

Painting by eye: an investigation into the representation and understanding of dimensions and space through objects, images and time

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PAINTING BY EYE

'Photography-Free Zone' and
'Construction-Abstraction' Series

An investigation into the representation and understanding of dimensions
and space through objects, images and time.

Abi Alice

MFA

2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is my belief that artists develop a visual language that recurs throughout their practice; their particular interests and style are projected onto the objects and images they create. Finding equilibrium in forms, colour-form combinations and images has long been a concern of mine. I recognise a persistent manner of working within my practice that utilises geometry, mathematics and colour to arrive at compositions that have a sense of beauty and equilibrium.

Abstraction has been of significant interest to me and the three collections of work that I developed during my Master of Fine Arts studies – ‘Colour:Form:Ratio’, ‘Photography-Free Zone’ and ‘Construction-Abstraction’ – illustrate the different ways I have applied my interests in abstraction.

Until the completion of the ‘Colour:Form:Ratio’ painting series my approach to abstraction was cerebral and self-reliant. While I was satisfied with results of my initial investigations and experimentation with abstract forms in painting I felt that the work lacked a social connection. I thus became interested in addressing what I perceived as this shortfall in my abstract painting.

A new body of photographic work that had been evolving in parallel to my painting practice seemed to offer a solution in that I was finding that I could develop abstract compositions based on objects, forms and painted surfaces taken directly from the world around me.

The abundant potential of the subject matter of my photographs soon became apparent. I realised that the photographs could be used to construct a new version of abstract composition. The images shared a

similar colour and geometrical configuration to that illustrated in the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' Series. With this breakthrough, I began 'painting by eye', replacing my brush and palette with the camera and using it to capture and frame colours and geometric forms from my surrounding environment. In order to test my new methodology of arriving at abstract compositions extracted from the world around me, I selected two common spaces – the gallery/museum and the construction site – as the sourcing ground for my photographs.

The result of my experimentation has been two collections of work: 'Photography-Free Zone' and 'Construction-Abstraction'. Both series reflect my experience of the gallery space and the construction site while illustrating the transferral of my painting process to the photographic medium. The most favourable realisation I made in the process of making these works was that the subject matter I captured with the camera possessed aesthetic and theoretical qualities in keeping with my former painted artistic vocabulary, despite being removed from the physical act of painting.

2. Point of departure: 'Colour:Form:Ratio'

Dimensional Painting Series

The 'Colour:Form:Ratio' Dimensional Painting Series evolved from my interest in painting and, in particular, my interest in colour, form and geometric abstraction. My aim with this work was to arrive at harmonious colour-form combinations through the use of geometry, mathematics and colour.

When referring to my intention being to achieve a 'harmonious' composition and/or a composition that possesses a sense of 'equilibrium', I imply that my aim is to present a harmonious or satisfying arrangement of elements. In this instance the elements of colour and geometrical form. My intention is that the completed works will present a composition that I believe to be, a pleasing combination of elements that are in accord with one another, instead of an arrangement that is discordant or aggressive on the senses.

With the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' series I was interested in questioning viewers' perception and understanding of painting. I believe we are in an exciting time where the boundaries and frameworks of perception have been dismantled, allowing creativity to be explored without limitation, expanding the horizons and potential of both the artist's and the viewer's experience.

In the media-saturated culture in which we live in contemporary western society we are inundated with a wide range of visual imagery. In this visually overloaded environment, it would seem that our senses could be numb to the effects of traditional paintings on canvas. It was with this in mind that I began the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' series with the

intention of developing an alternative painting format combining sculptural objects and painted compositions.

In this series I gave consideration to the space paintings occupy. Rather than displaying paintings as two-dimensional surfaces, the works in the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' series project from the wall. This projection into space occurs in two ways: because of the three-dimensionality of the painted object itself, and the use of colour to create spatial illusions.

My starting point with this series was the construction of the form itself. Once the proportions of the objects were determined, I used coordinates to plot arcs or lines. I then used ratios to determine the colour compositions to be painted on the object, with direct reference to its form and shape.

Significant consideration was given to the proportions of each form and how this would support the colour composition. Much has been written about the use of geometry to arrive at beauty in form. Perhaps the most well known mathematical equations is the 'Golden Mean' or 'Golden Ratio', which is a pattern found in many natural forms, such as flowers, and for centuries it has also been used in art and architecture.

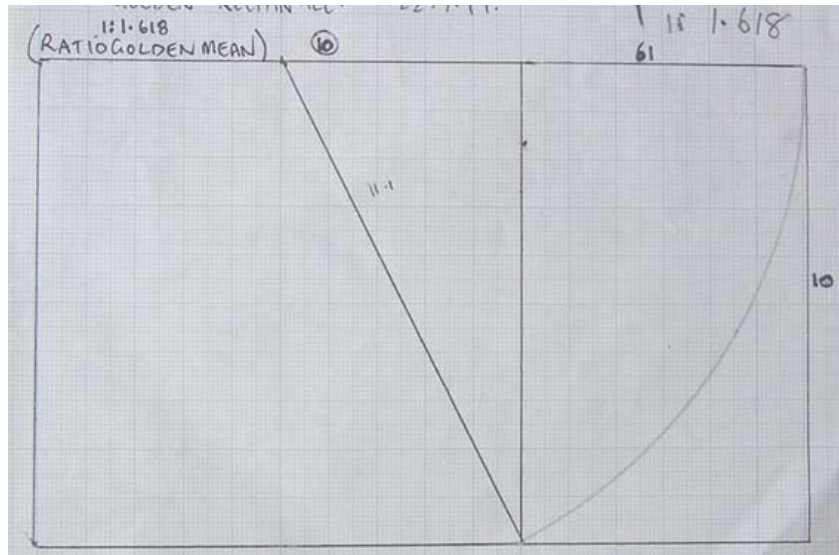
To illustrate the approach I took to arrive at the painting's form I will use one of the paintings from the series as an example, **Painting No. 2**. (The procedure used to make this work was repeated in the creation of all the other forms in the series.) In the case of **Painting No. 2** I undertook a series of early experiments using Golden Mean proportions to arrive at a 'golden ellipse', yet on completion of this work I intuitively believed that my own ellipse, based on the ratio 120:330, had a more appealing quality. Intuition is key to an artist's individuality; without it artists would only mimic all that has been done before. However, I experimented with

a number of different ratios. This process of determining the proportions of my objects is depicted in the following illustrations:

