each 48 x 48 x 48 inches.

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<sup>9</sup> Goldstein A., "Donald Judd" in *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958–1968: Exhibition Catalogue* (Goldstein A. ed.), The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles/The MIT Press, 2004, page 256.

Despite his desire to disassociate himself from the European legacy of modernism he – like Malevich and Mondrian – rejected the illusionistic spatial tricks inherent in painting.<sup>10</sup> Judd emphasized the power of the three– dimensional object.<sup>11</sup> One of the ways his work did this was to emphasize the physicality of the object by allowing the viewer to see into the sculpture. The use of perspex accomplished that; an example of this is *Untitled* (1968) illustrated below.



Above: Donald Judd, *Untitled* (1968), stainless steel, blue plexiglass, 33 x 67.875 x 48 inches.

The MFA project looked at certain aspects of Judd’s work and questioned others. The use of perspex as a material used to create a solid object was investigated. The cubic form as minimalist object was re-visited and altered.

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<sup>10</sup> Goldstein A., “Donald Judd” in *A Minimal Future*, page 256.

<sup>11</sup> Judd, D.: “Three dimensions are real space ... Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface”, in Goldstein, A., op.cit., page 256.

A rectangular shape was used in an attempt to challenge the perfection of the cube and in contrast to Judd's work the MFA work was developed with the deliberate use of formalist composition.

The other minimalist artists whose work informed the MFA project were Robert Morris and Robert Smithson. These artists used mirrored or reflective surfaces as a means of dissolving the space around the sculptural object and making the reflected environment the subject of the sculpture.

Robert Morris referred to plexiglass mirror as "*the most insubstantial of surfaces*".<sup>12</sup> Morris questioned the nature of the sculptural object and its impact on the viewer through its relationship with the surrounding environment. His *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* (1965) pictured below, was an attempt to investigate ideas through the use of material. His cubes tested the boundaries of the concrete/minimal object by dissolving the space that surrounded them. The experiential intent of the work was communicated clearly through the use of material. Morris's work subverted its own presence and challenged the monumentality of his and others' work within the minimalist movement.

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<sup>12</sup> Morris, R., from *Morris: Mirrored Works 1961–1978* (1979) Leo Castelli Inc., in Jenkins S., *Robert Morris, A Minimal Future?*, page 302.



Above: Robert Morris, *Mirrored Cubes* (Re-fabrication of a 1965 original), mirror plate glass and wood, 914mm x 914mm x 914 mm.

Robert Smithson also used mirror as a means of questioning space and the physical presence of an artwork. He used mirror as a device for spatial completion. In his work the mirror was used to reflect reality and to explore a “*visual/nonvisual dialectic between appearance and structure*” an exercise in subversion.<sup>13</sup>



Above left: Robert Smithson, *Nonsite/Essen soil and mirrors* (1969), 12 mirrors, each 3” x 3”. Above right: *Mirror with crushed shells: Sanibel Island Florida* (1969), sand and shells, three mirrors, each 36" x 36".

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<sup>13</sup> Langlotz J. and Spuehler S., Robert Smithson in *A Minimal Future?*, page 342.



Ken Unsworth's work offers an Australian version of Robert Smithson's *Mirror with crushed shells* (1969). In his work we also witness how the act of completion occurs solely through reflection in a mirror.



Above: Ken Unsworth, *Mirror with propped stone piece* (1976), river stones, mirror.

These artists' work informed the MFA project. Their work used mirror to challenge perceptual reality, as an act of completion and in order to extend the physical presence of the work in the visual field. The MFA project used mirror on a horizontal and vertical plane in order to create inverted space and duplicate forms. In the MFA project the mirror was used as a compositional device to draw attention to the space between the solid objects acting as a contrast to the perspex box and reflecting the space between.

## CHAPTER 2

### Development of ideas through studio work

Initially ‘empty space’ seemed like a vast and difficult concept to define.

When *The Empty Space Project* was developed one of the questions asked was: “what does empty space mean and how can it be articulated in an art object?” The project became an ongoing investigation into imagined and negative space. Ideologically it came to refer to the phenomenological value of space. It explored concepts of absence, both physical and conceptual, where empty space was neither inactive nor a void.

During the development of the MFA studio work empty space came to mean two things: *physical space* – the space between objects and *conceptual space* – the space invested with meaning. Donald Judd stated in his writings that when “*two objects are close together they define the space in between. These definitions are infinite until the two objects are so far apart that the distance between them is no longer space*”.<sup>14</sup> This defined space between objects that Judd talks about, is the same space explored within the MFA.

One of the primary aims in creating the studio work was to make work that had no direct representational or illusionistic reference. At the outset of the

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<sup>14</sup> Judd D., “Some aspects of color in general and red and black in particular” (1993) in *Donald Judd Colorist*, op.cit., page 80.

project one of the criteria was that the subject of empty space had to be articulated simply and directly through the object itself. The concept of empty space had to be apparent in the material used and the essence of the object. For the MFA project, empty space referred to the perception of space as physically manipulated through the use of material creating a sense of absence. How that absence was articulated was central to the development of the work.

The premise for creating work and analysing the MFA project was:

*‘What happens when the empty space between objects is defined as a physically solid shape?’* The challenge was to define the space between two solid objects as a physically solid shape, while maintaining the visual transparency that is associated with empty space. Clear perspex and mirror were the materials chosen to articulate this concept, because both of these substances had all the desired physical properties to communicate the idea of emptiness.

Phenomenologically the value of empty space investigated in the MFA referenced Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Ponty devoted much of his writing to the act and significance of seeing. He talked about the process of seeing as a symbiosis between an inside and an outside with ever shifting boundaries, where the outside enters the inside, and the inside becomes part of the outside – where inside and outside may at any moment split at their point of

contact. Ponty explored how this constitutive gap or split between inside and outside enables us to see.<sup>15</sup>

This act of seeing and the inversion between inside and outside were at the core of the MFA project. By using mutable materials such as mirror and perspex the standard mode of visual perception was disrupted prohibiting any clear delineation between the object, the subject and the viewer. By reflecting their environment or being completely transparent, mirror and perspex enabled their surrounds to be included in the viewer's perception.

Perspex and mirror articulated the idea of empty space by creating internal tension in the work through a series of contrasts and illusions. The transparent and reflective materials contrasted with the opaque, painted materials. Perspex was transparent and therefore was visually empty. Mirror reflected everything around it and was also read as visually empty. Both materials, when fabricated into a box shape were physically solid, affirming their status as concrete art objects and responding to the claim in the abstract: *"The solidity of the concrete or minimalist art object and the space that it physically occupies will be challenged by the use of visually*

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<sup>15</sup> Potts, A., *The Sculptural Imagination*, Yale University Press, 2000, page 208.

*ambiguous material.*” The transparency and reflectiveness of the material imbued the work with a sense of visual absence whilst retaining its physical presence.

Emphasis on material and the ‘objecthood’ of the artwork became central to the development of the MFA work.<sup>16</sup> Material affected the physical space the sculpture occupied and its intended or unintended meaning. As part of the conceptual framework the MFA work sought to extend and comment on previous traditions such as minimalism and early modernist abstraction by combining the manufactured with the handmade. Research that contributed to the development of the work included the investigation of construction techniques, the treatment of the surface, the compositional design of each piece and their presentation in the gallery space. Each of these aspects was developed through a series of drawings.

### **Initial studio drawings**

Drawings developed for the MFA thesis in the initial stages of the project responded to the abstract: “*The Empty Space project aims to explore the interior and exterior space of an object through the use of perspex.*”

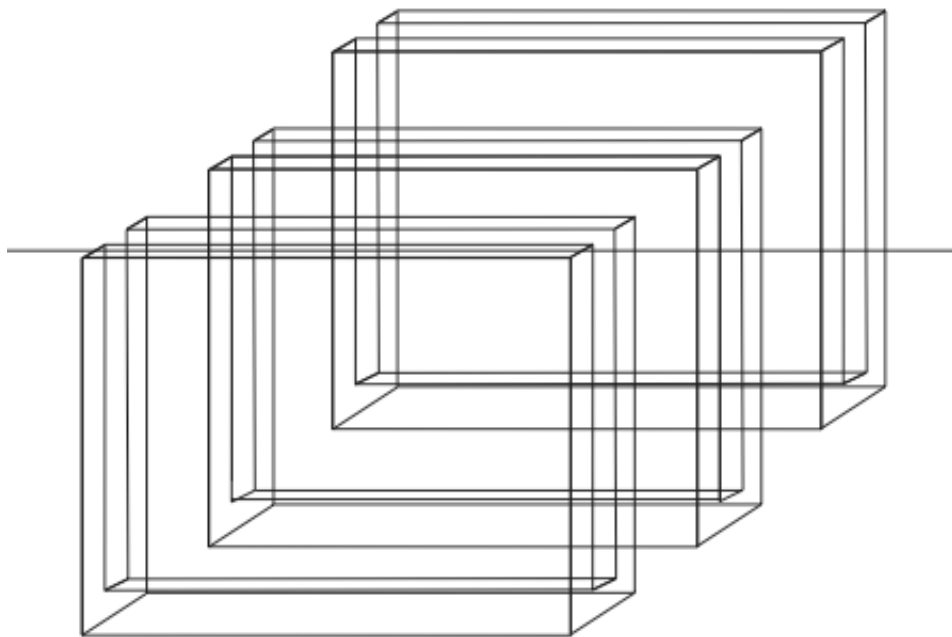
Some of these drawings developed into studio work translating theoretical ideas into physical objects. In accordance with the abstract, certain concepts evident in the finished work were developed from the beginning. These

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<sup>16</sup> Potts A.,, op cit, page 15–20.

were the use of 30mm clear perspex as an equivalent to 30mm MDF and the play between inside and outside through the contrasting use of transparent and opaque material. Early drawings explored the possibility of solely using industrial materials and manufacturing techniques, a feature of the work that changed.

Examples of drawings from the initial phases of the MFA are illustrated below:



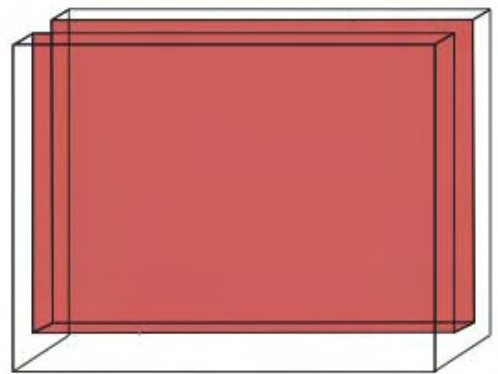
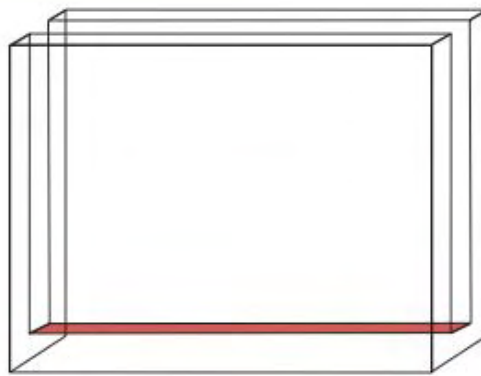
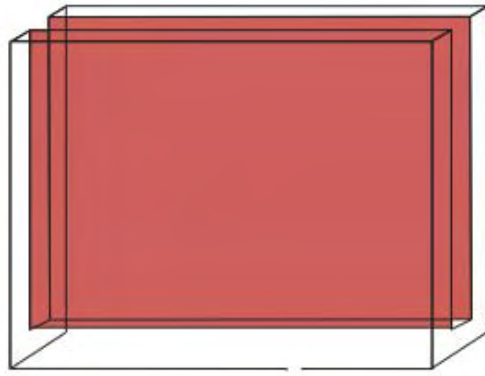
Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space* (2004), digital drawing.

Drawings made in the first Semester of the MFA reflect a direct relationship with earlier work, such as *Swan Dive II* (2003). They were the original response to the abstract of the thesis:

*“The Empty Space project aims to explore the interior and exterior space of an object through the use of perspex. The solidity of the concrete or minimalist art object and the space that it physically occupies will be challenged by the use of visually ambiguous material.”*

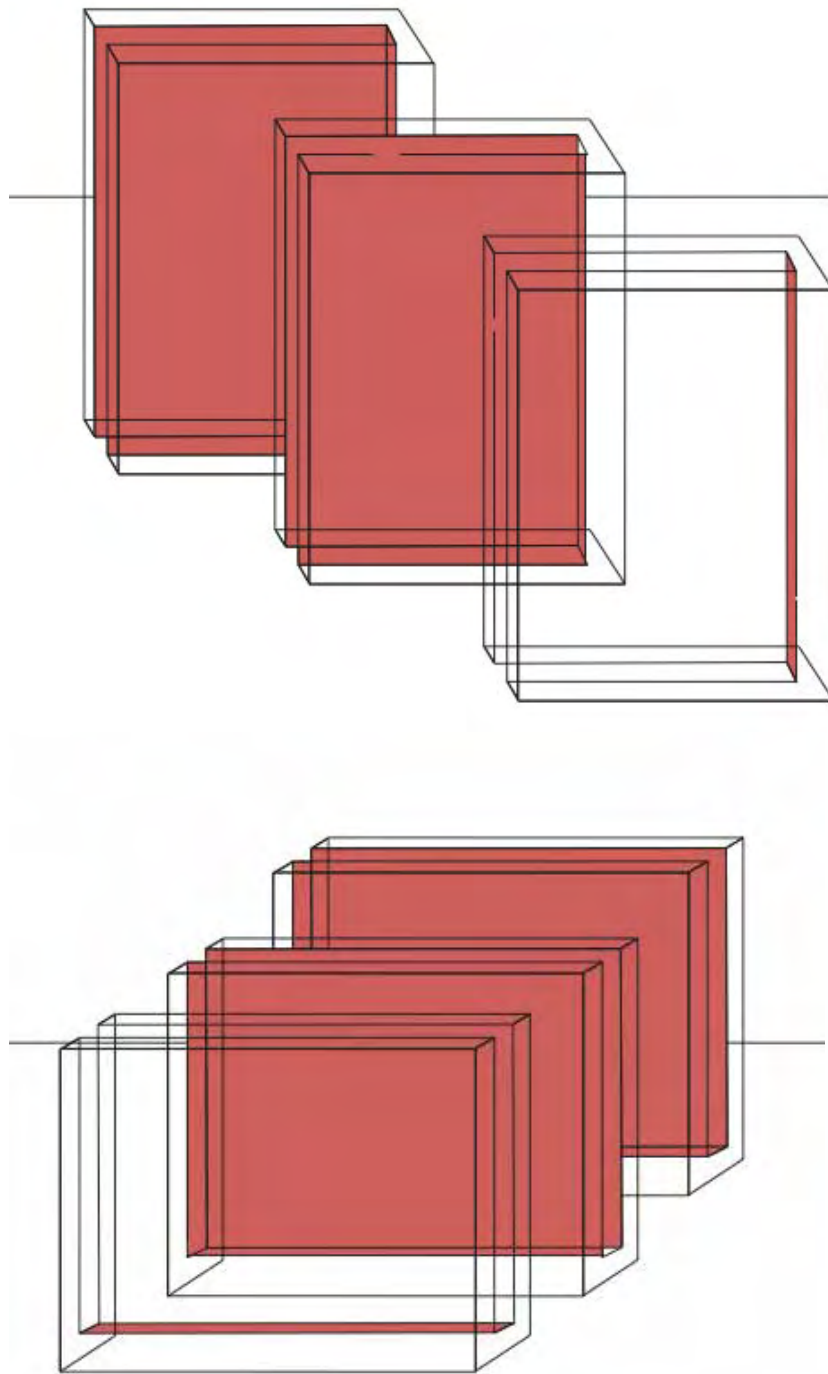


Francesca Mataraga, *Swan Dive II* (2003),  
oil on wood, 80cm x 80cm x 25cm



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space* (2004), digital drawing.





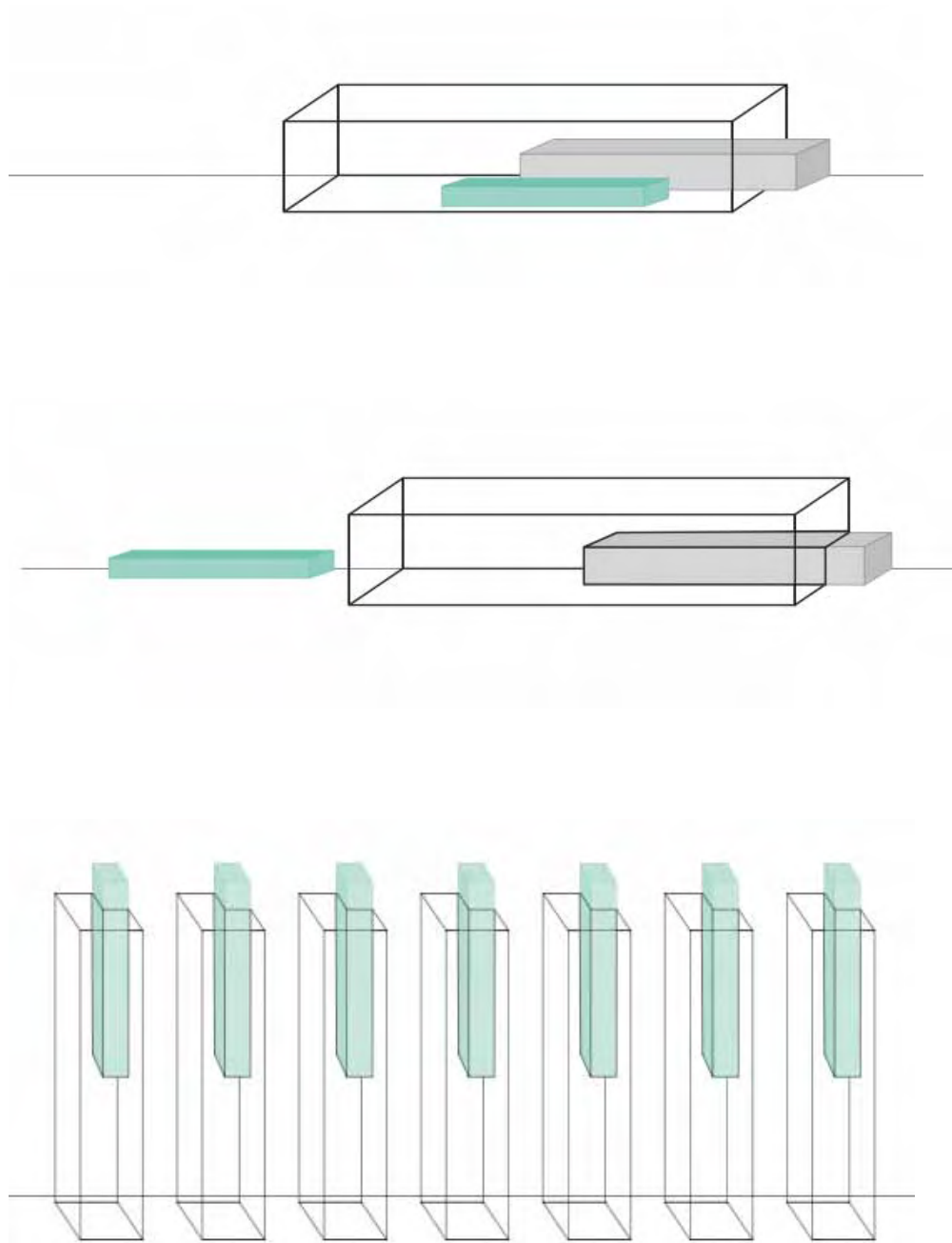
Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space* (2004), digital drawing.