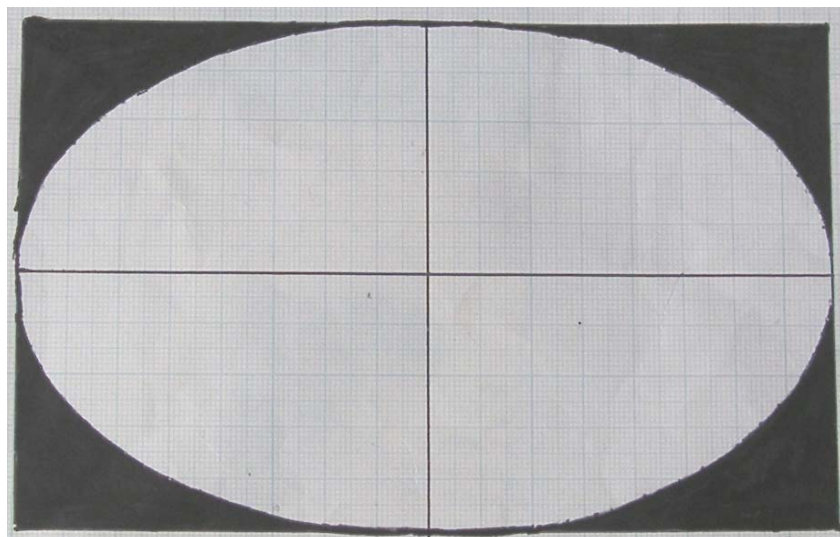
ELLIPSE RATIO SAMPLING

GOLDEN RECTANGLE

RATIO = 1:1.618

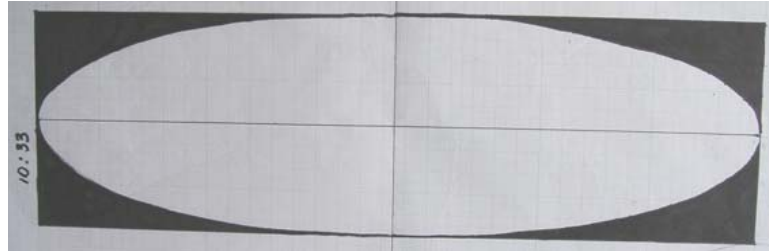


GOLDEN ELLIPSE

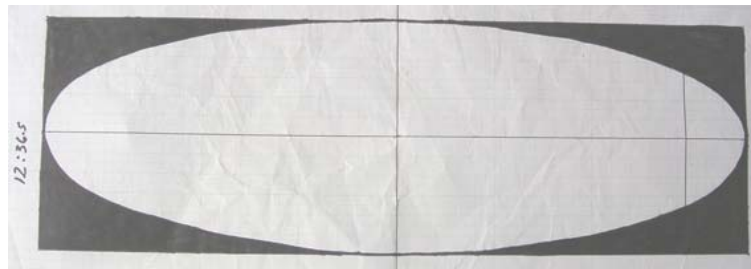


ELLIPSE RATIO SAMPLING

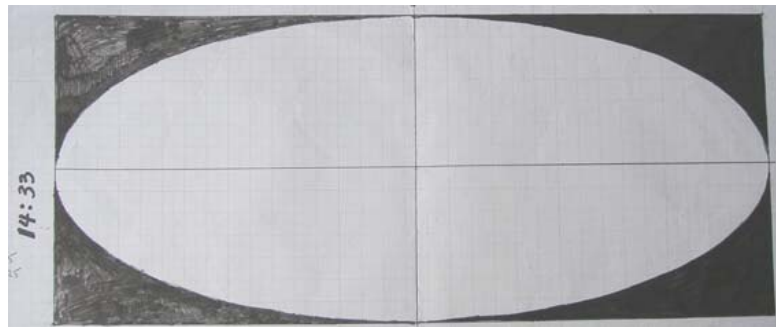
Ratio 10:33



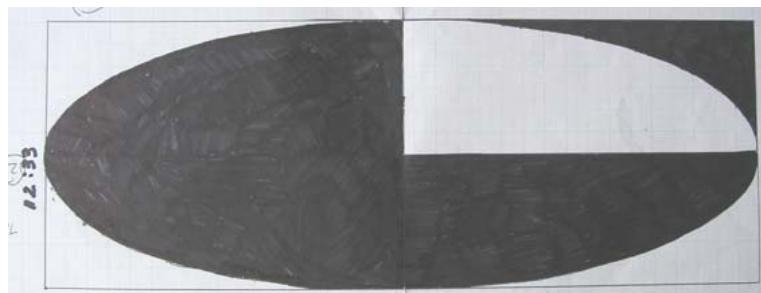
Ratio 12:36.6



Ratio 14:33



Ratio 12:33





Colour:Form:Ratio Painting No. 2

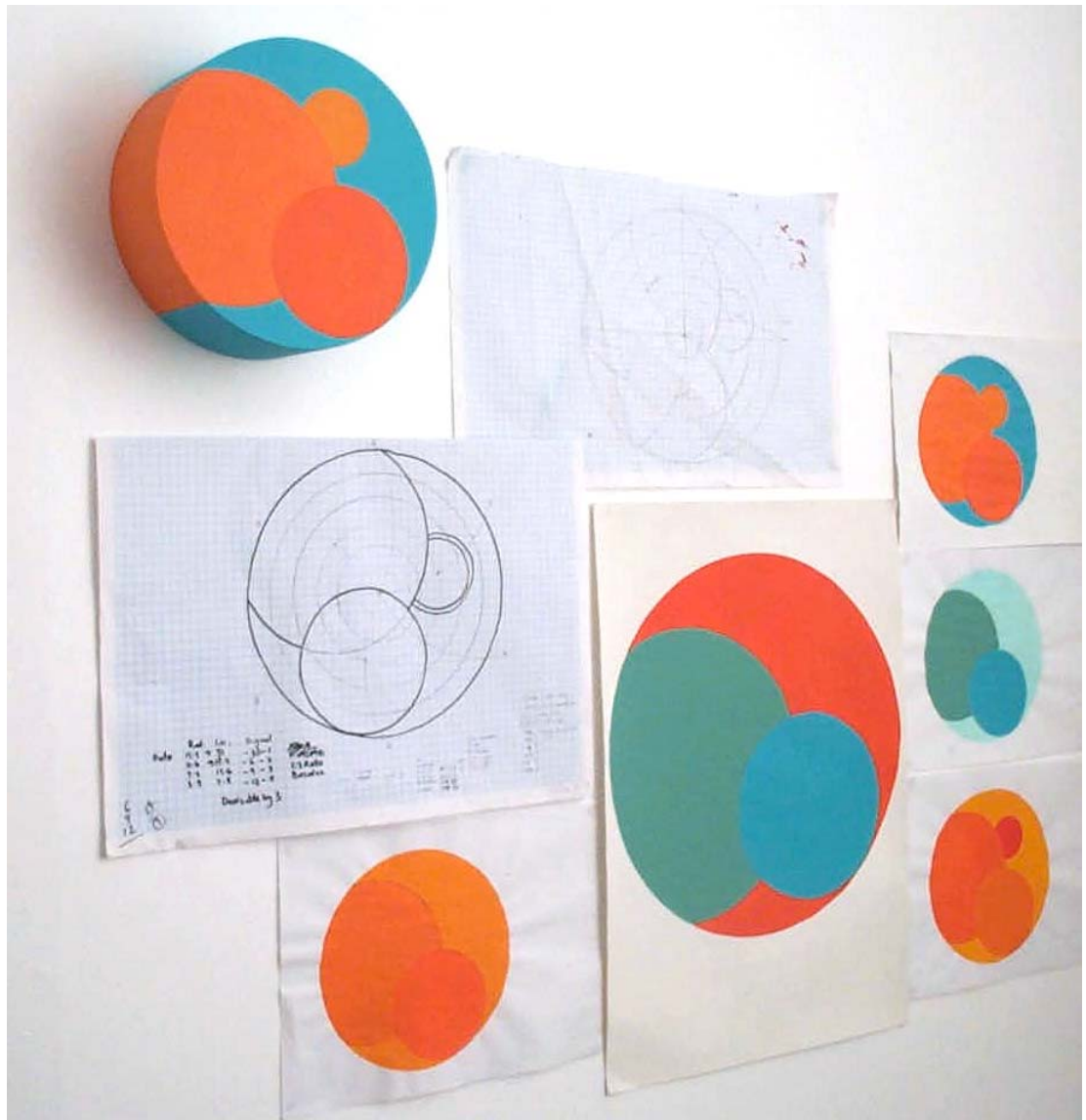
The ellipse used as the basis for **Painting No. 2** has the ratio 120:330 mm (width/height), with the width of the entire object being 420 mm. Once the object proportions are determined, the composition is then designed with direct reference to the object. In the case of **Painting No. 2**, a linear composition was chosen. The 420 mm width was broken up into a ratio of 217:12:30:60:100. Each individual number, if added, is divisible by three, except for the 1. The number 3 is frequently explored in my work.

The materiality of each work in the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' series is also carefully considered. Forms are constructed from bent plywood and the resulting works retain