These drawings substituted perspex for wood, replicating each piece with slight variations in order to create a sequence. Manufactured from 30mm clear perspex these pieces were designed to incorporate solid or opaque segments in 3mm red perspex or red metal in order to accentuate the internal planes of the sculpture. The intention was that visually the sculpture would be confusing making it difficult to distinguish which was the inside and outside, thus responding to the premise of the thesis.

Referencing the work of Donald Judd with their play on internal and external surface these drawings depicted sculptures incorporating thin sheets of metal or red perspex. They were a direct response to the question posed in the abstract of the thesis “*what is internal and what is external.*”

These initial drawings were rejected because they relied on existing work too closely; being replicas of earlier work they did not explore new ideas.

Further drawings were then developed examples of which follow.



Francesca Mataraga, *Working drawings for The Empty Space* (2004), digital drawings.

The premise behind this second set of drawings was to challenge the idea between “inside and outside” by using moveable elements. Conceived as floor pieces, these sculptures were to sit against the wall making the viewer aware of the wall and the sequence in which the varying components were arranged. Designed to be manufactured from clear 3mm perspex and Laminex benchtop material, these drawings were sequential compositions using a configuration of two or three oblong shapes in different positions to indicate change. This work was conceived as a direct response to minimalist construction methods embracing the manufacturing process and the idea of sequencing. These drawings were subsequently abandoned.

A third set of drawings was developed based solely on the use of clear perspex. Created in response to the question posed in the abstract of the thesis “*what is internal and what is external*” this work used the cube as the primary shape. Perspex cubes were placed next to each other and inside one another; this created confusion about the boundaries of each box.

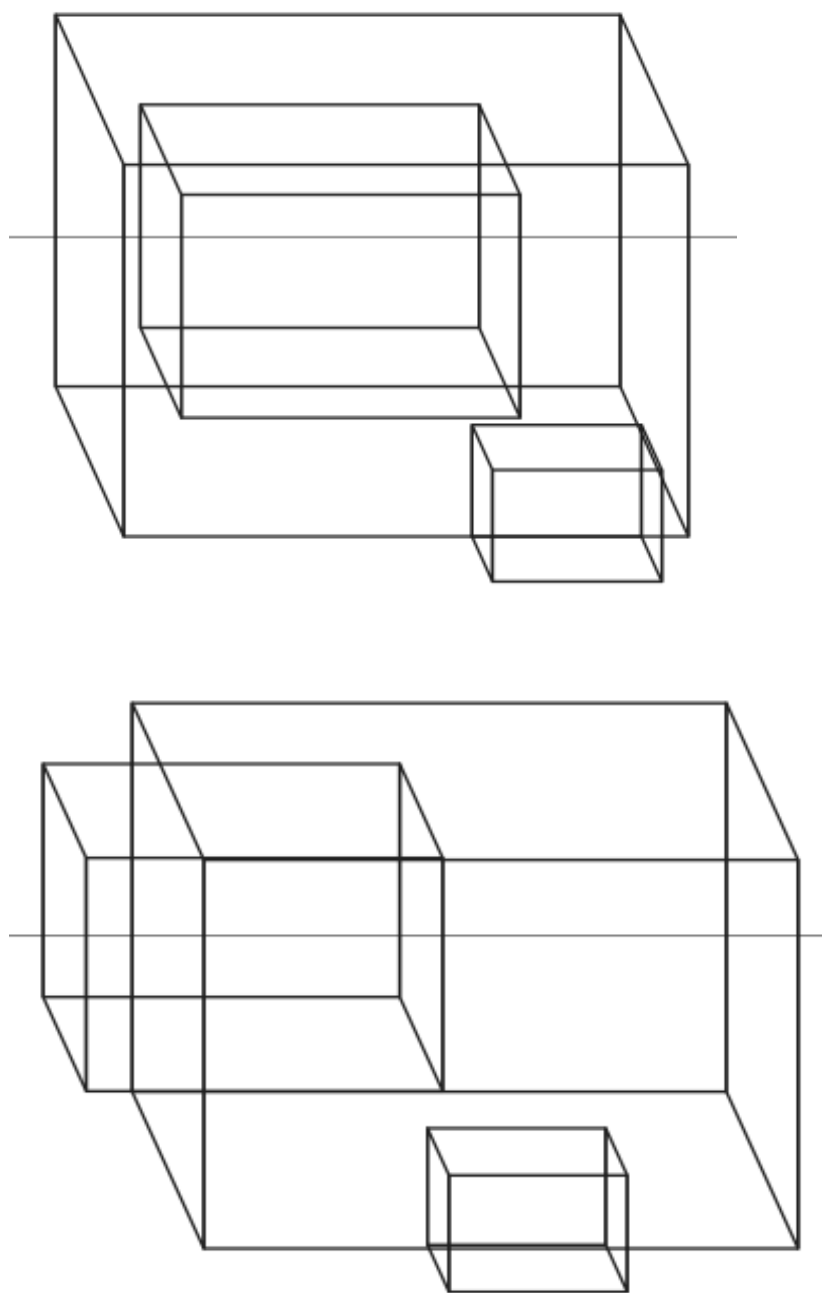
Initially this seemed like a satisfactory response to the hypothesis in the thesis abstract: “*The visual transparency of the material contradicts the physical presence of the object it creates. It creates a play between presence and absence.*” These drawings indicated a satisfactory response to

the abstract. Therefore, a set of four 3mm clear perspex boxes was manufactured after sourcing a sympathetic manufacturer who would guarantee a flawless finish.

Upon receiving delivery of the boxes and experimenting with different configurations in the studio it became apparent that this too was an unsatisfactory response; the boxes lacked presence. They appeared insubstantial and flimsy, reflected light badly and accentuated dust particles. The configuration of the work suggested an architectural Marquette for a larger structure rather than a medium sized autonomous sculptural piece.

Lack of presence as an art object indicated that further development of studio work was required. Using only clear perspex the composition did not create an impact nor did it express the focus of the work as empty space.

Examples of these drawings and the studio work created follow.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space* (2004), digital drawing.



Francesca Mataraga, *Work in progress (The Empty Space Project)* (2004), perspex, 60cm x 80cm x 50cm.

The perspex boxes were subsequently used to develop further studio work. Placing the boxes on plinths in the studio and surrounding them with MDF pieces indicated that the clear perspex communicated the concept of empty space when surrounded by solid objects. Examples of this work follow.



Francesca Mataraga, *Work in progress (The Empty Space Project)* (2004),  
3mm perspex and MDF, 40cm x 20cm x 15cm.



Francesca Mataraga, *Work in progress (The Empty Space Project)* (2004),  
3mm perspex and MDF, 25cm x 25cm x 20cm.



These new pieces indicated a successful response to the question what is empty space. By using solid objects made from 30mm MDF as brackets to surround a clear perspex box, empty space was visually defined as the space between these objects.

The perspex box became the subject of the sculpture by physically articulating the empty space between the surrounding solid forms. Fulfilling its function by challenging our perception of solidity, the perspex box defined the space between the solid shapes or brackets by its physical presence and visually preserved the empty space between the brackets by being transparent. It answered the question: ‘what happens when the empty space between objects is defined as a physically solid shape?’

### **Surface treatment – colour and texture**

Once the successful use of material had been established it became necessary to make a decision about surface treatment. Two factors were considered: firstly, the choice of color, and secondly, the application of the paint.

Choice of colour became an important feature of the work. Earlier work such as *Swan Dive II* (2003) had incorporated vibrant colour as a way of highlighting the space between forms, the schism or fissure. For the MFA

work it became important to use a colour that was fairly neutral in tone and mutable in chromatic value so that it did not dominate the reading of the work.

Choosing to paint the wooden surrounds with acrylic paint was a deliberate decision to create a link between the sculptural form and its painterly associations. A dark blue colour was chosen because of its chromatic value. Accentuating the physical heaviness of the MDF and showing chromatic intent was an important aspect of the work. Experimentation with various pigments, first in oil paint and then in acrylic resulted in the decision to use Matisse Pthalo Blue.

Matisse Pthalo blue was chosen because it appeared mutable in colour yet was a stable pigment. The pthalo blue took on different qualities depending on the light – it could appear as dark blue, purple or black. This ability to change meant that it was an ambiguous colour and corresponded to the perspex.

Initially the surface was painted with oil paint. This surface, although satisfactory for relief pieces, proved to be problematic when applied to three-dimensional cubic sculptures. The oil paint created a softly textured yet inconsistent surface that stuck to the perspex when placed directly next to it. This resulted in the perspex box and the painted surface being

damaged.

An example of the Matisse Pthalo Blue colour used and the painterly surface is shown below. This image illustrates the stippling effect achieved by applying the paint with a brush.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space* (2006), surface detail.

Texture in the application of the paint became an important feature of the work. Applying the paint with a brush created a stippled surface that was unmistakably handmade. This handmade surface developed into a key concept creating contrast between the manufactured elements of the work and the handcrafted components.

Contrast between the manufactured and the handmade engaged directly with

certain key issues of concrete, minimalist and post-minimalist art concerning surface treatment and manufacturing techniques. Painting the MDF surface with a brush, deliberately creating a textured surface that was in contrast with the flawless manufactured finish of the perspex, set up a dialogue within the work itself referencing modernist, minimalist and post-minimalist approaches to surface treatment.

Flawless manufactured surfaces were a feature of much minimalist art, such as that of Donald Judd, Richard Serra and Tony Smith. A handcrafted or painterly surface treatment was more readily associated with early twentieth century artists such as Mondrian and Malevich and some post-minimalist contemporary artists such as Rachel Whiteread and Hilarie Mais.

Contrast between the painterly surface and the manufactured surface became important because it kept the objects closer to their ideological origins – painting. Painterly surface treatment also became important because it emphasized the skin of the object. Hand painting the surface of the sculpture allowed that surface to have textural variation and painterly qualities - like a painting. In effect the work became a three-dimensional painting. Juxtaposition between the industrial and the handmade undermined the perfection of the minimalist object and introduced evidence of the artist's hand exploring the possibility of co-existence between minimalist values and modernist ideologies in the concrete art object.

## **The PM (Piet Mondrian) Project**

Use of transparent material as a metaphor for emptiness was developed through a body of work presented as a separate exhibition during the MFA. This exhibition was titled *The PM Project*. The premise behind *The PM Project* was to use a single two-dimensional linear composition and produce it as a three dimensional object in different and contrasting materials.

Studio work created for this project tested several hypotheses and was the test case for establishing the use of material, construction techniques and surface finish. Research behind the materials used in *The PM Project* contributed directly to the *Empty Space Project* by testing the idea that transparency could be equated with absence in sculptural objects and that tension could be created in a work simply through the contrasting use of materials.

*The PM Project* investigated the idea of making the same object out of contrasting materials. Based on the work of Piet Mondrian it intended to engage with the work of classical modernism and interpret it in a contemporary way. *The PM Project* presented three works that shared the same compositional elements but were executed in different materials.

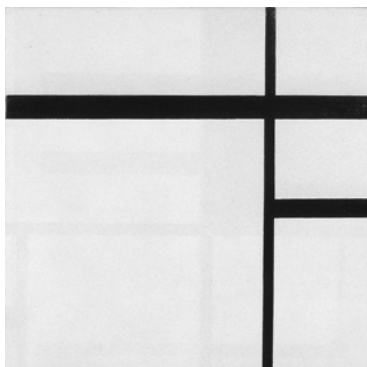
Material became the subject of this work by using painted MDF, transparent

perspex and fluorescent light; the contrast between these materials created visual tension. Simplifying the compositional elements of the work and limiting the use of colour, the subject and focus of the work became the choice of material.

The different materials created three very distinct works that explored the architectural presence of the art object in the gallery environment.

The sculptural nature of the work brought a simple line composition into the gallery space in a very physical way.

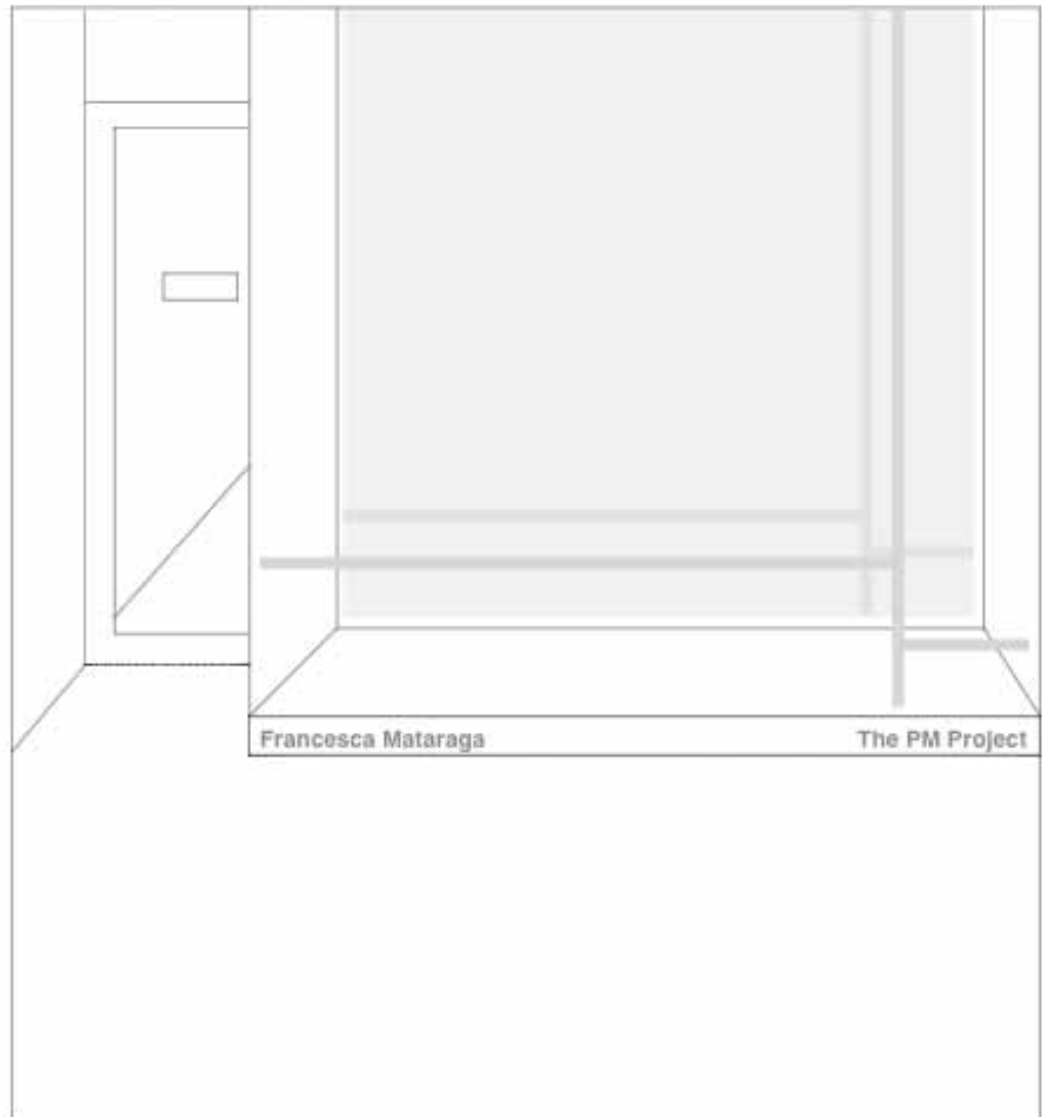
Taking a single painting, *Composition en Blanc et Noir II* (*Composition in White and Black II*) (1930) as a starting point to make new work, a link was created between the legacy of twentieth century abstract painting and contemporary approaches to minimalist work.



Piet Mondrian, *Composition en Blanc et Noir II* (*Composition in White and Black II*) (1930), Oil on canvas, 50.5 x 50.5 cm.

*The PM Project* was developed specifically for the Peloton gallery space.<sup>17</sup>

Images of the proposed working drawings and the finished work follow.



Francesca Mataraga, *Proposal drawing for The PM Project* (2005), digital drawing.

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<sup>17</sup> Peloton, 25 Meagher St, Chippendale, NSW 2008, Australia [www.peloton.net.au](http://www.peloton.net.au).

The original drawing for the front window, as depicted above, were for white tape and UV light. The piece was reworked for the exhibition because the tape did not create enough of a visible impact in the window. A new piece was created using fluorescent light.



Francesca Mataraga, *PM (Fluorescent Light)* (2005), fluorescent light and acrylic paint, 60cm x 70cm.

Empty space was a theme that was explored in this work. The light sculpture in the front window was only activated through the presence of electricity. A reflection was created in the window across the street thereby inhabiting an empty space. The insubstantial nature of light was used as a way of contrasting physical presence and absence. This work referenced the sculptures of Dan Flavin particularly his Vladimir Tatlin series and



modernist abstraction. The following image shows the final installation of the work in the gallery and is an indication of scale.

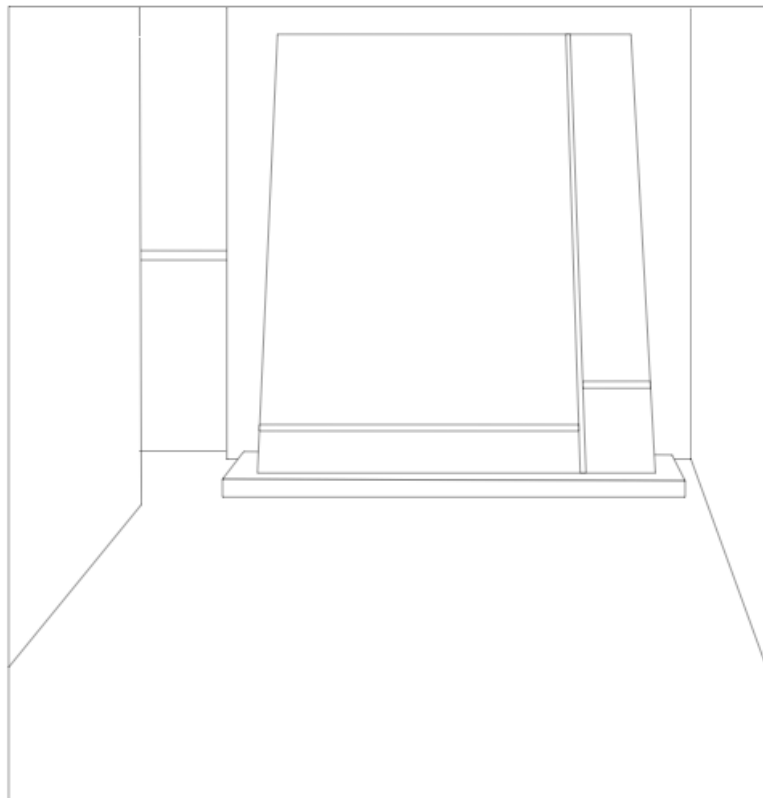


Francesca Mataraga, Installation view *The PM Project*, 2005  
Peloton, Sydney,  
Left: *PM (Large Oil)* (2005), oil on wood, 1.6m x 1.8m.  
Right: *PM (Large Perspex)* (2005), clear perspex and steel, 1.6m x 1.8m.