subtle evidence of the timber grain, as well as the brushstrokes of matt acrylic paint. I celebrate these qualities as I feel that they provide evidence of the hand of the maker. Although the form is sharply geometric, it is important that the completed works have a sense of the essence of the materials they are made from – unlike minimalist artists, I do not aspire to an impersonal industrialised aesthetic. As Marc Chagall wrote: 'Color is all. When color is right, form is right. Color is everything, color is vibration like music; everything is vibration.'¹

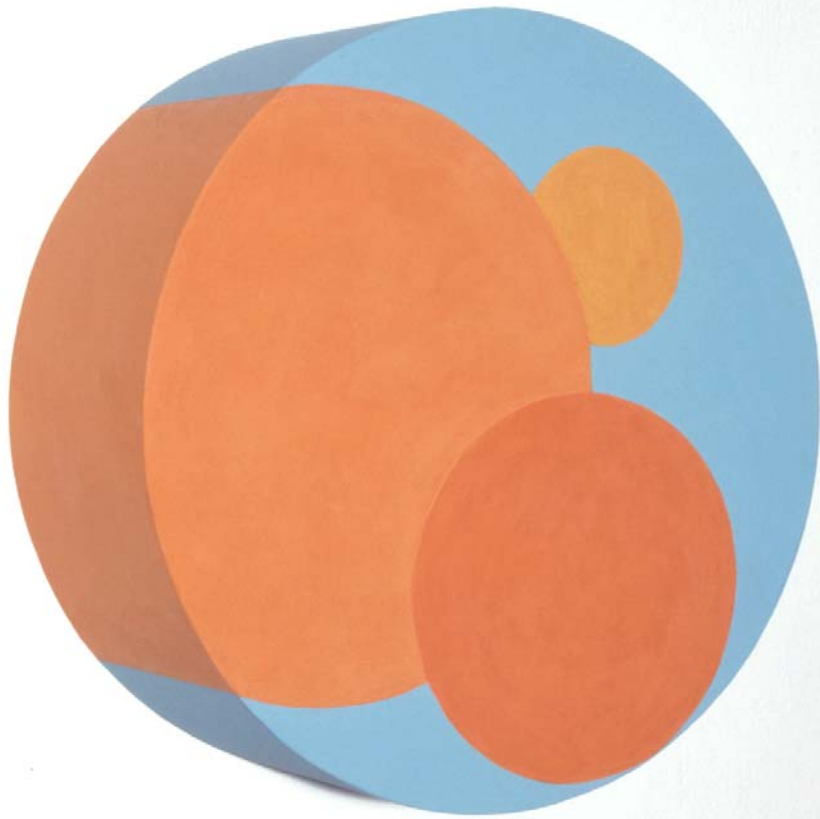
One of the intentions of the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' series was to explore the different optical effects that can be achieved through colour combinations. **Painting No. 1** in the series, with its active, intense, vibrating palette made up of three tones of orange and a turquoise background, generates the illusion that the composition is projecting forward into space. The illustration following shows the number of different colour combinations that were experimented with before the final composition was arrived at.