*The PM Project* tested whether 30mm clear perspex and 30mm MDF could be used successfully to communicate the idea of absence. These two materials were chosen because they had similar physical attributes. 30mm clear perspex and 30mm MDF were both physically solid materials of equal mass and volume with a smooth surface. When used to construct pieces that were physically identical, this equivalence in mass and volume highlighted

visual absence as the subject of the work.

As illustrated above, the finished pieces were placed next to each other in the gallery space in order to instigate a dialogue. One piece was visually solid and painted in a dark blue colour in order to emphasize its solidity. The other was completely transparent. The success of this project in equating visual transparency with absence contributed to the development of *The Empty Space* exhibition.

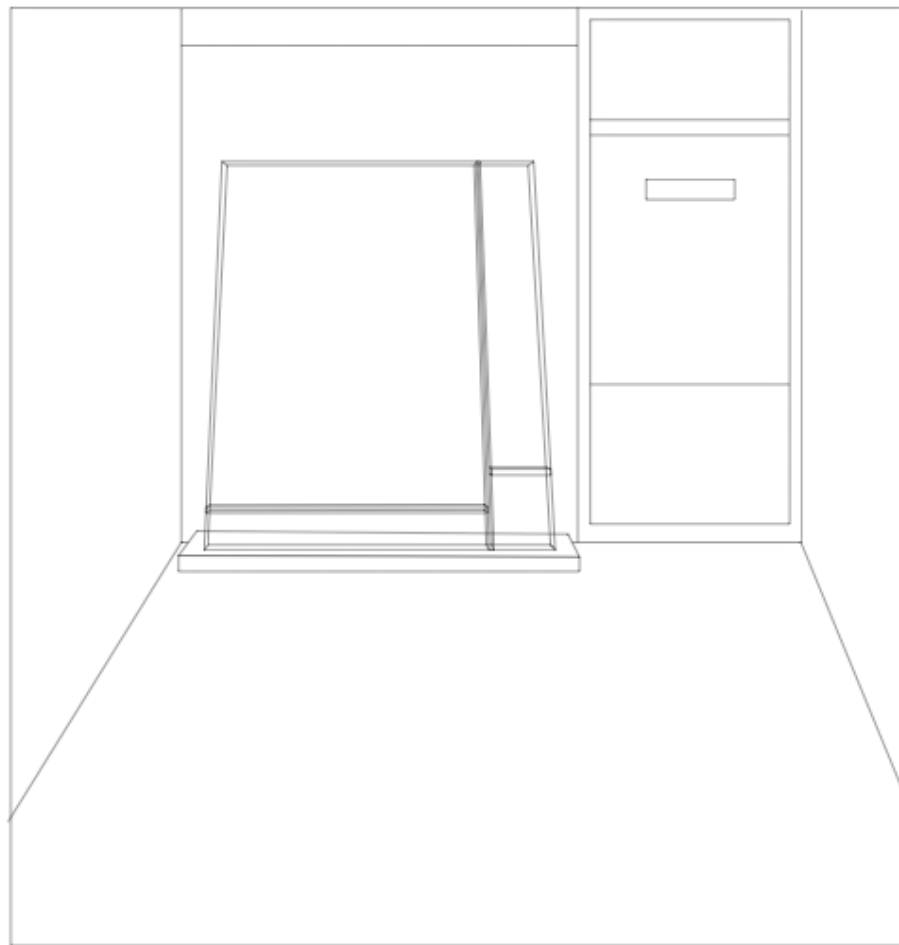


Francesca Mataraga, *Proposal (PM Large Blue)* (2005), digital drawing.



Francesca Mataraga, *PM 1 (Large Oil)* (2005),  
oil and acrylic on MDF, 1.8m x 1.8m.

PM (Large Blue), one of the two pieces displayed inside the gallery was created as one of a pair. PM (Large Blue) was placed directly opposite the gallery entrance with its companion piece PM (Large Perspex) at a 90-degree angle on the adjacent wall.



Francesca Mataraga, *Proposal (PM Large Perspex)* (2005), digital drawing.



Francesca Mataraga, *PM (Large Perspex)* (2005),  
steel, 30mm clear perspex.

Placing the pieces so close to each other made the material they were made of the subject of the work. Each functioned as an echo of the other. One solid, the other transparent – both equal in size and mass – they were simultaneously twin forms and opposites.

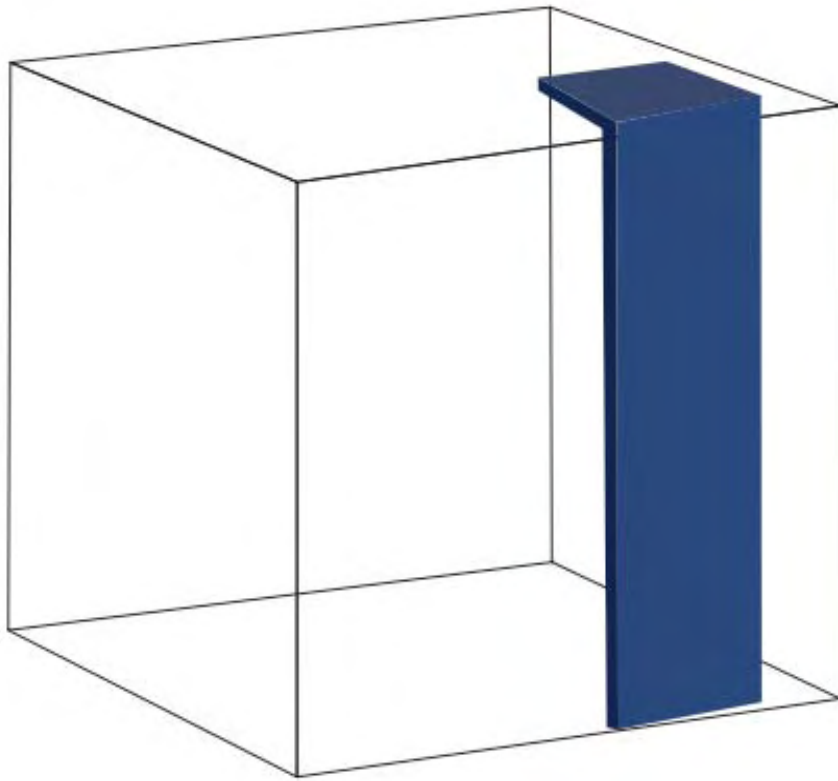
### **The Empty Space Project**

The process of developing larger work for the MFA project was determined by certain design and construction elements that had to be considered. One of these was that the materials and the construction method used had to reflect the ideology behind the work. The construction had to appear effortless. In the tradition of minimalism a substantial portion of the work was manufactured and it therefore became important to develop construction methods before manufacture commenced.

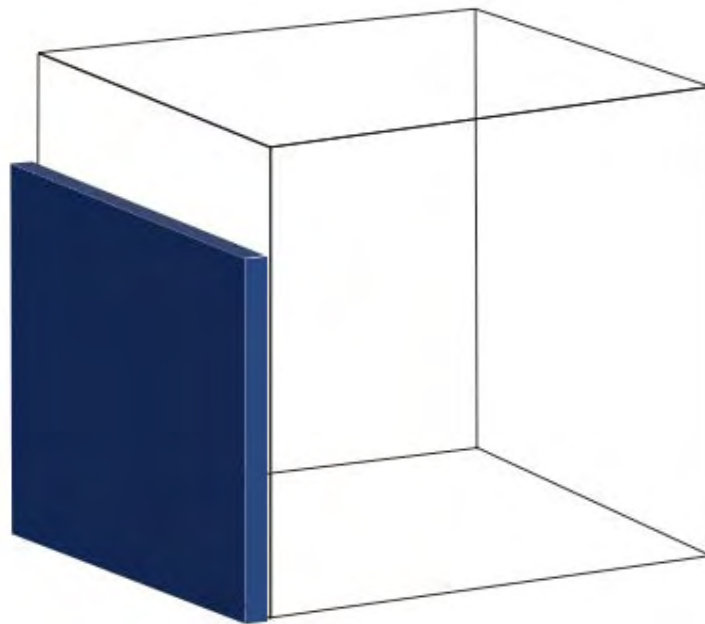
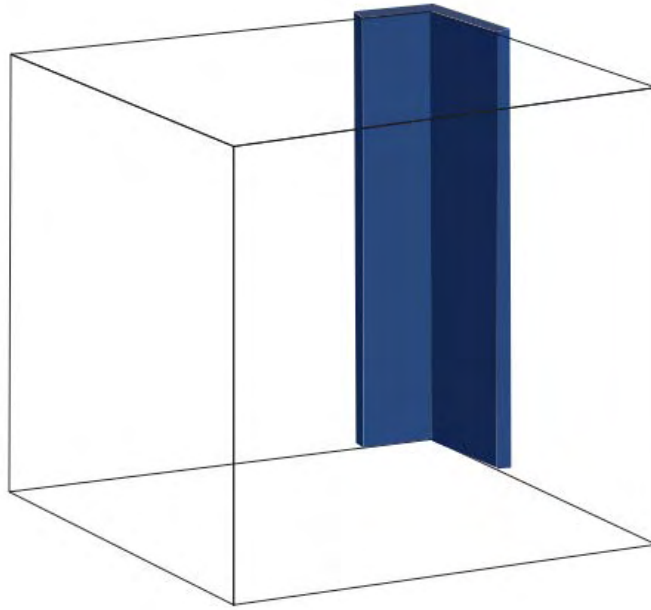
Digital drawings were developed in order to determine the final design and installation plans that were determined by the gallery space. These initial drawings and plans show a variety of work that was never created.

Conceived as a series, these proposed sculptures were to be constructed as isometric cubes, creating a sequence. Measuring 80cm x 80cm x 80cm each, they were smaller than the work that was eventually constructed.

Examples of these initial drawings and the gallery floor plans that influenced their development follow.

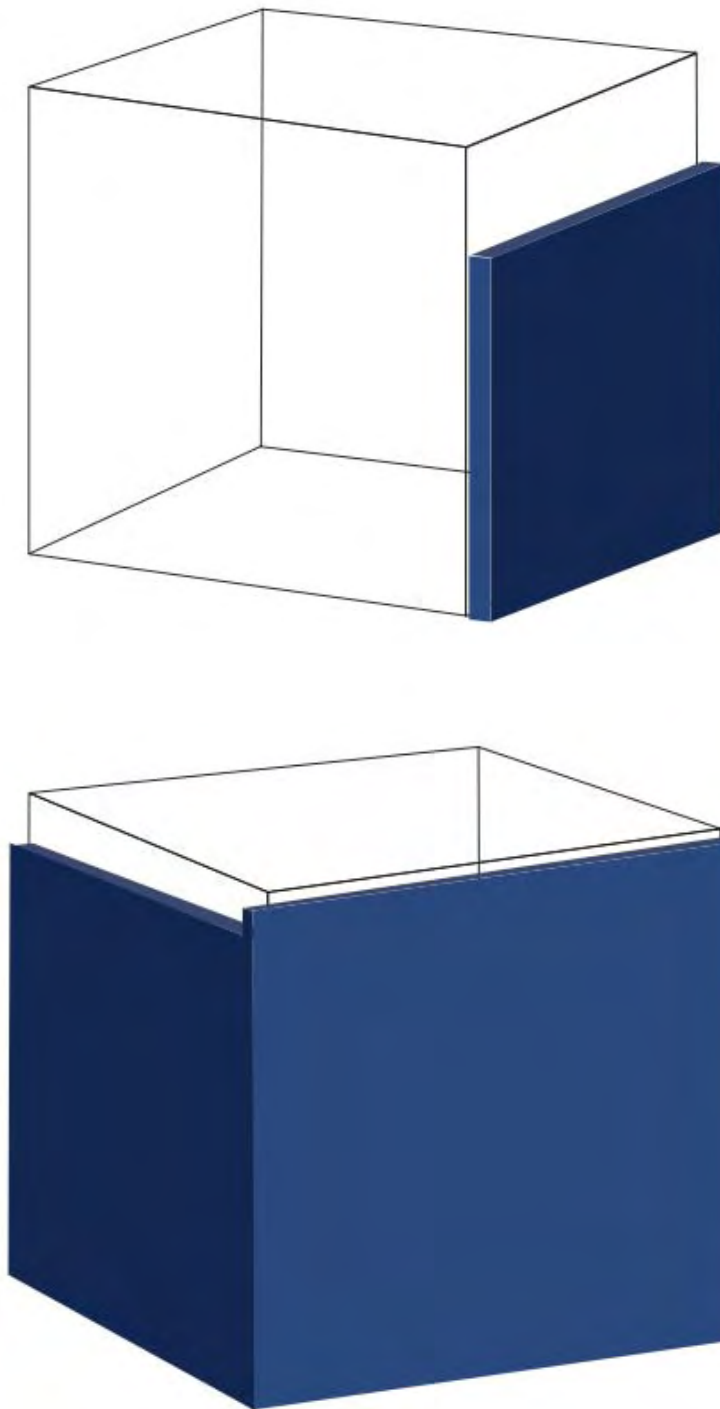


Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space Construction Drawings* (approximate size  $1m^3$ ) (2006), digital drawing.



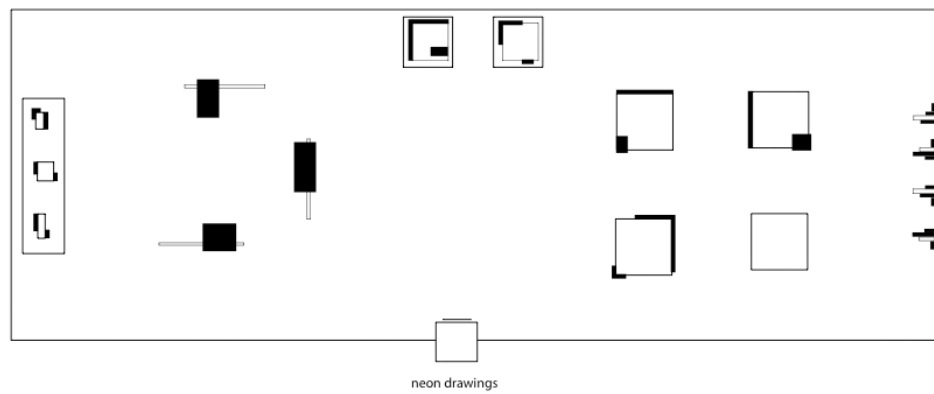
Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space Construction Drawings* (approximate size 1m) (2006), digital drawing.



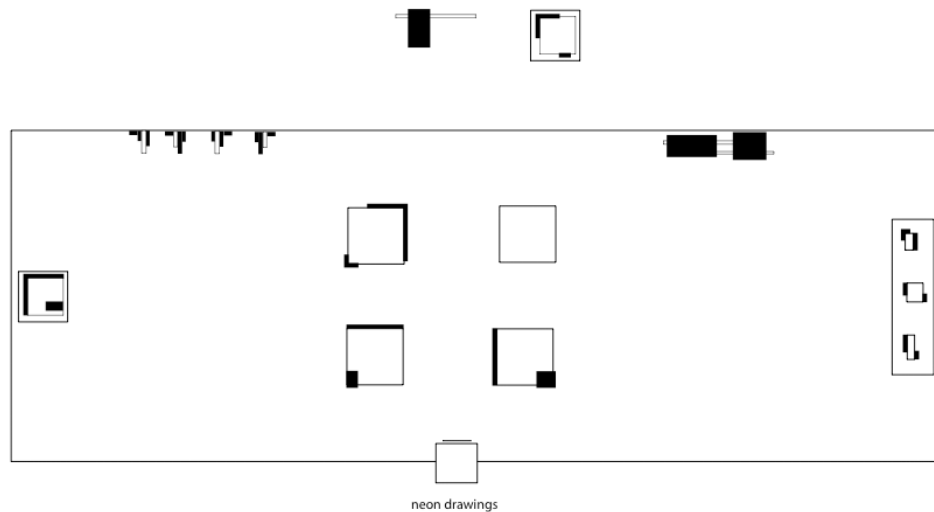


Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space Construction Drawing* (approximate size  $1m^3$ ) (2006), digital drawing.

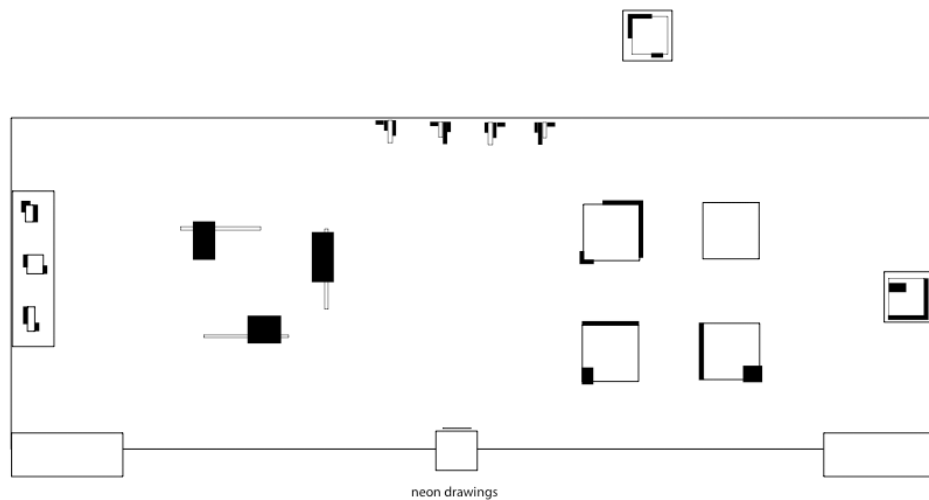
Initial gallery floor plans show numerous other pieces. Some of these pieces were inspired by past work and developed as drawings but were never manufactured. Others were based on the original gallery proposal.



Francesca Mataraga, *Gallery Layout Plan 1* (2005), digital drawing.



Francesca Mataraga, *Gallery Layout Plan 2* (2005), digital drawing.



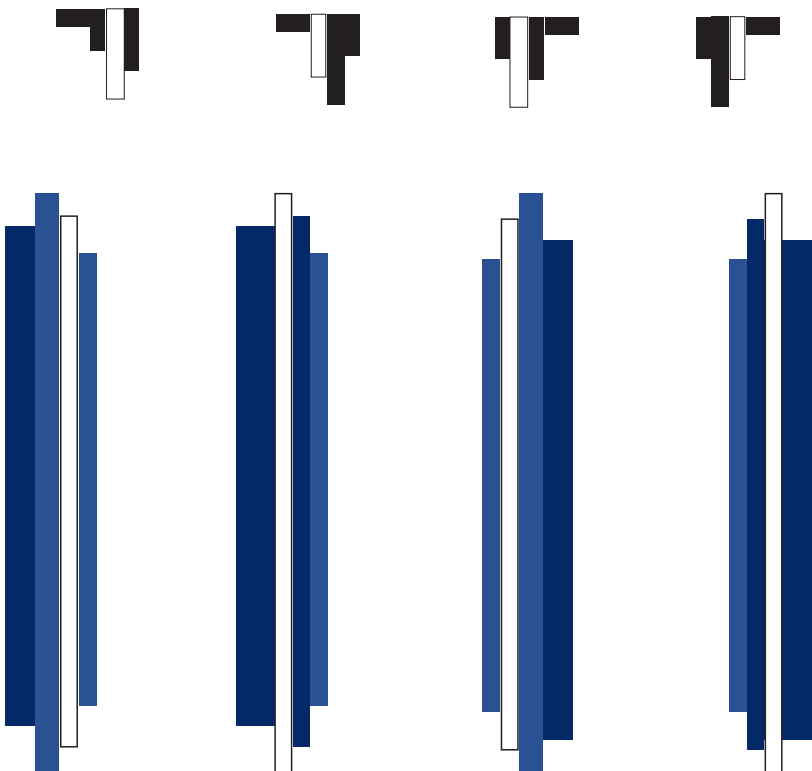
Francesca Mataraga, *Gallery Layout Plan 3* (2005), digital drawing.