¹ Marc Chagall quoted on 'The painter's keys',

<http://quote.robertgenn.com/getquotes.php?category=colour>; viewed 1.2.07.



Compositional and colour sampling process



Colour:Form:Ratio Painting No. 1



Colour:Form:Ratio Painting No. 3



Colour:Form:Ratio Painting No. 5



Colour:Form:Ratio Painting No. 4

In contrast, with **Painting No. 3** from the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' series, my aim was to achieve a composition with a sense of calm and equilibrium. Tones of green were mixed, with the resulting hues equal in value and not pulsating against one another.

In **Painting No. 4** and **Painting No. 5** I created a spatial depth in the painted composition, a depth that was further suggested by the shape of the form itself. The colour composition in this work continued around the internal and external surface of the form.

When I am making a new collection of work I tend to go into isolation and remove myself from the world of art theory and art writing in magazines and catalogues. It has been my experience – as a person more comfortable with the visual than with the written word – that referring to art writing, past or present, tends to inhibit and negatively influence my art making, either in a conscious or unconscious way. Perhaps this inhibition stems from the realisation that it is next to impossible to create unique objects. I believe that by remaining in a 'creative vacuum' during the experimental stage of my art making, I can follow my creative intuition. I prefer to find parallels between my work and that of other artists or art movements after the completion of a body of work, and I welcome viewers' own personal connections.

On completion of the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' series I researched other artists who have explored themes or concerns similar to my own, including ideas about the spatiality of painting and compositional arrangement. Mark Rothko, Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella and Josef Albers (particularly his 'Homage to a Square' series),² have all created paintings with internal

² In terms of colour exploration, Josef Albers, and his 'Homage to a Square' series, is of great interest to me. Edward Lucie-Smith has written that Albers was: 'very much interested in Gestalt psychology, and this led him towards an exploration of the effects of optical illusion. Later he was drawn towards a study of the way in which colours act upon one another. The pictures and prints of the "Homage to a Square" series, Albers'

compositions that have a direct reference to the parameters of the canvas. This is well illustrated in the work of Frank Stella. Edward Lucie-Smith has written about Stella:

His concern is not so much with colour-as-colour, as with the painting-as-object, a thing which exists in its own right, and which is entirely self-referring ... The paintings which established Stella's reputation were those which were shown in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition 'Sixteen Americans' in 1960. They were all black canvases, patterned with parallel stripes about two and a half inches wide, a width chosen to echo the width of the wooden stripes used for the picture support.³

The idea that painting was restricted by the canvas format was a notion shared by many other artists. Michael Crichton has written: 'One of the extreme problems of paintings as objects is the other side, the back ... it can't be solved, it's the nature of the work.'⁴

I avoided this problem of the two-dimensionality of the canvas by presenting painting as a three-dimensional object. Although each painting in the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' series is displayed on the wall in the manner of a conventional painting on canvas, the painted composition continues around the circumference of each object.

Since the early 20th century several artists, art movements and critics have addressed this aspect of spatiality. Some notable examples are the Russian Constructivists of the 1920s, the 'spatialist' art and slashed

best-known works, are planned experiments with colour.' Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art Since 1945*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1969, p. 94.

³ Edward Lucie-Smith, *ibid.* p. 110.

⁴ Michael Crichton, *Jasper Johns*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1977, p. 77.

canvases of Lucio Fontana,⁵ and the work of Donald Judd, along with his 1965 article 'Specific Objects'.

The Russian Constructivists explored spatiality predominantly through spatial constructions. However, as seen in the work of Russian artist Pyotr Miturich, particularly his *Spatial Painting No. 18*, 1920, spatiality was also addressed in painting.

As Donald Judd points out in his famous 1965 essay 'Specific Objects':

The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangle plane placed flat against a wall. A rectangle is a shape itself: it is obviously the whole shape; it determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside it. In work before 1945 the edges of the rectangle are a boundary. The end of the picture. The composition must react to the edges and the rectangle must be unified, but the shape of the rectangle is not stressed; the parts are more important, and the relationships of colour and form occur among them.⁶

The limits of the rectilinear picture plane led me to reconsider the form a painting could take. This, in turn, led to work with shapes other than the rectangle that could act as the support for my composition. Yet, for the purpose of this series, I also identified with the principles of compositional construction that relate directly to the rectilinear support as seen in the work of Donald Judd, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman.

⁵ It has been said of Lucio Fontana that he 'transcended the boundaries of the orthodox disciplines, i.e. painting and sculpture. This was due partly to his experiments with electric light, partly to the cuts and cracks which he introduced into his painting and sculpture.' *Phaidon Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art*, Phaidon, London & New York, 1973, p. 76.

⁶ Donald Judd, *Complete Writings 1959–1975*, The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design/New York University Press, New York, 2005, p. 182.

3.BREAKTHROUGH

As mentioned in my introduction, I found that my early experiments with geometric abstraction in painting lacked a sense of social relevance or connection to life. Consequently, I developed a body of photographic work – in which the abstract geometric imagery and colour is drawn from real life – to address this shortfall. The titles of the two photographic series I produced are 'Photography-Free Zone' and 'Construction-Abstraction'.

A breakthrough occurred when I made an aesthetic connection between the colour-form compositions I was creating in my painting and the imagery I was capturing in photography. The imagery in both mediums shared a similar colour and geometrical configuration. I began to recognise the potential of these original photographs as my raw materials that could be used to construct a new variant of abstract composition, despite the completed compositions being removed from the process of painting. Excited by this discovery, I abandoned my brush and palette and took up the camera.

I began to create a new abstract language in my work. Geometric shapes and colours found in the environment around me replaced the circles, lines and arcs I developed in my earlier paintings. Graph paper, brushes, ratios, coordinates and paint were substituted for geometric and colour imagery captured in photographs.

The potential of creativity is one of the main inspirations for my work. I have a curiosity and passion for all things abstract, as well as a keen interest in geometry, mathematics and colour. I perceive these fundamentals as a universal language with no age or language barriers and therefore not alienating for the audience.

I am inspired when I find these fundamentals and abstract imagery in everyday life. I embrace the challenge of working with what can often be seen as mundane or banal details or subject matter, capturing these seemingly insignificant details with the camera and then using the resulting photographs to construct works of art.

I refer to this new approach in my work as 'photographic-construction'. This process is the turning point in the creation of my abstract compositions. Conceptually, the same themes of equilibrium in colour-form relationships are explored in my photography, despite the two-dimensionality of the medium. My compositions no longer related to a three-dimensional form. Instead, they corresponded to the new two-dimensional rectilinear shape of the square or rectangle. Ironically, I utilise the potential of the rectilinear picture plane in my photographs, overriding what was previously seen as the limitations of this form. I embrace the challenge of working within these pictorial parameters.

In order to test my new methodology of photographic-construction, I selected two spaces in our shared environment from which to derive my initial photographs. The first of these environments is the gallery/museum space, and the second is the construction site. From these spaces I extracted my subject matter by taking photographs from which I could construct my abstract compositions.

The gallery/museum and the construction site were chosen for several reasons. Firstly, they are extremely different spaces. I intentionally chose such distinctive spaces in order to illustrate how my principles of observation and my process of photographic-construction could be successfully applied to two very different environments with the completed works maintaining conceptual and aesthetic links.

I was interested in celebrating the sophisticated and unsophisticated nature of the different spaces from which these two series derived. I recognise the gallery/museum as a pristine, rarefied and sacred space, as opposed to the construction site, which is characterised by dust and dirt – a space in a constant state of transition.

Both the gallery/museum and the construction site are communal spaces that my audience can identify with and not be alienated by. I believe that this awareness gives the viewer an understanding and sense of familiarity with the completed works. The works make a connection with the viewer by giving them a link to an environment they have already experienced. I recognise that the gallery/museum is not necessarily an everyday space, yet I believe that even if viewers are not frequent visitors to such an environment, at some point in their life's journey they will experience it, even if that might be during a school excursion. A reference point is also provided for the viewer by the titles of each work, such as **Pompidou No. 1** and **Louvre No. 1** – titles that make a direct reference to the environments in which the photographs were taken.

Through these connections I hope to eliminate some of the alienating and confusing aspects of abstract art, in particular the notion that you have to be educated or well versed in art in order to appreciate it. As Clement Greenberg wrote in his 1959 essay 'The case for abstract art': 'Some people go further and say that abstract, non-representational art is pathological art, crazy art, and that those who practice it and those who admire it are sick or silly.'⁷

⁷ John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p. 75.

Through these two collections of work, 'Photography-Free Zone' and 'Construction-Abstraction', I hope to demystify abstract art and attempt to bring it closer to the viewer. This is not to say that I do not appreciate the work of the 'masters' of abstract art, such as Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky and Frank Stella. However, I agree with Clement Greenberg that outside of the art world, abstract art can confuse and alienate viewers. As Greenberg writes: 'Abstract art is not a special kind of art ... nor is it a superior kind of art.'⁸

In simplified terms abstract art could be said to derive from an alphabet of colours and shapes; this alphabet being one of the very first things we experience as children in the form of building blocks and colouring-in. Greenberg wrote: 'Abstract art comes, on this level, as a relief, an arch-example of something that does not have to mean, or be useful for, anything other than itself ... we are left alone with shapes and colours.'⁹

By presenting art works derived from everyday, shared environments it is my intention to illustrate the creative potential that lies everywhere. I elevate often-overlooked or banal details into artworks that provoke observation and contemplation. It is my hope to encourage viewers to be open to the beauty around them, even in the most ordinary of spaces.

As an artist I do not expect the audience to fully understand the conceptual and theoretical basis of my work. My main intention is that, at whatever level desired, viewers will enjoy contemplating the completed work. This may simply be for the colour and/or compositional arrangements, or the challenge of trying to identify from which details of my chosen spaces (the gallery/museum and the construction site) I have extracted my imagery. The 'Photography-Free Zone' and

⁸ Ibid. p. 82.

⁹ Ibid. p. 80.

'Construction-Abstraction' series reflect my experience of these two social spaces and illustrate the transferral of my painting practice to the photographic medium.

4. PROCESS: 'PHOTOGRAPHIC-CONSTRUCTION'

Like Josef Albers, for whom 'the human eye always remained the master with the camera its humble servant',¹⁰ I am relatively indifferent to the technical aspects of photography. My equipment on most occasions is a 3.2-megapixel digital camera, or an automatic camera with slide film. I perceive the camera simply as a tool; the priorities for me are the observations captured on film and the way I can utilise my initial photographs to construct abstract compositions. I intentionally use very simple equipment – equipment that is not elite, in order to demonstrate that expensive and complex apparatus is not necessary for creating works of art. In **National Gallery of Victoria No. 1**, from the 'Photography-Free Zone' series, the original image on which the final artwork is based was blurred, an effect that could be perceived negatively – that is, as an error. However, to my surprise, in the process of printing, this blurring effect resulted in an image that resembled a pastel work or a drawing rather than a photograph.

Similarly to the Colour: Form: Ratio series, the materiality of the works in the 'Painting By Eye' series is carefully considered. The final works are printed with an inkjet printer on a German etching paper, apposed to the traditional glossy photographic paper. The textural and matt surface of the paper, contributed to the painterly and/or drawn appearance of the completed works.

¹⁰ Achim Borchardt-Hume, 'Two Bauhaus histories', *Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World*, Tate Publishing, London, 2006, p. 74.



National Gallery of Victoria No. 1

It has always been a prerogative of mine not to pigeonhole my artistic practice in a particular creative camp. In this research project I oscillate between painting and photography, however my observations are of paramount importance, not the media in which I choose to express them. I believe that creativity has no parameters. My works often resemble drawings or watercolours – this is a favorable quality in my opinion as it is not important to me that the work sits within the photographic realm. My photographic-constructions reflect theoretical and visual concerns, rather than my interest in photographic media.

With the 'Photography-Free Zone' series I see myself as a 'curator' or 'producer' of the space I am photographing. Through the process of framing and cropping, I select what part of the space remains in the image and what will be edited out. I focus attention on the geometric configurations and colour combinations within the chosen spaces. The visual imagery I have captured in each photograph appealed to me because it resembled aspects of my geometric abstract language, including lines, shapes, angles and colour palette.