Examples of some of these associated drawings follow. They show how the work relates to an earlier piece titled *Three* from 2005. *Three* was a relief triptych using nine equal components in three differing configurations to create a whole. The inside was painted a slightly different colour to the outside in order to accentuate the internal space.

The *Empty Space* drawings explored the idea of emptiness as a transparent section of a similar relief in a series. The empty space between the segments was translated through the use of clear perspex. These pieces were again abandoned because they were translations of earlier work.



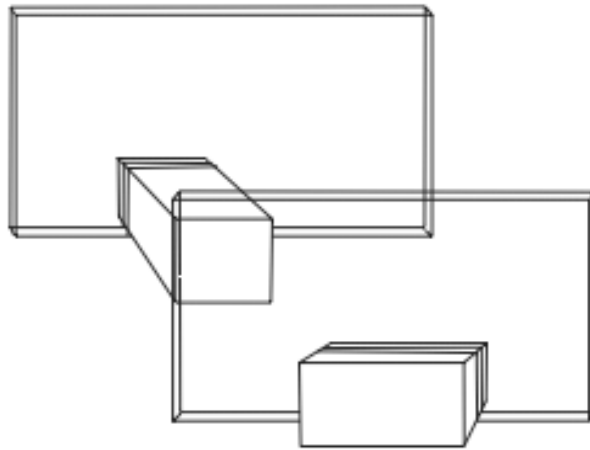
Francesca Mataraga, *Three* (2005), oil on wood, 1.2m x 80cm x 25cm.



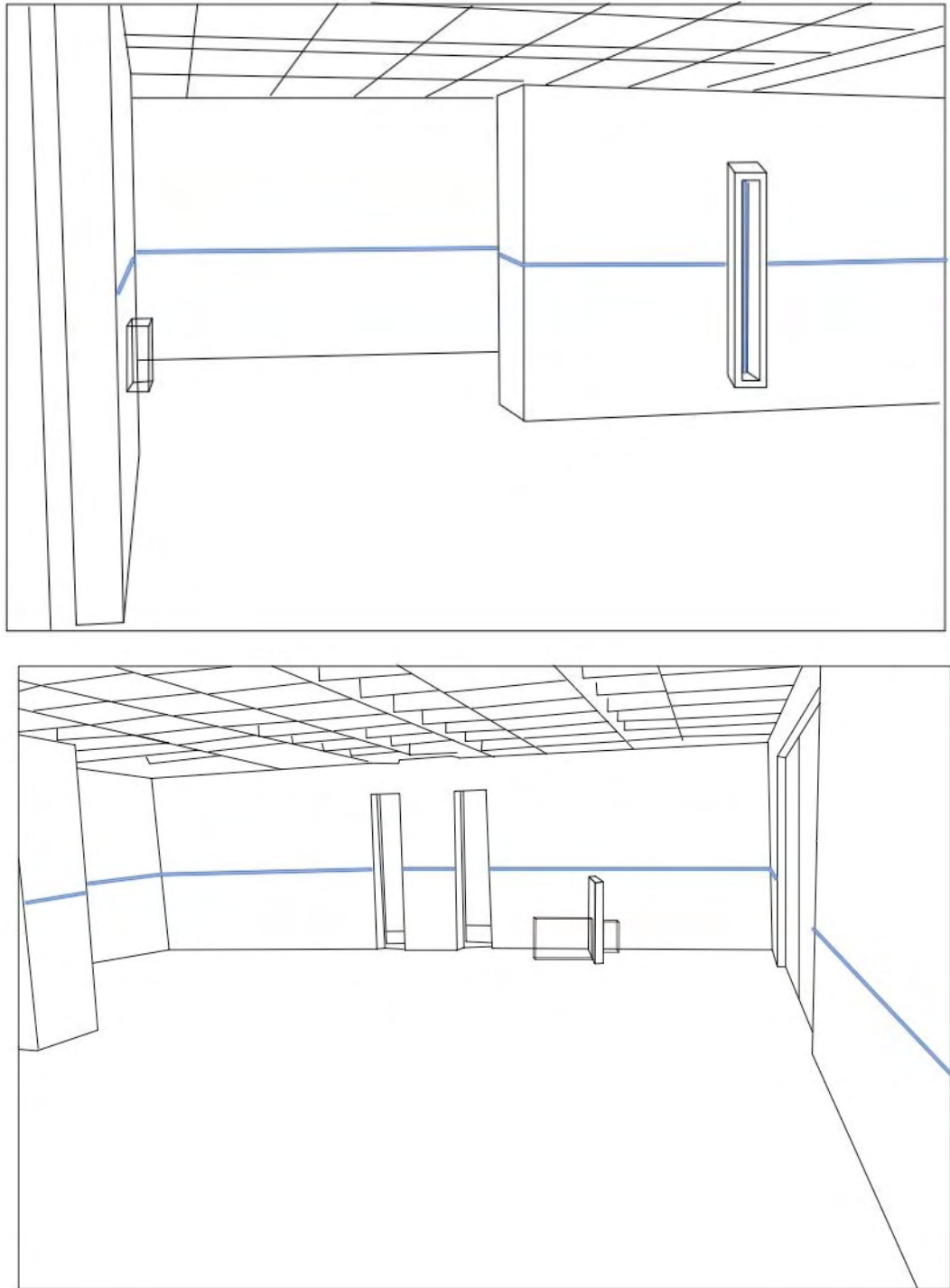
Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space Drawings for Wall Reliefs* (2006), digital drawing.

The proposal drawings for the Tin Sheds Gallery were very different to the work that was eventually shown in the space. Drawings for the proposal had been developed at the beginning of the MFA, were based on speculative ideas and were a response to the architecture of the gallery space.

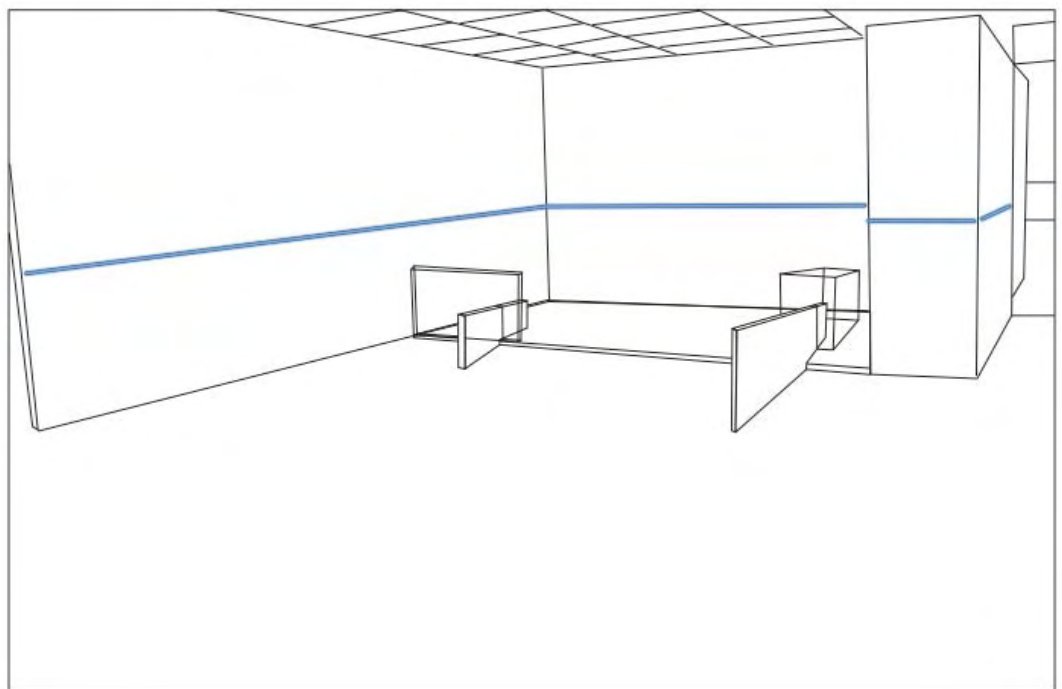
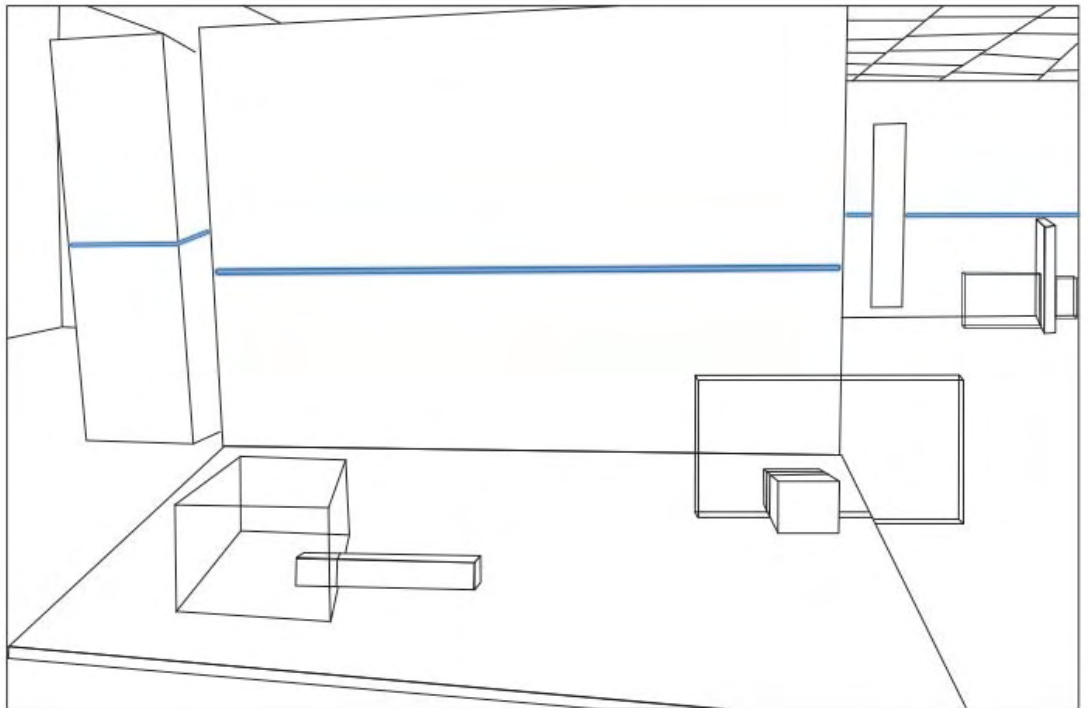
Examples of the original proposal drawings follow. These drawings show how much the work developed during the MFA. The initial proposal drawings were developed in May/June 2005. Some of the ideas from this original proposal were incorporated into the finished work and are discussed in reference to the small-scale studio work.



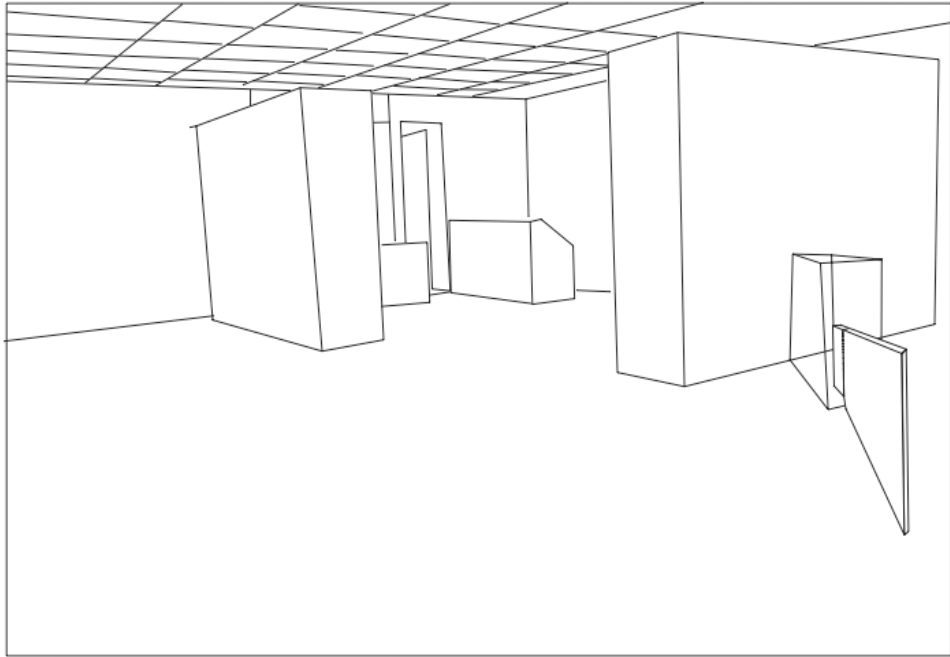
Francesca Mataraga, *Tin Sheds Gallery Exhibition Proposal, The Empty Space, Sculpture* (2005), digital drawing.



Francesca Mataraga, *Tin Sheds Gallery Exhibition Proposal for The Empty Space* (2005), digital drawings.



Francesca Mataraga, *Tin Sheds Gallery Exhibition Proposal for The Empty Spac* (2005), digital drawings.



Francesca Mataraga, *Tin Sheds Gallery Exhibition Proposal for The Empty Space* (2005), digital drawings.

### **Untitled I – The Empty Space**

The first piece produced for *The Empty Space Project* was *Untitled I – The Empty Space*. Designed and built on top of a plinth it utilised two solid wooden shapes built around a perspex box. The perspex box was made using 3mm perspex and the corners were made using 30mm MDF.

Viewed at eye level so that the spatial subtleties of the forms could be examined more closely, the piece extended all the way to the edges of the plinth.



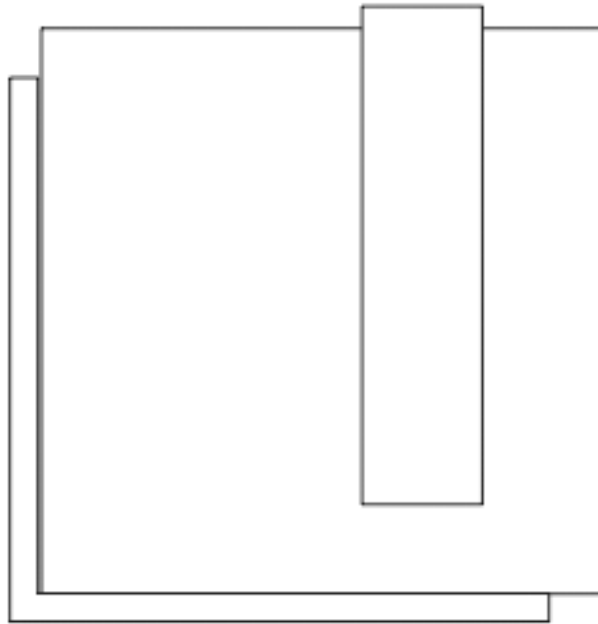


Francesca Mataraga, *Untitled I (The Empty Space)* (2005)  
3mm perspex, oil on MDF, 60cm x 60cm x 50cm.



Francesca Mataraga, *Untitled I (The Empty Space)* (2005)  
3mm perspex, oil on MDF, 60cm x 60cm x 50cm.

The sculptural shapes created were three-dimensional interpretations of flat geometric drawing, an example of which is shown below.



Francesca Mataraga, *Working Drawing for Untitled I (The Empty Space – top view)* (2005), digital drawing.

The cubic form, created by the perspex, gave physical articulation to the empty space between solid surrounds. The surrounds could be read as remnants or sections of a cube that had been cut away or as positive forms encasing the perspex box.

Both the small and larger *Empty Space* sculptures were developed from this work. This piece confirmed that contrasting solid and transparent materials could articulate the idea of empty space successfully in a three-dimensional object.

### **Small-scale Work**

After constructing *Untitled I (The Empty Space)* a series of small-scale works was developed to further test the visual abstract of the thesis.

This work was assembled in the studio and developed through a series of drawings and work in progress.

Small-scale boxes manufactured as test pieces for shape, size and construction technique allowed experimentation that helped determine the most effective construction techniques that could be applied to a large-scale box. Designed as cubic forms and rectangular shapes, the different sized and shaped boxes enabled experimentation with composition. Detailed images showing the development of the small-scale work follow.

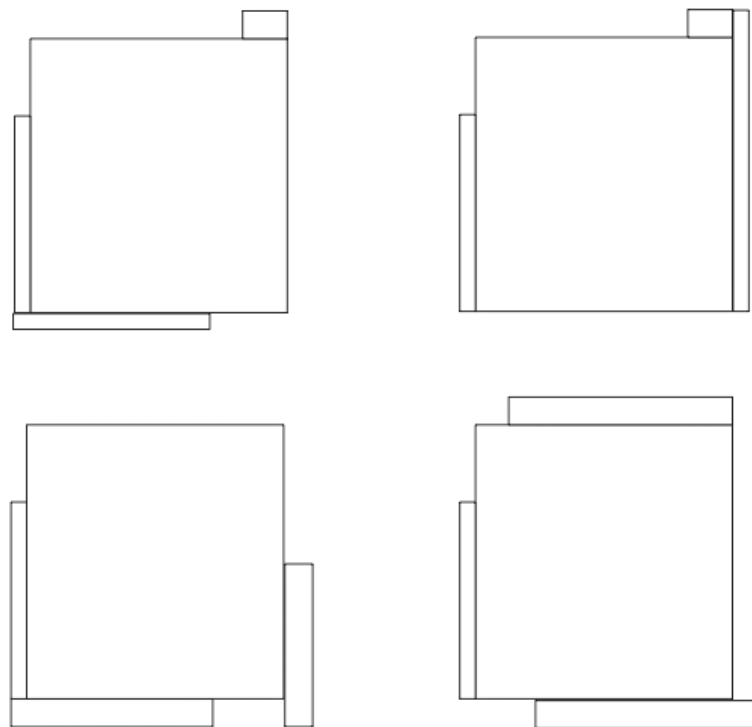


Francesca Mataraga, *Work in progress (The Empty Space)* (2005/6),  
3mm perspex, MDF.