To elaborate on my process of 'photographic construction', I will explain the first body of work within the 'Photography-Free Zone' series to eventuate from this process:

The Pompidou Series. Original photographs that are the basis of this series were taken in the Pompidou Gallery in Paris. (Before I begin, I would like to state that I am ALWAYS respectful of the 'flash-free zone' in the museum or gallery.) I took initial photographs of details in the gallery spaces of the Pompidou and then transformed these photographs into abstract compositions. This process is repeated in all my later compositions. The only alteration to **Pompidou No. 1** is that the composition was rotated. All the other completed works in this series – **Pompidou Nos 2, 3, 4, 5** – were achieved by the processes of cropping,

duplicating and merging the original photograph. This process is not dissimilar to the traditional method of photomontage, a term originally coined by the Dadaists in c. 1918 to refer to the method whereby a 'composite photographic image is formed by combining images from separate photographic sources'.¹¹ My compositions differ from traditional photomontages, however, in that multiple photographs were not used to create the final work.

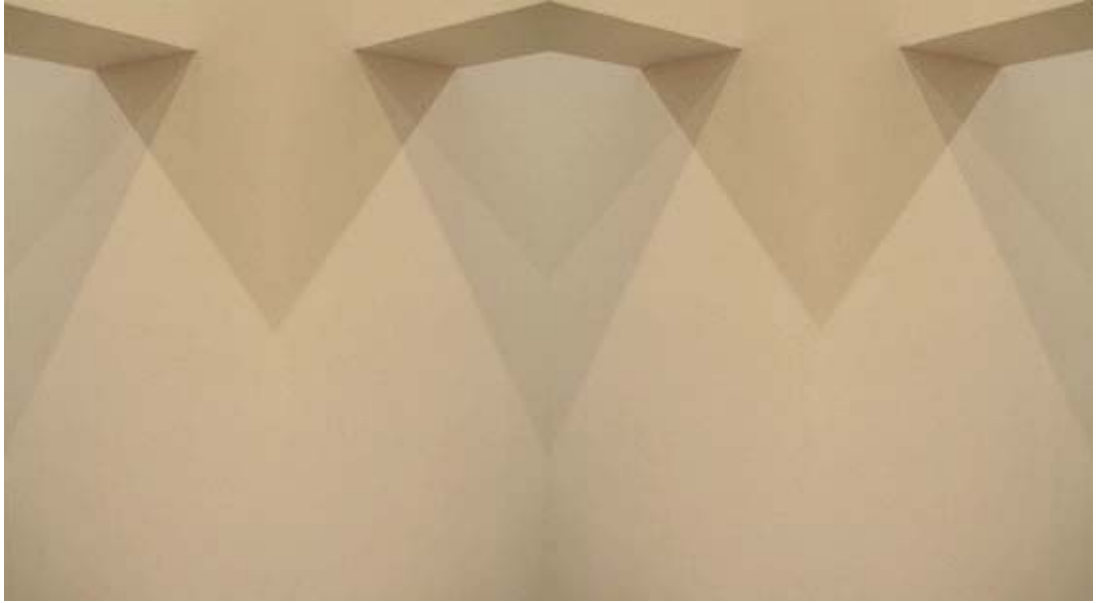
¹¹ David Evans, *Grove Art Online*, 2006, www.groveart.com



This is the original photograph taken in the Pompidou.



Pompidou No. 1



Pompidou No. 3



Pompidou No. 4



Pompidou No. 5



Pompidou No. 2

In the writings of the early 20th-century Hungarian painter and photographer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy it is evident that he recognises the potential of processes like photography. Moholy-Nagy believed that only until the development of a mechanically improved process could the wonderful potential inherent in photography be realised.¹² In our own time, the advent of computer programs has vastly improved traditional methods – such as the manual processes of cutting and gluing – used to make photographic montages. This small but important technological advance has been invaluable in assisting me with my method of photographic-construction.

Although the computer is an effective tool, offering a more streamlined and cleaner way to arrive at my compositions compared to traditional photomontage methods, it does not reduce the time taken to create a successful composition. Of the hundreds of initial photographs I take, only a small number have appropriate configurations of colour and form. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the original photograph will successfully translate into a completed work in the second phase of photographic-construction. The images that I create with the assistance of the computer are equivalent to the preliminary compositional drawings I undertake as part of my painting practice. For every successful completed work there are approximately 10 to 20 unsuccessful works – works that do not resonate with a sense of equilibrium or beauty in their composition and colour combinations.

It is important to reiterate that each of the completed photographs in the 'Photography-Free Zone' and the 'Construction-Abstraction' series is derived from ONE initial photograph. Although the spatial relationships are altered via the process of cropping and repetition, I

¹² Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painting Photography Film*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967.

strive to maintain the integrity of the original space, including its light and colour. In this digital age I acknowledge the importance of maintaining the essence of the original subject of the photograph. Without this my photographs would be devoid of the life of the gallery/museum and construction site and would not retain meaning.

In both 'Photography-Free Zone' and 'Construction-Abstraction' I attempt to give my compositions a sense of surprise and humour. I aim to plant a seed, to germinate a thought, to encourage the viewer to look and see creatively. I like to retain a sense of surprise in each work; this surprise stemming from the viewer's realisation that the resolved, purified, abstract works have been derived from real yet inconspicuous spaces and unimportant details. The works also emphasise my belief that everything has creative potential, and that every person has the potential to see creatively. In the same way that Moholy-Nagy and Josef Albers encouraged the act of seeing creatively through their teaching, I similarly seek to encourage creative looking through my work. Both Moholy-Nagy and Albers:

Aimed to liberate the creative potential of their students in the firm belief that becoming an artist was not a question of genius but of unlocking a positive universal force. As Moholy-Nagy put it: 'Everyone is talented. Every healthy man has a deep capacity for bringing to development the creative energies found in his nature.' Both artists saw their principal task as sharpening their students' perceptiveness – to become more 'aware' – be it to the qualities of a particular material; or the pressing questions of their time.¹³

¹³ Achim Borchardt-Hume, op. cit. p. 70.

5. 'Photography-Free Zone' Series

I have spent a great deal of my life visiting galleries and museums around the world. For me, art galleries and museums are a Mecca; they are spaces that I make pilgrimages to in order to see works by the many artists I admire.

Galleries and museums are generally tranquil and captivating spaces. However, the gallery/museum is not solely a space where one can reflect on and admire the work of fellow artists. Through my research I have attempted to illustrate it can equally be a space of inspiration in which creative practice continues to evolve. The main inspiration of the gallery environment for me is not only the paintings or sculptures, but also the ceiling details and shadows that are projected by the gallery's architectural structure. What interests me are banal, unexpected details that are often overlooked. These details I capture with my camera; the resulting photographs then become the raw material from which my abstract compositions are constructed.¹⁴

In the completed works that are created from the photographs I take of these spaces, I hope to create a sense of emotional relief in the form of serene and contemplative images with an emphasis on the subtleties of the space – on its light, colour and geometry. The works reflect the ambience of the gallery/museum space as well as my own personal observations of this particular environment.

The source for the images in **The Louvre** series (part of the 'Photography-Free Zone' series) is the central foyer of the Louvre Museum in Paris. I was initially drawn to the geometry of the foyer ceiling yet, unexpectedly,

¹⁴ As mentioned previously, I am always mindful of the 'flash-free zone' in museums and galleries and would never compromise light-sensitive artworks.

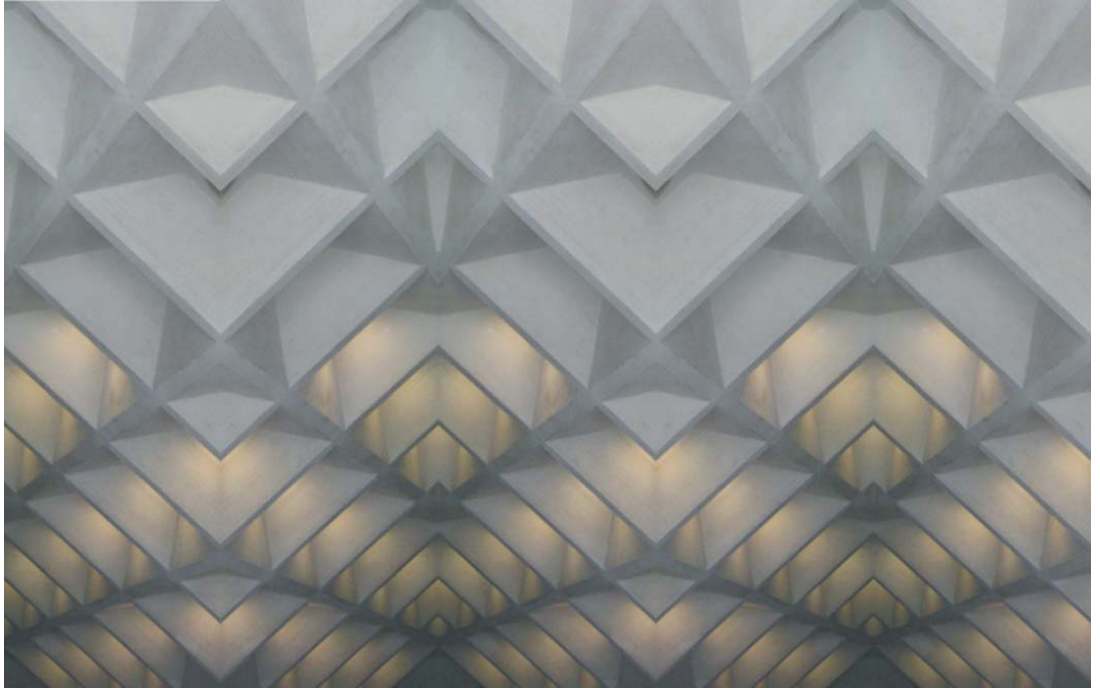
the original photographs also encapsulated the magnificence of the pressed concrete used in the building. **Louvre No. 3** illustrates the materiality of the space. The textural beauty of the ceiling details in the Louvre were not fully realised in my original photographs; it was not until I returned to the studio and began the photographic-construction process that I could see the potential of the forms. The photographs in **The Louvre** series have a sculptural and textural quality which links with the attention to form and texture in my earlier 'Colour:Form:Ratio' Series. It is as though the compositions are sculptures compressed into a two-dimensional format – sculpture without mass, sculptures created without the physical act of carving or constructing.



Louvre No. 3



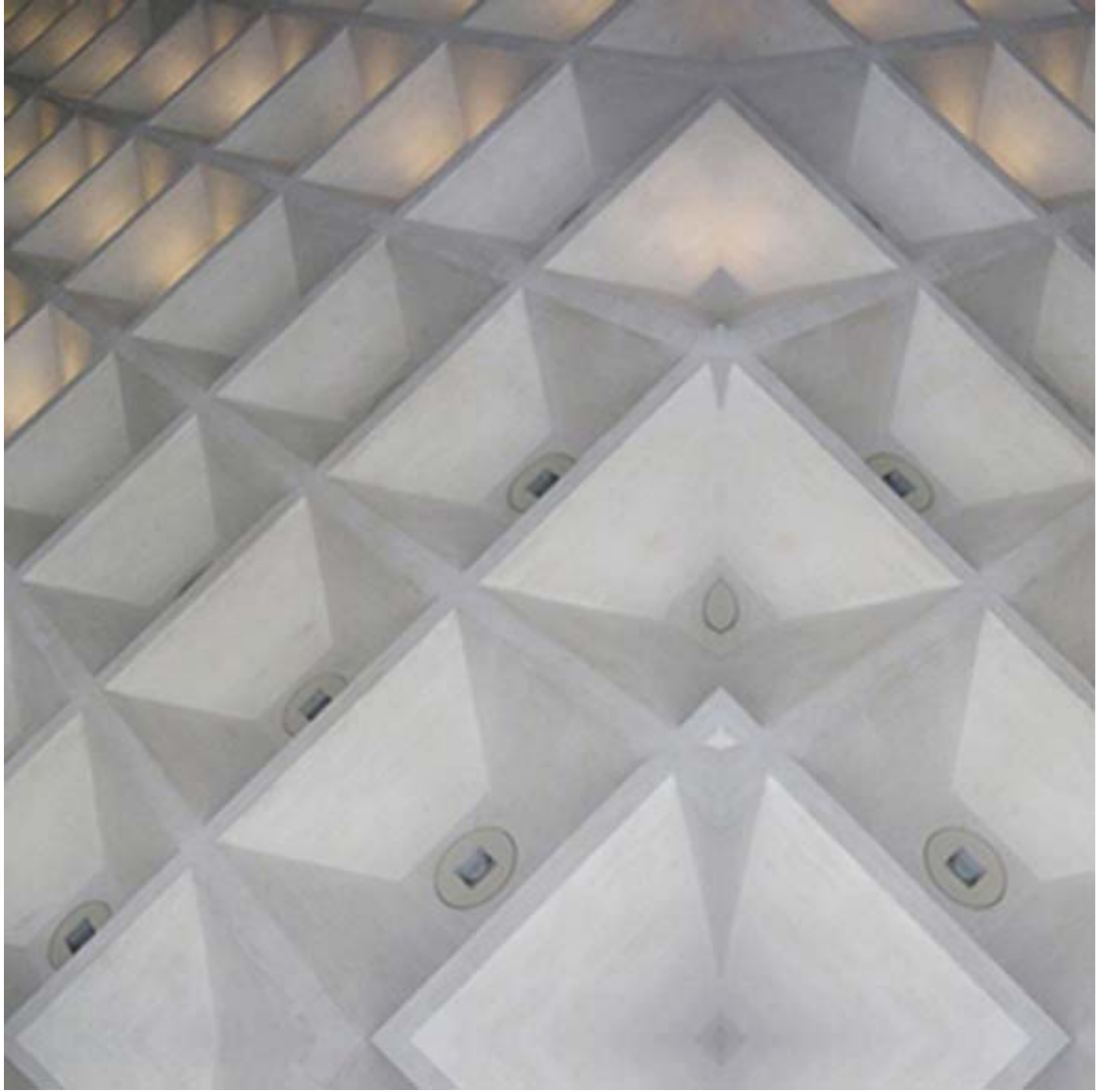
Foyer from which original photographs are derived.
This photograph was used to creation Louvre No.3