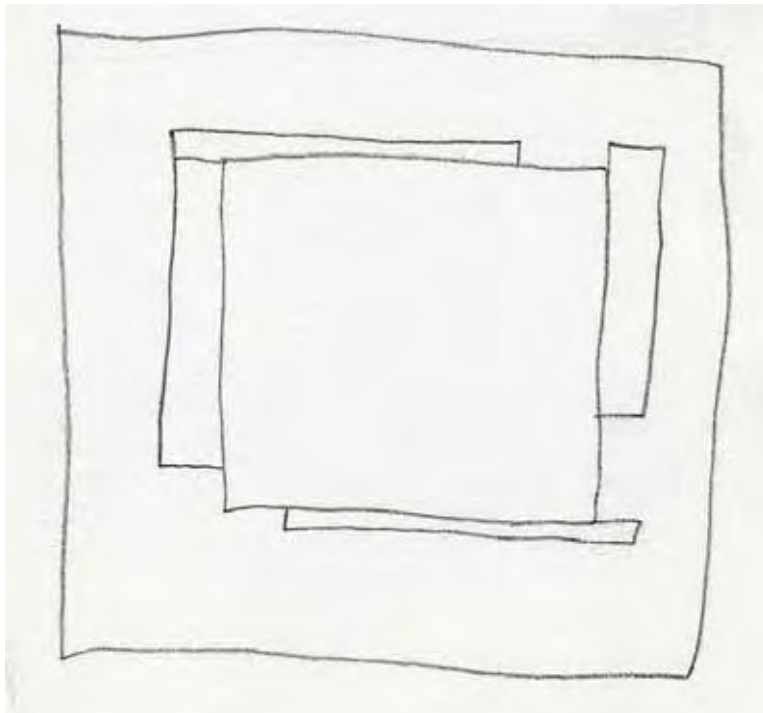
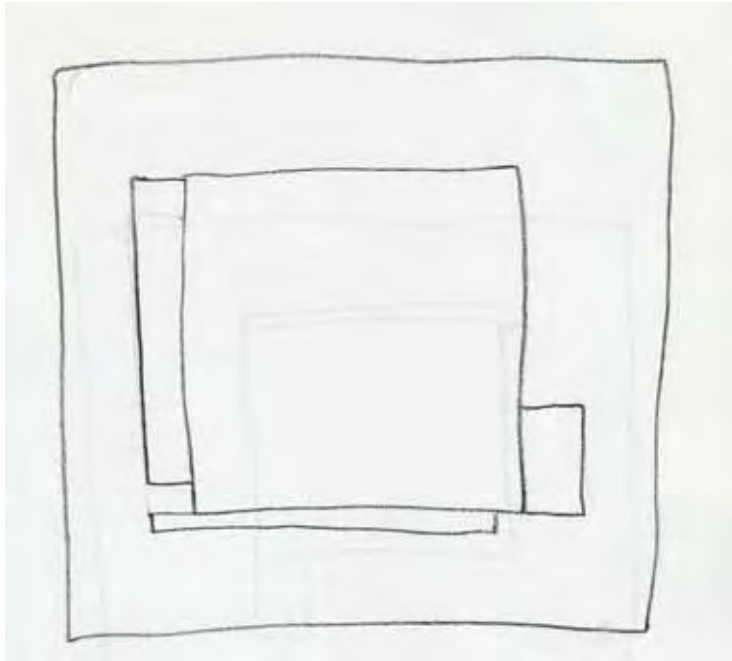
Developed from notebook sketches and earlier drawings the sculptures referenced the original proposal drawings, specifically *Drawings for Neon* and earlier drawings such as *Compositions with 4 elements* as shown below.



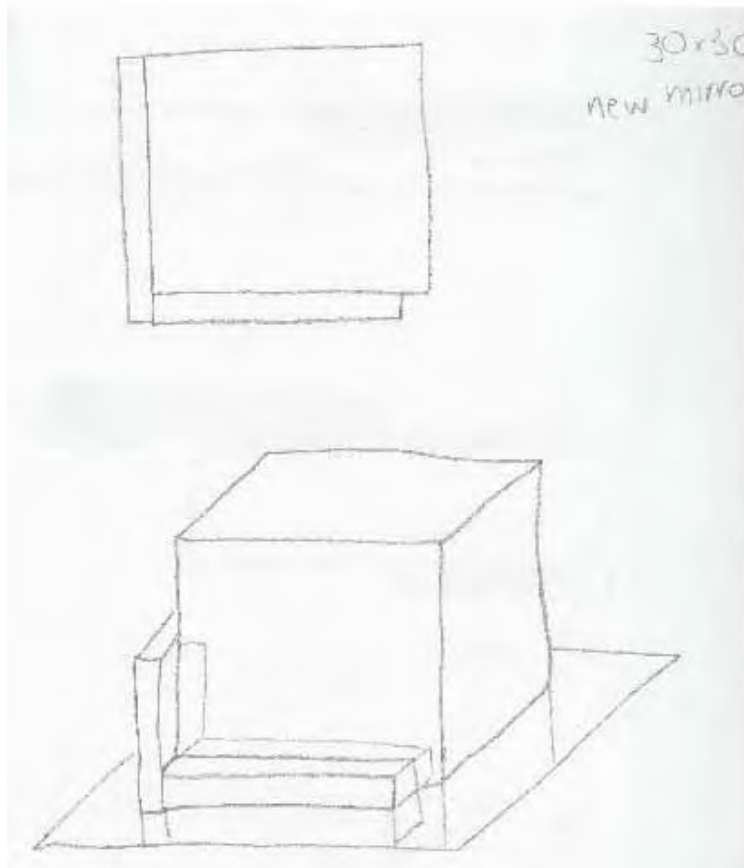
Francesca Mataraga, *Drawings for Neon* (2005) The Empty Space Project Proposal , digital drawing.



Francesca Mataraga, *Compositions with 4 elements* (2004), digital drawing.

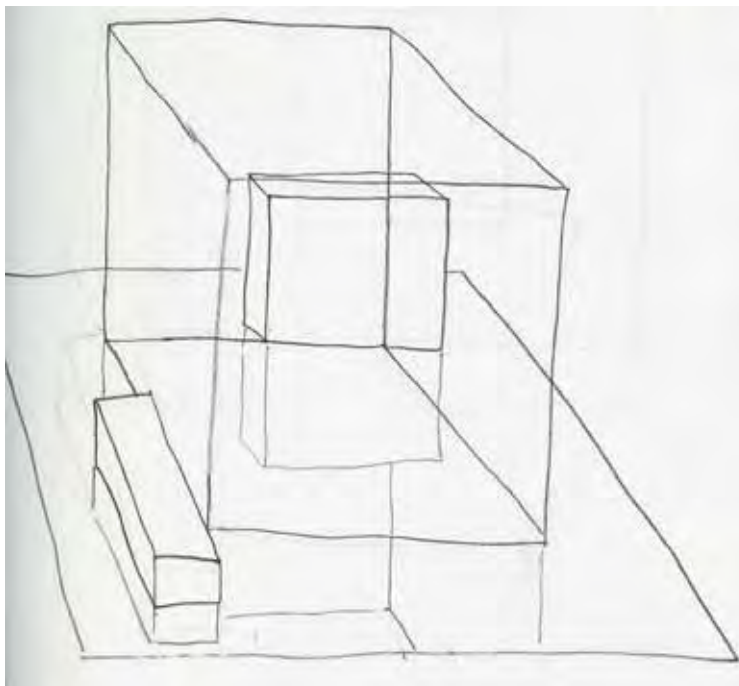
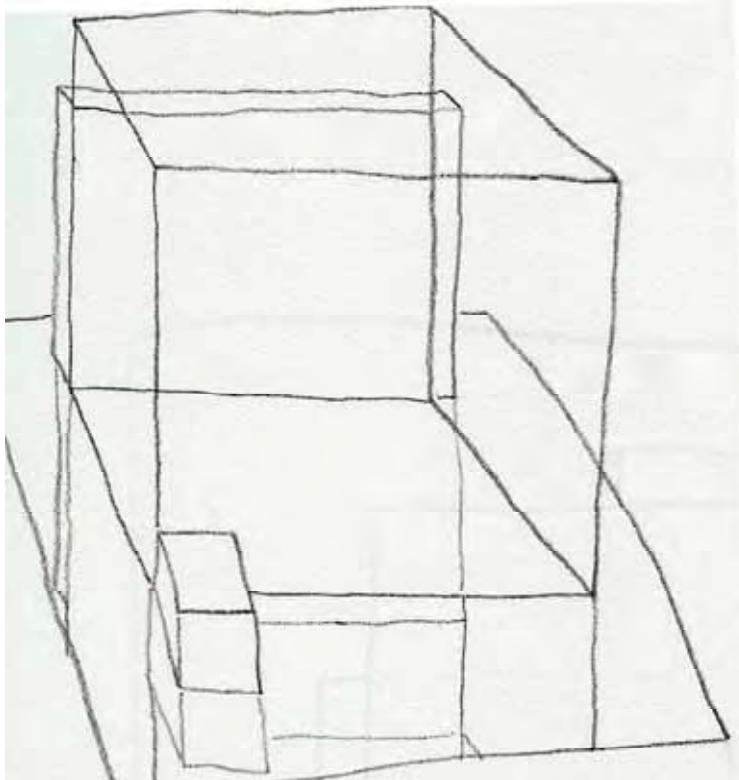


Francesca Mataraga, *Sketches for compositions with perspex box (The Empty Space)* (2005/6), pencil on paper, 20cm x 20cm.



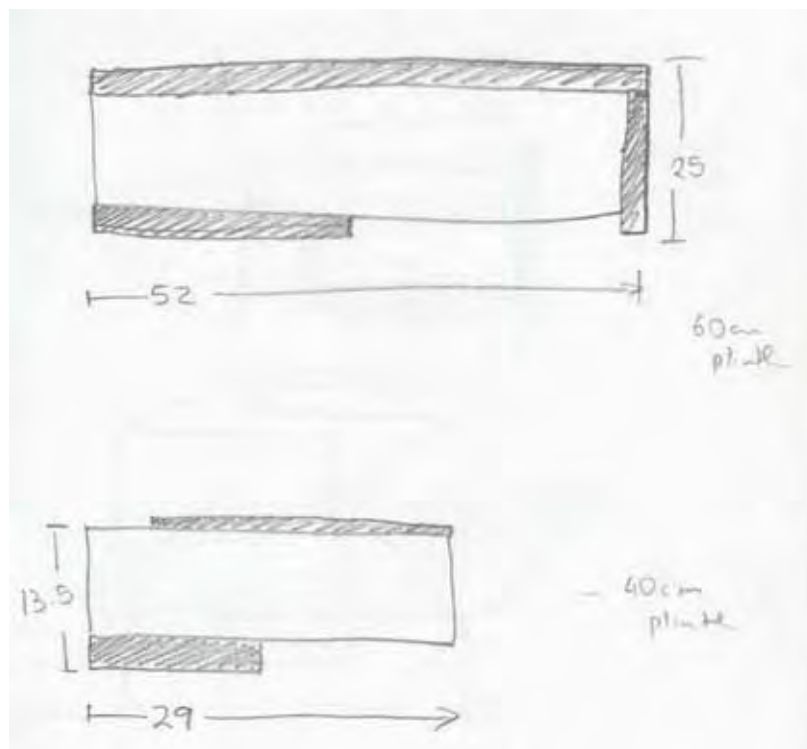
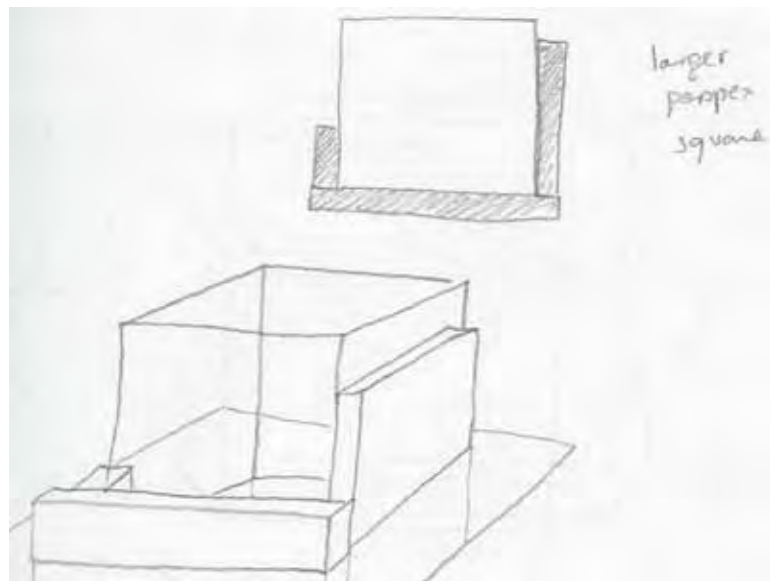
Francesca Mataraga, *Sketch for compositions with Mirror box (The Empty Space)* (2005/6), pencil on paper, 20cm x 20cm.

Each sketch is a record of a composition assembled in the studio. These drawings served as architectural footprints and as a method of recording work in the studio. Each sketch recorded two-dimensional and three-dimensional compositions used to determine the final work.



Francesca Mataraga, *Sketches for compositions with perspex box (The Empty Space)* (2005/6), pencil on paper, 20cm x 20cm.





Francesca Mataraga, *Sketches for compositions with perspex box (The Empty Space)* (2005/6), pencil on paper, 20cm x 20cm.



Francesca Mataraga, *Work in progress (The Empty Space)* (2005/6)  
3mm perspex, acrylic on MDF, 25cm x 25cm x 15cm.

The small-scale perspex pieces were never shown as individual works because of the inherent problems with the perspex surface. Dust particles and poor light reflection made the work appear insubstantial. The 3mm perspex did not appear to function as a satisfactory material on its own. The perspex boxes were incorporated into a composite installation piece.

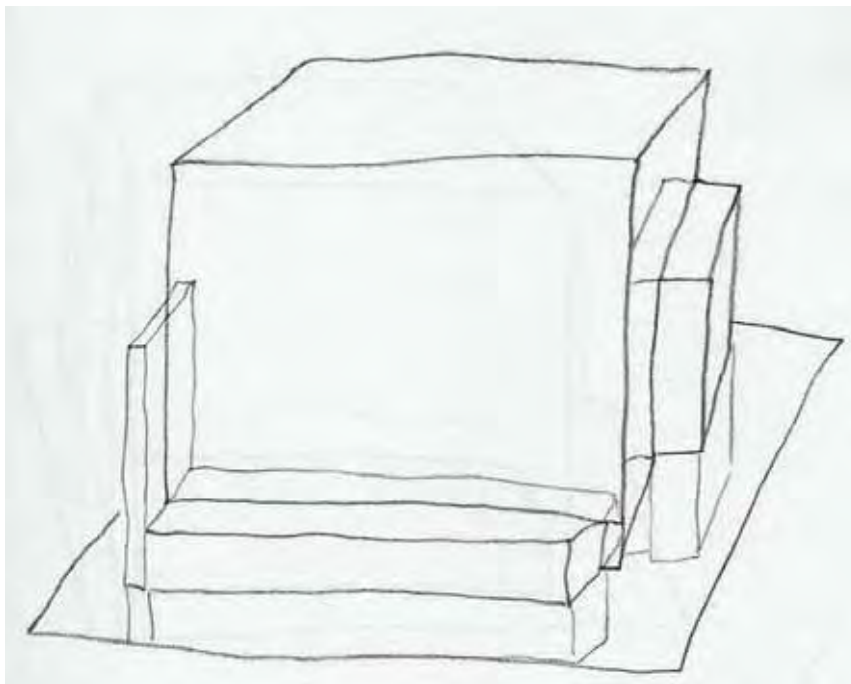
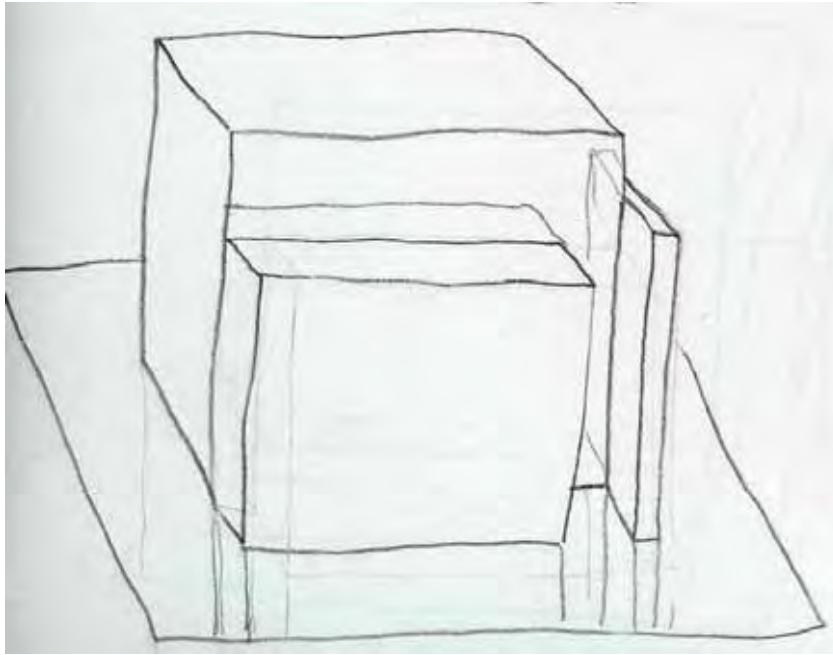
The unsatisfactory appearance of the 3mm perspex boxes led to the development of other small-scale work using 3mm mirrored perspex. Mirrored perspex was selected as an appropriate material because its reflective surface offered an opportunity to extend the concept of empty

space further. The mirrored surface extended the meaning of empty space as visually absent and physically present. The mirror box was a development of the perspex box.

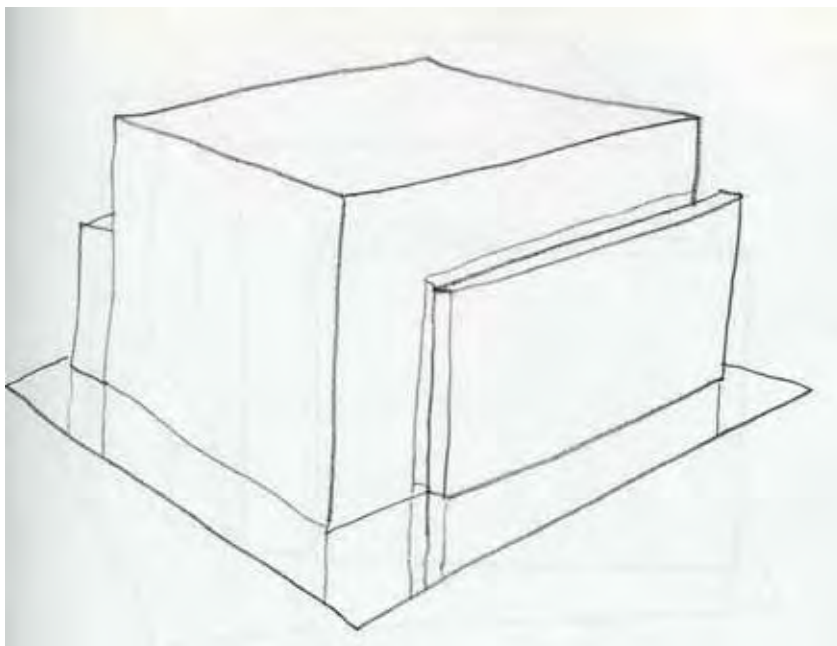
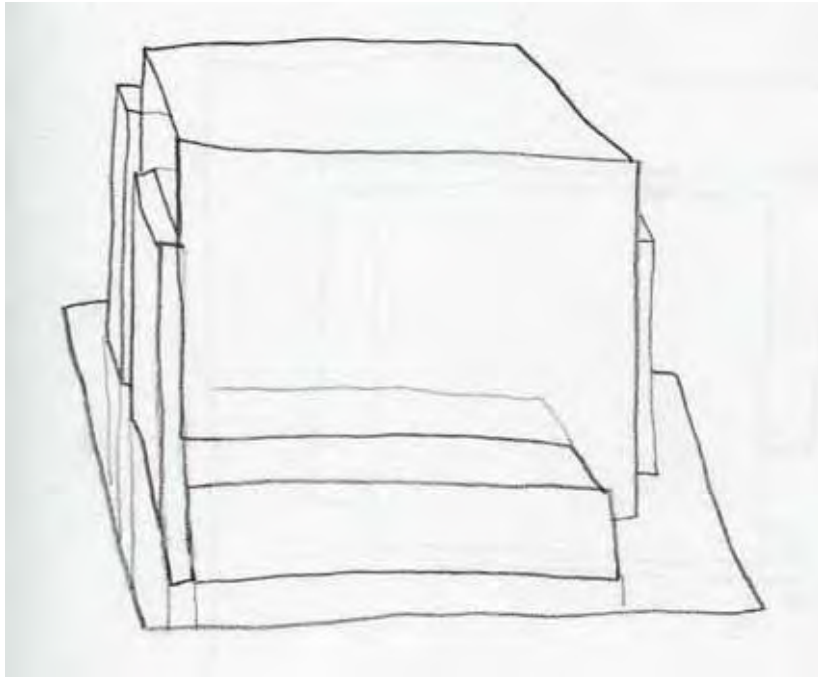
A series of new pieces was created exploring the concept of empty space as mirrored or reflected space. Virtual space became the metaphor for empty space. The surrounding solid forms were reflected in the mirrored surface creating virtual sculptures by extending the images of themselves. The solid forms were visually extended into the mirrored cube.

Developing the sculptures through a studio process led to the addition of a mirrored base. This extended the concept of empty/reflected space even further by creating a virtual duplicate of the sculpture in the vertical plane. This technique of mirroring and the success of the small-scale work led to the development of the large-scale piece *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006).

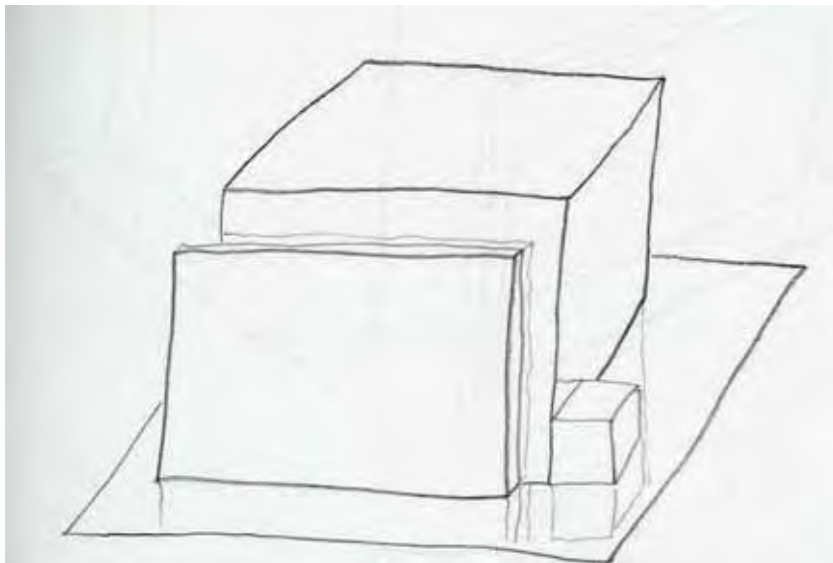
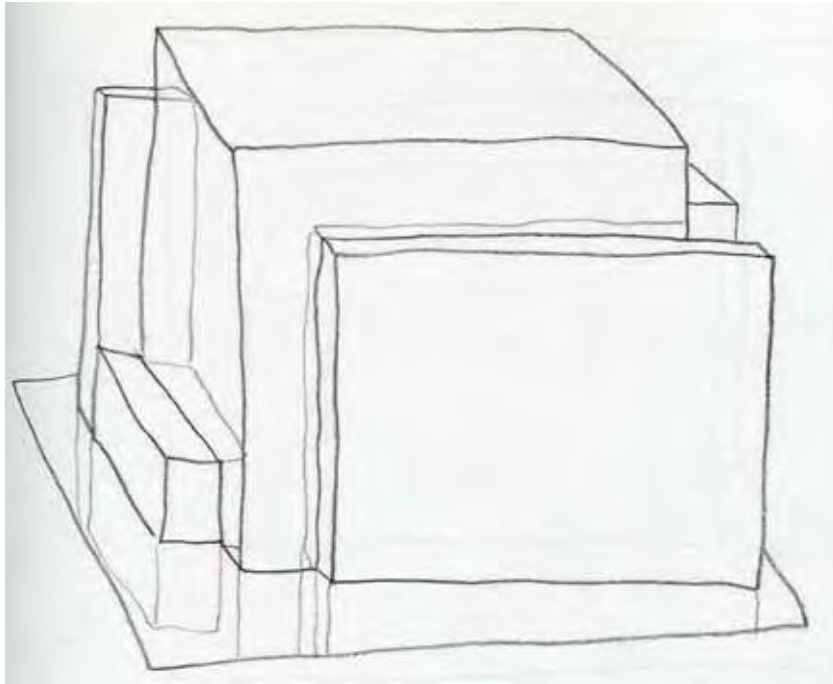
Examples of the small-scale mirror box compositions showing studio development follow.



Francesca Mataraga, *Sketch for compositions with Mirror box (The Empty Space)* (2005/6), pencil on paper, 20cm x 20cm.



Francesca Mataraga, *Sketches for compositions with Mirror box (The Empty Space)*, (2005/6), pencil on paper, 20cm x 20cm.



Francesca Mataraga, *Sketches for compositions with Mirror box (The Empty Space)* (2005/6), pencil on paper, 20cm x 20cm.



Francesca Mataraga, *Work in progress (The Empty Space)* (2005/6),  
3mm mirror perspex, acrylic on MDF, 30cm x 30cm x 25cm.

Three of the small-scale mirror sculptures were exhibited as individual pieces. *Untitled (The Empty Space III)* (2006) and *Untitled (The Empty Space IV)* (2006) were exhibited as a pair at *Off the Wall, Sydney Art 06*. These two works, shown on the following page, were placed on top of mirrored bases that were used as a device to extend the sculpture to the edges of the plinth.

*Untitled II (The Empty Space)* (2006) was exhibited at the College of Fine Arts exhibition space *3ft Square* and is shown below.

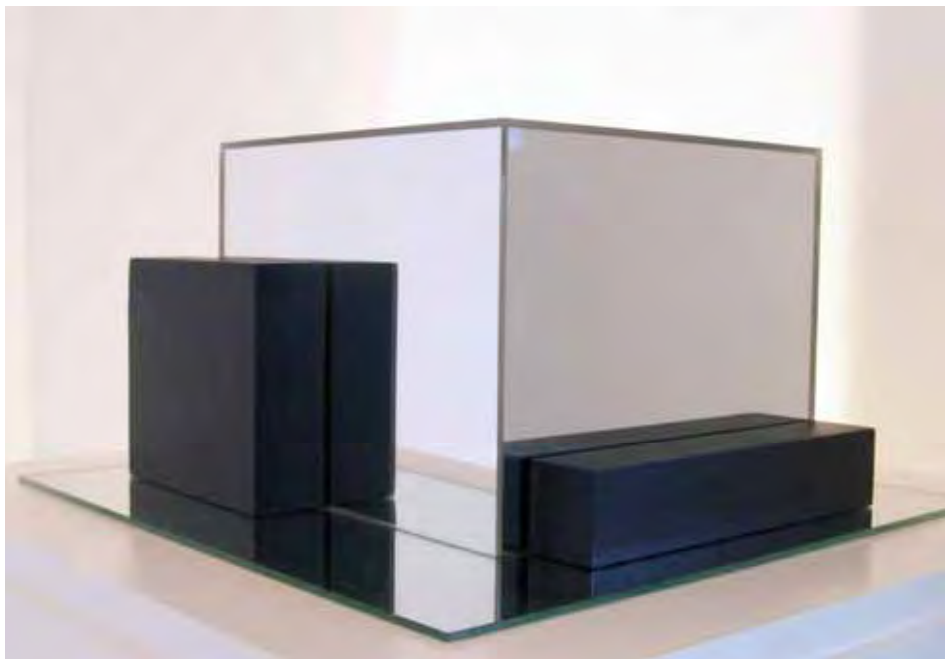


Francesca Mataraga, *Untitled II (The Empty Space)* (2006),  
Mirror, acrylic mirror, acrylic on MDF, 30cm x 30cm x 25cm.





Francesca Mataraga, *Untitled (The Empty Space IV)* (2006),  
mirrored perspex, mirror and acrylic on MDF, 30xcm x 30cm x 25cm.



Francesca Mataraga, *Untitled (The Empty Space III)* (2006)  
mirrored perspex, mirror and acrylic on MDF, 30xcm x 30cm x 25cm.

Exhibiting this work revealed certain problems with the small-scale work. Each piece was limited by its size appearing insubstantial. This led to the decision not to exhibit any of the small-scale pieces individually. All the smaller pieces were amalgamated into an installation piece equal in size to the two large-scale works.

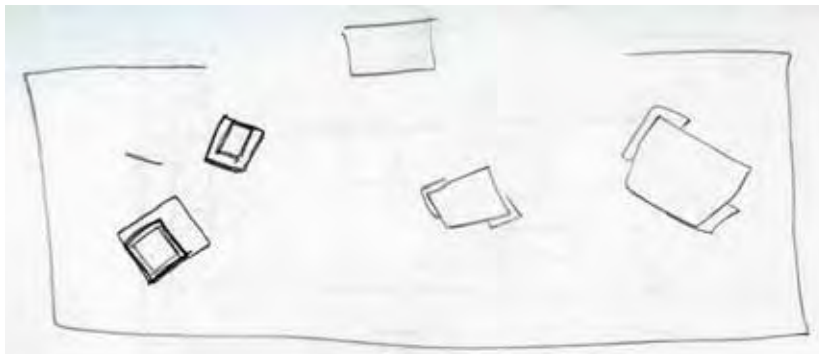
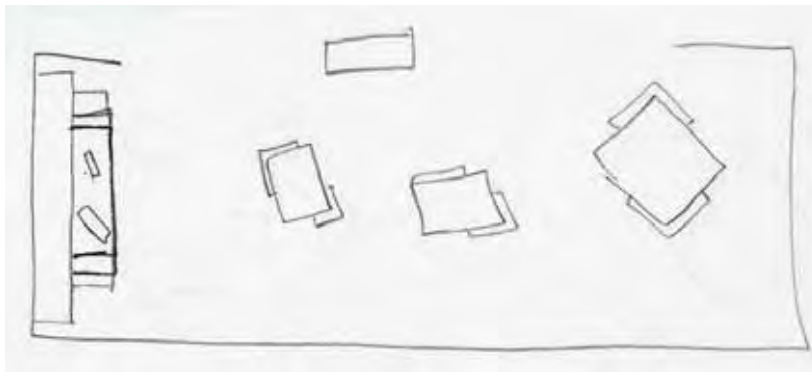
Successful outcomes included determining appropriate methods of construction, the extension of the original abstract from the use of clear perspex to the use of mirrored perspex and the decision to not exhibit any small work as autonomous pieces. Ultimately the insubstantial nature of the small-scale pieces led to the successful exhibition of large-scale work at the *Tin Sheds Gallery*.

By rejecting small-scale work as an unsuccessful expression of the thesis abstract, *The Empty Space Project* grew and developed. The studio process led to the careful re-development of the large-scale work, done by developing drawings for the gallery layout.

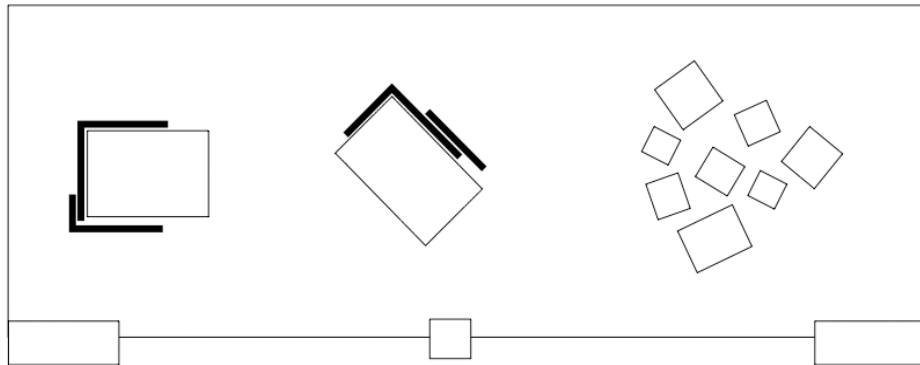
## Gallery Layout

The final designs for the large-scale work were determined by a desire to produce work that appeared laconic and sparse in the gallery space. After creating a floor plan and making cardboard mock-ups in the studio it became apparent that showing less work was advantageous. The amount of work to be manufactured was reduced and the final gallery floor plan was revised.

The final layout was determined after making various sketches; examples of these are shown below:



Francesca Mataraga, *Sketches for Gallery Layout (The Empty Space)* (2005/6), pencil on paper.

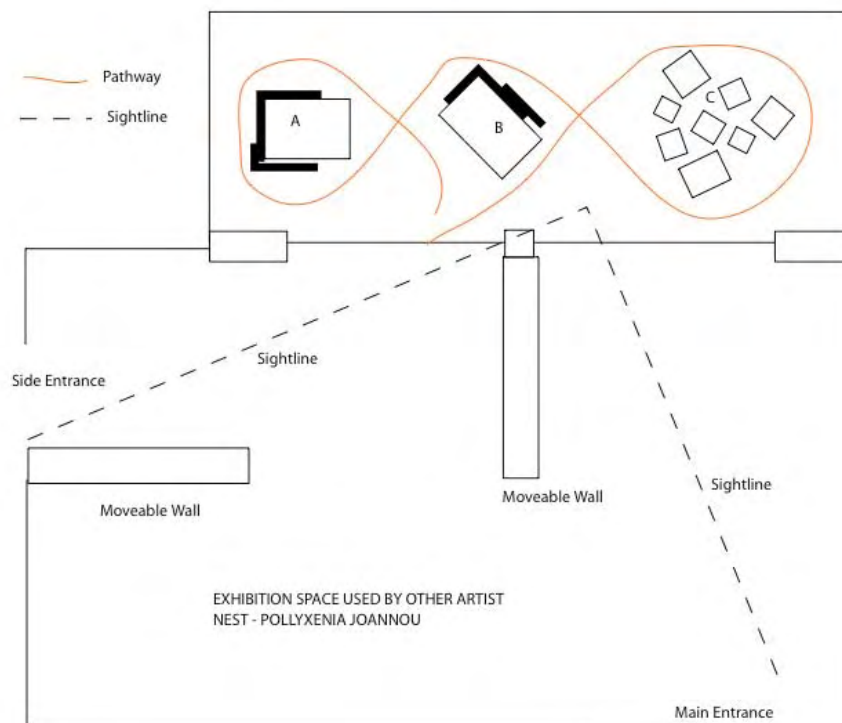


Francesca Mataraga, *Final Gallery layout* (2006), digital drawing.

This drawing became the blueprint for the exhibition at the *Tin Sheds Gallery*, determining the spatial relationship between each piece. Drawings of the gallery layout took into account the way in which the work would be viewed. Because the work was presented in a performative way it was important to consider the way in which visitors would walk around the gallery space. Each piece was positioned in such a way that a visitor had to walk around the sculpture in order to ‘see’ it as a whole. This meant that each piece had to be a certain distance from the wall, providing ample space for visitors to walk around without bumping or damaging the work and without feeling confined in the space.

Existing sight lines and positioning of the moveable walls determined the way in which the work was to be viewed, because of the open architectural structure of the gallery. The work could be seen immediately upon entry.

This limited the opportunities for creating a sense of drama through discovery. Plotting a pathway was a deliberate act to ensure that visitors interacted with the work in a physical way. The frontal approach into the gallery space meant that the work would have to be positioned in such a way that visitors were forced to walk around it. This was accomplished by settling on the configuration illustrated below. This layout created extended figure of eight pathways, leading the visitor around the work in a circular motion. Entering from the main entrance, the visitor was forced to walk around figure B, circumnavigate figure A or C and then return through the central part of the gallery.



Francesca Mataraga, *Layout with Sightlines* (2007), digital drawing.

Viewing of the work considered “the shifting spatial relationship between viewer and object” and how that “can become a defining parameter of the work”.<sup>18</sup> In *The Sculptural Imagination* Alex Potts discusses this by stating: “*precisely by focusing our attention on the actual material and visual properties of its surfaces and its literal occupancy of space as distinct from what it might represent ... a ‘constitutive emptiness’, a ‘certain disequilibrium’ open’s up in one’s apprehension of it, so that it acquires something of the instability of an actively projected rather than a merely fixed and given presence, drawing one out of oneself and into the arena it seems to activate*”.<sup>19</sup>

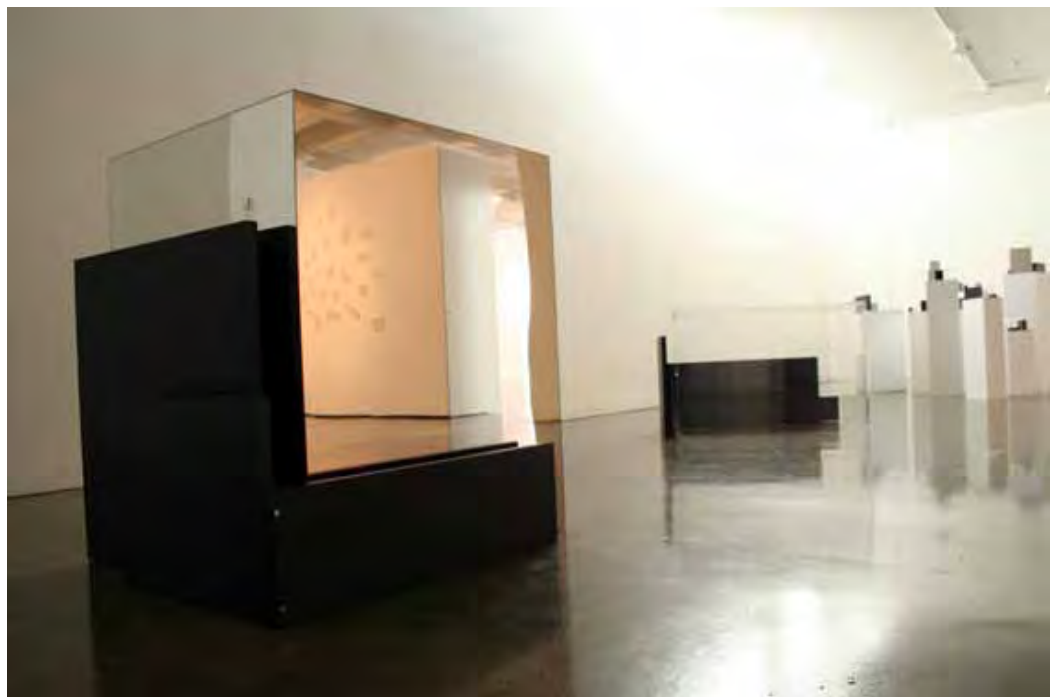
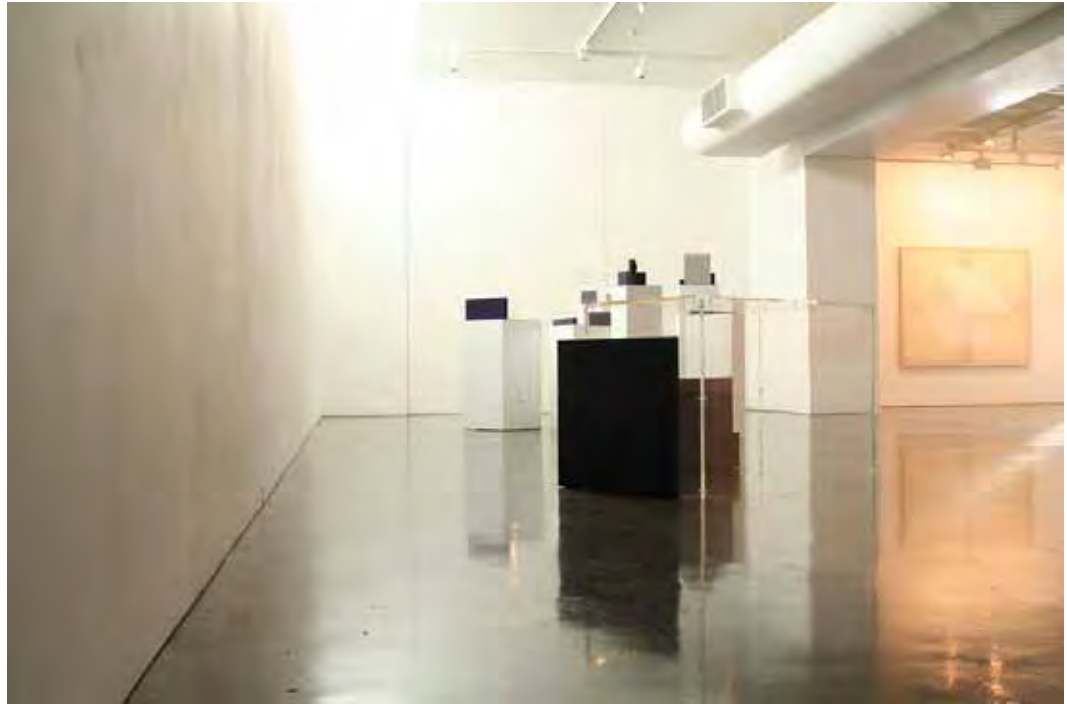
The final configuration as shown above offered three pieces *The Empty Space (Large Perspex)* (2006), *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006) and *The Empty Space (Installation)* (2006). Developing the work through floor plans distilled all previous ideas into three large pieces. This was an important step because the work was reduced into its simplest possible form. Consolidating the work was more in keeping with the ideology that informed the *Empty Space Project*.

Images of the gallery installation follow.

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<sup>18</sup> Potts, A., op.cit., page 239.

<sup>19</sup> Potts, A., op.cit., page 233.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space Project* – Gallery view (2006),  
Tin Sheds Gallery, Faculty of Architecture University of Sydney.

## **Scale**

Final size of the sculptures was determined by the physical parameters of the gallery and a desire to create work that had a human scale. Human scale was determined by adjusting measurements to the human body – in this case my body. Each box was measured out in arm widths. The height of the box was equivalent to hip height or chest height.

Making measurements equivalent to the human body was an important aspect of the work. Rather than working out measurements through mathematical relationships, size was determined by a very direct and somewhat arbitrary act. Making the work an arm width and hip height or chest height ensured that each piece had a direct relationship with the human body. The work was neither monumental nor domestic. It was comparable in spatial mass to a human body and its immediate surrounds. The intention behind this was to make the work more accessible.

This aspect of the work is similar to the scale used by Donald Judd, Tony Smith and Hilarie Mais. Both these artists have created sculptural work on a human scale. Using this scale equates the work to familiar architectural or domestic structures – doorways, windows, tables and beds. This scale allows the viewer to engage with the work on a comfortable level without feeling overwhelmed.



The large sculptures were made using the same methods as previously described for the smaller pieces. Development drawings functioned as schematics for the manufacturer. Each drawing was created using a layering process that determined the width of perspex to be used and the way in which it would be assembled.

### **The Empty Space (Large Perspex)**

The first piece *The Empty Space (Large Perspex)* was manufactured from 15mm perspex. This size was chosen because it was substantial in thickness without being too heavy. The thickness of the perspex was visually equivalent to the surrounding MDF brackets yet each side weighed less than 20 kilograms and was therefore light enough for one person to carry.

Each side was cut and polished separately with screw holes drilled in exact positions enabling easy assembly and accurate installation of the piece.

The surrounding MDF brackets were designed using the same technique as the perspex, allowing the screws to be visible. This was a deliberate choice. Allowing the screws to remain visible in both components of the sculpture was a way of retaining the transparency of the sculpture. The way in which the piece was made was self-evident – nothing was hidden.

As with the smaller perspex work *The Empty Space (Large Perspex)* (2006) responded to the abstract of the thesis “*The visual transparency of the material contradicts the physical presence of the object it creates. It creates a play between presence and absence.*” The large sculpture was physically equivalent to the space of a small sarcophagus, equating it to a human scale.

*The Empty Space (Large Perspex)* responded to the abstract of the thesis as a singular piece, incorporating all the previous drawings, research and ideas. The work embodied the concept of empty space.

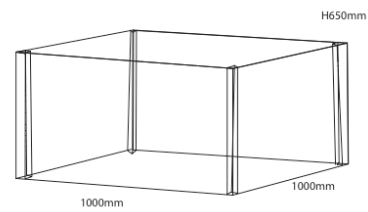
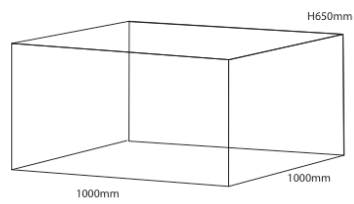
Drawings that follow show how the work was developed. Initially two perspex boxes were going to be manufactured, each with a slightly different composition. As the drawings developed only one box was made. Each drawing shows a different construction technique.

15mm square polished edges  
with screws

or

5mm Pespex with 4 corner  
supports 30mm x 30mm  
4 screws on each side  
and 4 screws on top

E



15mm square polished edges  
with screws

or

5mm Pespex with 4 corner  
supports 30mm x 30mm  
4 screws on each side  
and 4 screws on top

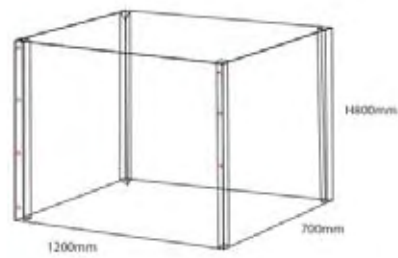
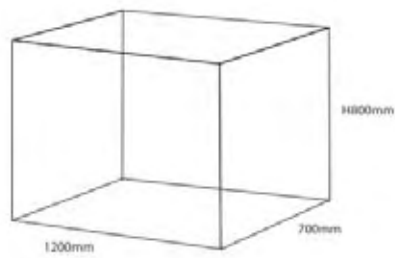
E



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space* (Working drawings for construction)  
(2005/6), digital drawings.

# A/C

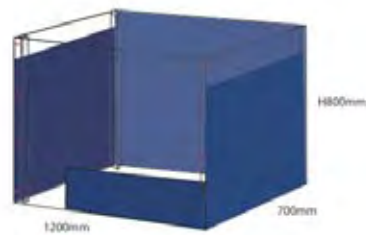
Perspex panels  
square polished edges  
w screw holes



15mm Perspex  
or 5mm Perspex with 4 corner supports

# A/C

Perspex panels  
square polished edges  
w screw holes



15mm Perspex  
or 5mm Perspex with 4 corner supports

Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Working drawings for construction)* (2005/6), digital drawings.

Once the box was manufactured and delivered to the studio the sculpture continued to evolve. The original composition, once assembled in the studio, appeared to confine the perspex box restricting its visual transparency. The box appeared closed in by the surrounding brackets. One bracket was placed around the box whilst the other sat adjacent to the first.

The small space that was created between the two solid forms was a shallow space that extended the notion of emptiness. Changing the position of the solid brackets in this way developed the original drawings further.

Placing the solid brackets adjacent to each other created a shallow space that was replicated in the mirror piece *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)*. When installed in the gallery space the perspex piece was reflected in the mirror thus extending the idea of the empty space further. This duplication or ghosting that took place in the reflection of the mirror tied the pieces together. The installation in the gallery space became complete through the visual intertwining of the pieces.

*The Empty Space (Large Perspex)*, successfully addressed the abstract of the abstract. The solid physicality of the object drew directly on the tradition of concrete art and the language of minimalism. The visual transparency of the perspex subverted this language both conceptually and literally, challenging the physicality of the art object and questioning the nature of solidity.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Perspex)* (2006),  
15mm perspex, steel, acrylic on MDF (Detail shows construction method).



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Perspex)* (2006),  
15mm perspex, steel, acrylic on MDF.

The above image shows the final composition and installation of the piece in the studio. The construction technique is clearly visible in this and in the previous image, showing the screws that hold the piece together.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Perspex)* (2006).  
Installation at Tin Sheds Gallery showing reflection of *The Empty Space (Large Perspex)* in *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)*.





Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Perspex)* (2006).  
Installation at Tin Sheds Gallery showing *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)*  
in the background and reflection of *The Empty Space (Installation)*.

### **The Empty Space (Large Mirror)**

*Untitled – Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006) was created as a counterpoint to the perspex work. As noted above, the mirror was used as an extension of the empty space idea. The large-scale sculpture was developed through the studio process in the same way as the perspex sculpture.

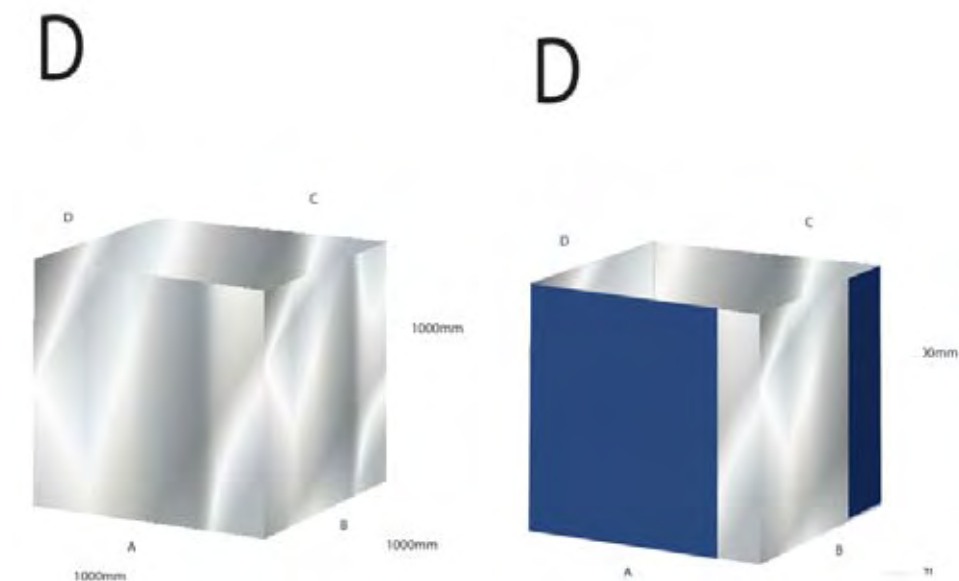
Initial drawings were made once the overall size of the piece had been determined. These drawings were then developed to incorporate construction specifications for the manufacturer.

As described earlier the construction techniques for the large mirror piece were developed from the small-scale work. The small-scale boxes were assembled using different techniques in order to determine a successful way of joining the beveled edges of the mirrored perspex in a seamless manner.

As a contrast to the large perspex box all the construction techniques were concealed. This became necessary because the mirrored perspex was only available in a 3mm thickness and had to be glued onto 12mm MDF panels with beveled edges in order to be self-supporting. All five sides of the box were bevel cut and joined with internally hidden 2mm steel bracket supports.

This method of construction was developed in order to ensure the successful assembly, disassembly and storage of the work. As with the large perspex box each side had to weigh less than 20 kilograms in order to comply with occupational health and safety requirements. The internal joining technique was developed in order to ensure that when the box was assembled the joins could be tightened at individual points in order to appear seamless.

Construction drawings for *Untitled – Empty Space (Large Mirror)* follow.

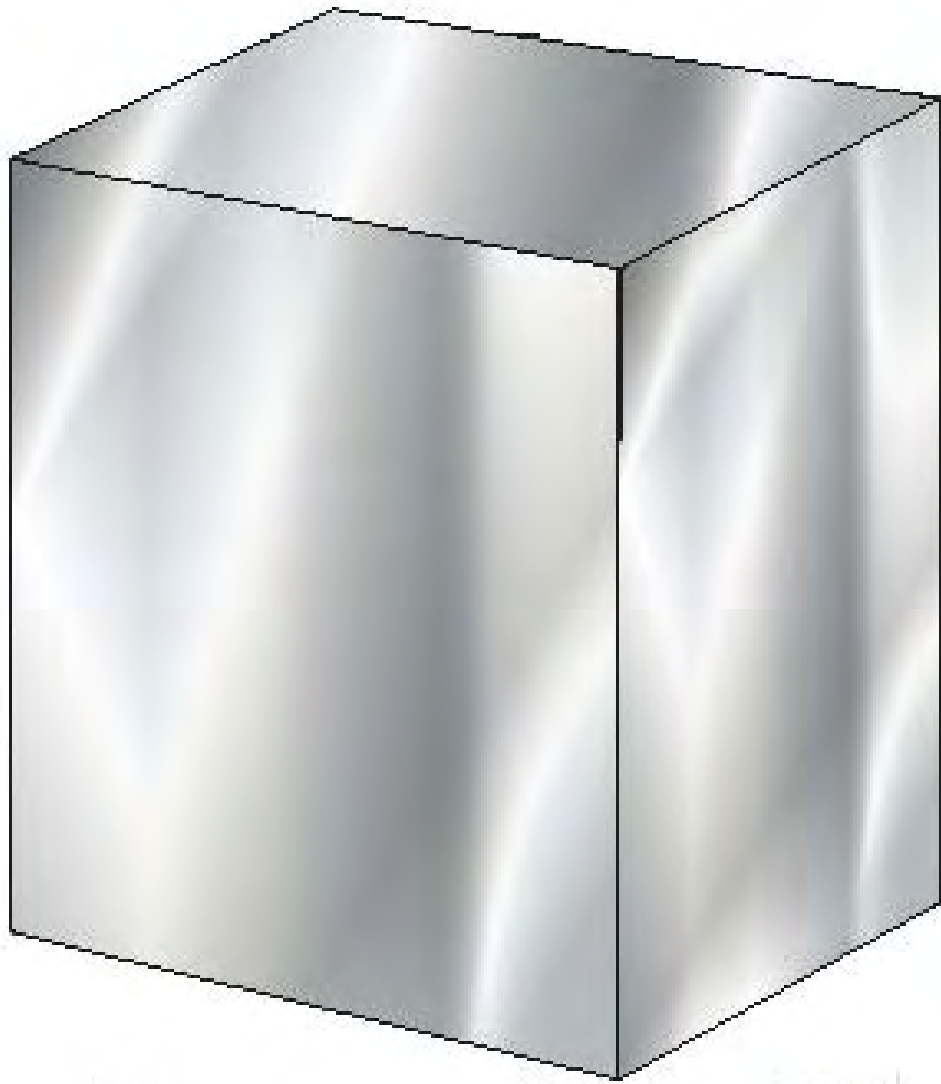


Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (*Working drawings for construction*) (2005/6), digital drawings.

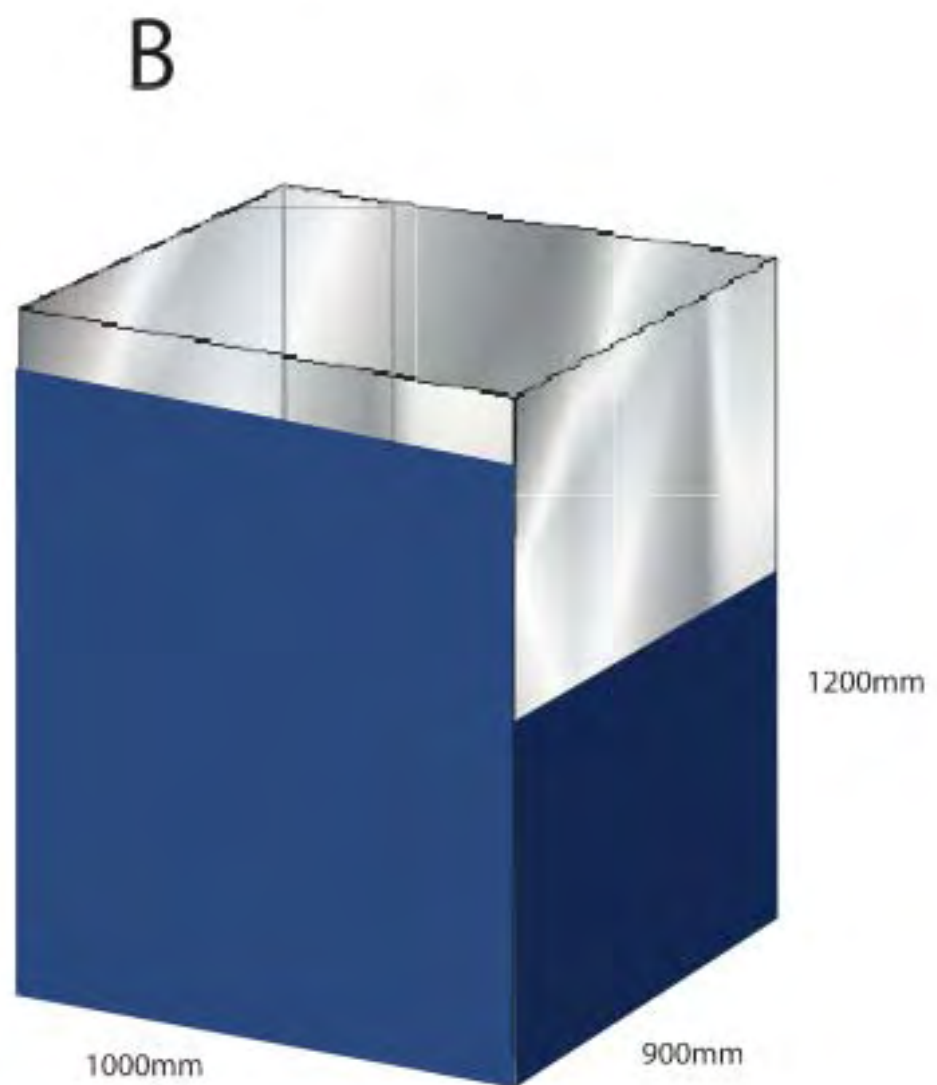
The above drawing was developed prior to manufacture of the boxes. It depicts a smaller box than the final version that was constructed. This drawing was re-developed because the surrounding solid brackets enveloped a large portion of the box diminishing the reflective capacity of the structure and thereby lessening the impact of the surrounding mirrored shapes.

The composition was revised into a finished drawing for the manufacturer and is depicted on the following page. The sculpture assumed its final state after being re-worked in the studio.

B



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space* (Final Working drawing for construction) (2005/6), digital drawing.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space* (Final Working drawing for construction) (2005/6), digital drawing.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006), mirrored perspex, steel, acrylic on MDF, 1.2m x 1.2m x 1.4m.



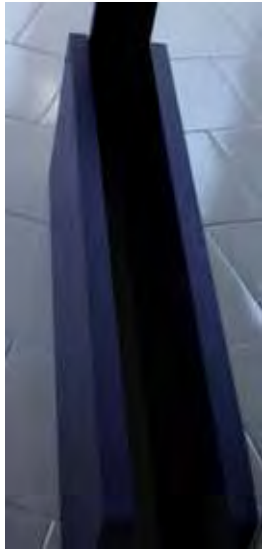
Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006), mirrored perspex, steel, acrylic on MDF, 1.2m x 1.2m x 1.4m.

*The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006) addressed key aspects of the research. The abstract stated that: “*The solid physicality of the objects will directly draw on the tradition of concrete art and the language of minimalism.*”

The mirror referenced minimalism directly, specifically the work of Robert Smithson and Tony Smith. The abstract also stated that: “*This will make the relationship between internal and external space more complex, challenging the physicality of the art object and questioning the nature of solidity.*” This was achieved by the reflective action of the mirror. The doubling of the space between the solid surrounds and their reflection in the mirrored box extended the visual presence of the object by creating a series of virtual sculptures.

These virtual sculptures referenced both the empty space project and earlier work such as *Swan Dive II* (2003), creating a series of virtual sculptures showing a narrow space between two solid sides. The mirrored surface functioned as a completion device. The solid brackets became visually completed sculptures in their own right.





Left: Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006), detail.  
 Right: Francesca Mataraga, *Swan Dive II* (2003), oil and acrylic on wood,  
 80cm x 80cm x 20cm.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006),  
 detail showing reflection.

The photographs shown above were taken in the studio during the final stages of development. Shown above are the virtual sculptures that were

created by the reflection as well as their relationship to previous work.



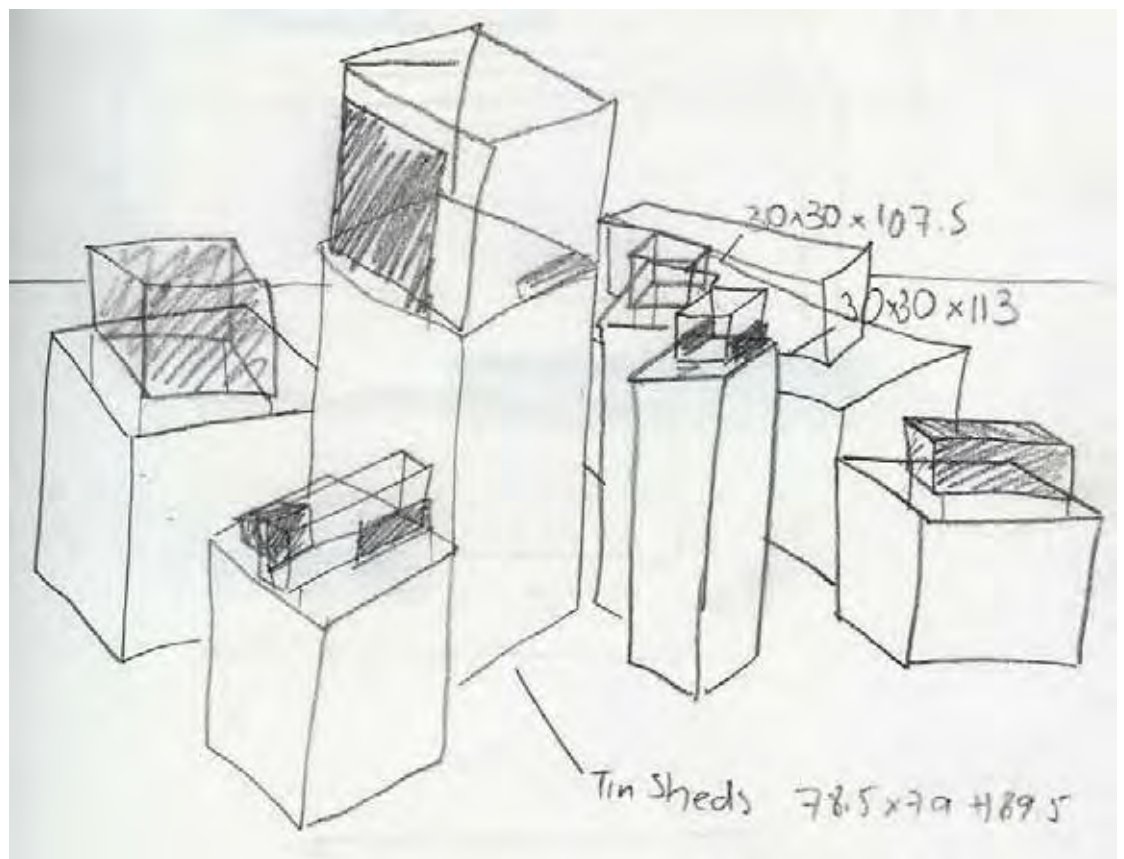
Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006), detail showing reflection.

*The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* was the largest single piece developed for the MFA project. The composite piece *The Empty Space (Installation)*

was developed in response to the volume of this piece.

### **The Empty Space (Installation)**

The third piece exhibited at the Tin Sheds Gallery was *The Empty Space (Installation)*. This piece developed from the small-scale pieces discussed earlier and the final gallery layout depicted earlier. A series of sketches determined the final configuration. Examples are shown below.



Francesca Mataraga, *Sketch for The Empty Space (Installation)* (2006), pencil on paper.



Francesca Mataraga, *Empty Space (Installation)*, (2006), detail.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Installation)* (2006), mirrored perspex, mirror, 3mm perspex, acrylic on MDF, variable dimensions.

*Untitled – Empty Space (Installation)* (2006) combined all the previous small scale work into one large piece. Created as an extension of the large-scale pieces the installation incorporated all the elements that had been explored during the MFA, amalgamating the use of perspex, mirror and mirrored bases to create a completely autonomous third sculpture in the gallery space.

The piece evoked a miniature city or landscape. Each small-scale box used was a different size and was mounted on a different sized plinth. The undulating heights and the sense of depth created by the mirrored bases placed on the plinth's surface enabled the viewer to consider different articulations of the central concept by looking at small-scale versions of the work.

Elevated to eye level the work became equal in physical presence to the floor work. Placed on mirrored bases and grouped together the smaller-scale works ceased to be just small works and became a third human scale piece.

Mirrored bases extended the space from the horizontal plane to the vertical plane. By being able to look down into the sculptures the 'landscape' was inverted. Empty space was visually doubled or tripled.

## **Installation**

Final presentation of the work at the *Tin Sheds Gallery* was affected by environmental conditions. Highly visible dust particles on the surface of the work had surfaced as a concern after the small-scale work was exhibited at *Sydney Art 06* and *3ft Square* at College of Fine Arts. The lighting conditions in both of those spaces was uncontrollable and accentuated the collection of dust particles on the surface of the work detracting from the flawless finish.

These experiences resulted in the decision to exhibit the work under low lighting conditions at the Tin Sheds gallery. By dimming the lights in the gallery space the dust particles were no longer visible on the surface of the work and the surface itself seemed to become luminescent. The low and indirect lighting created a theatrical atmosphere that was more dramatic, accentuating the flawless surface and creating a series of reflective images. Images showing the lighting conditions follow.



Francesca Mataraga, *The Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006), detail showing low light environment and light reflection.

## CHAPTER 3

### Contemporary context

Work of other artists as referenced in this chapter and in 'Chapter 1 – Historical Context' relates directly to the MFA project either through use of material, surface treatment, composition or conceptual intent. Research into contemporary work offered insight into the way other artists use materials similar to those used in the MFA work. The contemporary context of the MFA referenced the work of several artists for different reasons. These artists were Hilarie Mais, Nausica Pastra, Rachel Whiteread and specific work by Mikala Dwyer.

The later work of Hilarie Mais was used as a reference because of surface treatment, colour, the use of grids as compositional device, as well as conceptual context. Like *The PM Project* and *The Empty Space Project* Mais' work engaged 'with the history of modernism and its significance of artists today'.<sup>20</sup>

Mais' work has architectural presence and is often placed directly on the floor using the two-dimensional grid in a relief format and as a structuring

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<sup>20</sup> Kent, R., 'Hilarie Mais' in *Home and Away: Contemporary Australian and New Zealand Art from the Chartwell Collection*, McAloon, W. ed., Auckland Art Gallery 1999, page 130.



device through which order is imposed on form.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the MFA sculptures used the grid in a two-dimensional and three-dimensional format to create relief work and cubic formations.

As in the MFA project, presence and absence is also a recurring theme in Mais' work. This is often explored through the double image created by the shadow of her work as well as by certain companion pieces.<sup>22</sup> Works such as *Grid V* (2003) (pictured below) were a direct influence on the PM pieces. Ideas about positive and negative space are emphasized by the grid composition incorporating solid and empty space.<sup>23</sup>



Hilarie Mais, *Grid V* (2003), oil paint on wood, 264 cm x 203 cm x 15.5 cm.

The MFA work occupies a similar place in contemporary practice as Hilarie

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<sup>21</sup> Kent, op.cit., page 130.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

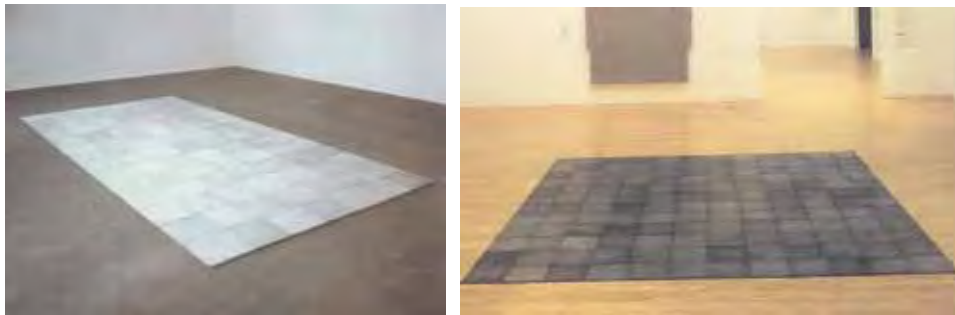
Mais' work. Mais' work served as a contemporary Australian reference and inspiration during the MFA by existing in the nexus between sculpture and painting and using handcrafted techniques to reference modernist and post-modernist traditions.

Nausica Pastra was another artist whose work was referenced during the MFA, in particular her *Synartisis Series*. The use of wood as the construction material, the open grid formation and the prolific use of blue were all referenced. Pastra's work was an example of the use of the grid in a three-dimensional format, combining hand-crafted and manufacturing techniques, placing the work in the nexus between painting and sculpture.



Nausica Pastra, *Synartisis I* (1979-1982),  
painted wood, 270 cm x 450 cm x 500 cm.

Rachel Whiteread's work was also referenced early in the MFA project. Her piece *Untitled (Bronze Floor)* (1999–2000) is a direct example of work that is situated in a Post-minimalist context referencing Minimalist work directly. Like *The PM Project*, Whiteread's work referenced a historic piece, in this case Carl Andre's *Magnesium Floor* (1969) and re-examined the conceptual context of the work. These two pieces show the contrast between Proto-minimal work and its Post-minimal development through the treatment of the surface. Whiteread's floors are a response to Andre's work and relate to her other architectural pieces referencing emptiness and space.<sup>24</sup>



Left: Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Bronze Floor)* (1999–2000), 98 units, 350 cm x 700 cm.

Right: Carl Andre, *Magnesium Floor* (1969), magnesium, 366 cm x 366 cm.

Whiteread's work served as an inspiration during the MFA specifically because of her hand-crafted surface treatment and subject matter. Cast

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24 Corrin, L., 'A conversation with Rachel Whiteread, March 2001' in *Rachel Whiteread*, Corrin, L. ed., 2001, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh/Serpentine Gallery, page 17–25.

pieces such as *Untitled (Nine Tables)* (1998) and *Untitled (Room)* (1993) use empty space as their subject by being a physical manifestation of absence. Whiteread's surfaces show evidence of their history through their construction process offering a re-assessment of the Minimalist art object and its manufactured associations.



Rachel Whiteread

Top: *Untitled (Nine Tables)* (1998),  
concrete and polystyrene, 68.5 cm x 111.8 cm x 60.5 cm each.

Bottom: *Untitled (Room)* (1993), plaster, 275 cm x 300 cm x 350 cm.

Mikala Dwyer's work *Selving* (2004) was also referenced as a specific example of contemporary work using a mirrored box and transparent material. Dwyer's work also engages with Modernist and Minimalist themes through the use of material. In *Selving* the mirror creates spatial distortions and questions the viewer's perception of the reflected object. The use of transparent plastic and mirror made this piece directly relevant to the development of *The Empty Space Project*.



Mikala Dwyer, *Selving* (2004), plastic, perspex mirror, 144 cm x 295 cm.

The examples given above are far from exhaustive. They represent the specific pieces that influenced the development of the MFA work directly either conceptually or through studio practice. All the examples shown investigate empty space in some way. The different manifestations of this subject indicate how vast the theme of emptiness really is.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed above the MFA set out to investigate a premise, stated in the abstract, within certain parameters. One of the parameters was to use perspex in order to challenge the perception of solidity – what is internal and what is external – and how this material creates a play between presence and absence. As illustrated in ‘Chapter 3’ this aim was achieved in the final development of the work as exhibited at the *Tin Sheds Gallery*. *Untitled – Empty Space (Large Perspex)* (2006), *Untitled – Empty Space (Large Mirror)* (2006) and *Untitled – Empty Space (Installation)* (2006) investigated the play of presence and absence through transparency and reflection.

Multiple compositional elements used within each piece and the contrasting use of material made the relationship between internal and external space more complex. The interplay between reflective and transparent surface questioned the nature of solidity and the physicality of the art object itself responding to the abstract: “*The solidity of the concrete or minimalist art object and the space that it physically occupies will be challenged by the use of visually ambiguous material.*”

The work embraces its Concrete and Minimalist roots, acknowledging its context as an object in a gallery and the role of the viewer in bringing multiple meanings to the reading of the work. *The Empty Space Project* offered a post-minimalist comment on minimalist and modernist traditions, by engaging with the purity of the geometric, manufactured cubic form and the somewhat nostalgic act of painting.

The spatial contradictions within the work created both physical and visual tension. The work referenced concrete art and minimalism directly, paying homage to the materials and ideas of those traditions while at the same time questioning them. By rejecting minimalist ideas about non-composition and non-association, the work challenged notions of the Concrete.

As Nancy Spector stated in her introduction to *Singular Forms (Sometimes Repeated)*, the MFA project showed ‘*that a cube* [or in this case a cubic-form] *is rarely just a cube*’.<sup>25</sup> It is the means to an end, to draw our attention to the ether – the emptiness between objects rather than to the objects themselves.

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<sup>25</sup> Spector, N., op. cit., page 22.





## **APPENDIX 1**

**Exhibition Catalogue - Tin Sheds Gallery, 2006**

Empty space is one of the founding elements of Taoism. The ancient concept of the void or emptiness, denotes the origin of being. Qi (Chi), a principal concept in Chinese culture, signifies spiritual energy and life force. This is represented by emptiness. This emptiness is not absence but the presence of life and energy. It is believed that the empty spaces reflect the positive images within the composition.



It is precisely this activation and reflection which is explored in these sculptures. The space the objects occupy is simultaneously both present and absent, active and inactive. The multiplicity of space created through the reflective and the transparent surface extends the physical presence of the objects.

Reductive space, emptiness, the void, is the space in which our thoughts exist. It is the space we invest with meaning.

Francesca Mataraga  
June 2006

#### Images

Front: *Untitled II* (The Empty Space), mirror, acrylic and acrylic on MDF, 2006  
Centre: *Untitled III* (The Empty Space), mirror, acrylic and acrylic on MDF, 2006  
Back: *Untitled I* (The Empty Space), perspex and oil on MDF, 2005



COFA  
UNSW

The sponsorship of the UNSW College of Fine Arts Modern Art Collection through the COFA Scheme is gratefully acknowledged.

Tin Sheds Gallery



## Francesca Mataraga The Empty Space Project

The Empty Space Project is an ongoing investigation into imaginary and negative space. Solid forms act as brackets to the space between them. This usually empty space, is articulated as a solid object through the use of clear acrylic and mirror.

The space between two entities, bodies, buildings or objects is often seen as empty, devoid of meaning. And yet it is this very space which determines the way we experience the spatial relationship between the solid shapes. It is the negative space which activates the things it separates.

The void is not a dead space but rather a space in which we as the viewers are situated, an active and interactive space.

According to astronomy there is no such thing as 'empty space' anywhere in nature. There are only apparent 'voids' that seem not to contain matter or energy. At the level of the quantum world, even 'empty' voids are teeming with activity as particles come and go.

In Eastern philosophy the idea of empty space is an integral concept. "Clay is moulded into a vessel, but the usefulness of the vessel depends on the space where nothing exists."



## **APPENDIX 2**

**Artist's Statement - Tin Sheds Gallery, 2006**

**The Empty Space Project**  
Francesca Mataraga

The concept of reductive or empty space is often present in minimal, concrete and abstract art. The colossus of minimalism, Donald Judd, commented that *"the space between can ... be...more definite than the two objects which establish it"*. My investigation into empty space is based on this idea of space between objects. The solid forms of the composition act as brackets to the space between them. What is usually perceived as empty space is in this instance articulated as a solid object - a mirrored or transparent box which makes us acutely aware of the space which would normally be a void.

The concept of empty space is present in many religious, philosophical and scientific texts. Chinese Taoist philosophy embraces empty space both in philosophy and art, viewing it as essential - the place where energy exists. In ancient Greece the philosopher Leucippus asserted that there could be no motion if there was no void and he inferred that it was wrong to identify the void with the non-existent. In Judaic and Christian philosophy empty space is an integral part of creation. Viewed as a space filled with infinite light having no beginning or end, in Judaic texts it is known as "the light of Ein Sof". Recently a US court heard a case challenging the empty space or 'nothingness' in the rotunda of the Judicial Building as an endorsement of atheist belief, alleging that the 'void' space or 'nothing' in the rotunda constituted the government's establishment of the religion of "non theistic belief." The court ruled that the empty space demonstrates government neutrality toward religion.

Empty space has also been viewed as a pseudo-scientific space, filled with promise. In America before the explorations of Lewis and Clark, Thomas Jefferson and other geographers had filled in the empty space on the western map with hypothetical features based on rumours, legends, distorted versions of Indian information and a certain amount of wishful thinking. Similarly in our own country the settlement/invasion policy of Terra Nullus, designated the Indigenous territories as empty space, spaces available to be claimed. This idea of Australia persists. Our vast natural landscape and comparatively low population often lead to descriptions of the outback as empty.

The point of all these examples is to illustrate the multiple instances in which empty space is not inactive or a void. It is always filled with something - fantasies, theories, time. Empty space can be filled with any number of meanings. At the very least it is the space in which our thoughts exist. Often it is loaded with meaning.

Francesca Mataraga is a Sydney based artist. Her work has been shown in various exhibitions including The Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize in 2003 and 2005, The Year in Art in 2004 and the Jacaranda Acquisitive Drawing Award touring exhibition in 2003.

This is her third solo exhibition.

For further information or to contact the artist see: [www.francescamataraga.net](http://www.francescamataraga.net)

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