Completed work Louvre No. 1



Original photograph



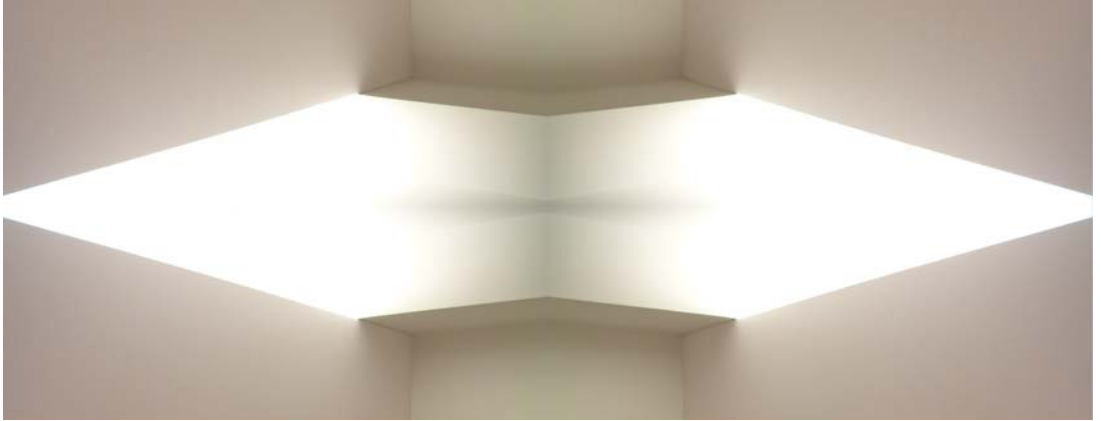
Louvre No. 2



Milan Triennial No. 1



Original photograph



Museum of Contemporary Art No. 1



Original photograph

Other gallery/museum environments on which I have based photographic works are those at the Milan Triennial in Italy (La Triennale di Milano) and the foyer of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Both spaces have a geometric structure and an ambient light that I found appealing. The spatial depth created by the light and the structural forms is captivating, while also possessing a harmonious colour palette.

An ironic, cyclical process occurs in the 'Photography-Free Zone' series. The initial subject matter is photographed within a gallery/museum; then the photographic-construction takes place and the final works are transported back into the gallery context for presentation. The series is underpinned by another playful irony: the fact that the photographs have been taken in a 'photography-free zone'. The gallery/museum is a restricted environment, yet the 'Photography-Free Zone' series subtly pushes the limitations of this space.

I am drawn into these spaces by the work of artists such as Donald Judd, Frank Stella, Lucio Fontana and Ellsworth Kelly, to name but a few. The work of these artists makes the gallery/museum a place of creative inspiration for me, and the actual space itself, with its remarkable architectural features, is the basis for the continuation and development of my creative practice.

6. 'Construction-Abstraction' Series

Construction sites are at epidemic levels in the city of Sydney. This became particularly apparent to me in the context of my own living environment: an inner-city apartment in Sydney surrounded by three construction sites. Despite the tormenting noise of the sites that began at 7 am each morning, I discovered an abundance of visual material in these spaces that inspired my second collection of photographic work, the 'Construction-Abstraction' series. My observation of construction sites led me to the realisation that in these sites was the potential for the union of my two preoccupations: photographic-construction and geometric abstraction.

On occasions, the visual imagery of the construction site can resemble abstract paintings and 'happenings'. I found a poetic association between these ordinary, dusty spaces and the extraordinary abstract art movements that were pertinent to my aesthetic and theoretical interests. Hence the title of the series: 'Construction-Abstraction'.

It is quite evident that both the construction site space and the Gallery/museum space are emotionally and psychologically contrasting to one another. Taking a closer look at the two spaces it can be seen that the construction site is a transitory environment, permeated by dust and noise. One primary difference between the two spaces is that access to the construction site space is not permitted. Barricades and fences deny access therefore only permitting observation, viewing and image capture from the outside parameters. In contrast the Gallery/Museum is a permanent, pristine and calm space, inviting public access.

The construction site is a transitory space; it is in a constant state of evolution. I became aware of the effect time has on these spaces. I captured these changing spaces in photographs taken at a moment in time; the sites have an impermanency and configuration that cannot be repeated, giving my initial photographs of them a unique quality.

The camera has been the key to the development of the 'Construction-Abstraction' series. This tool allows the subject to be captured in a brief moment. Within a few hours of this moment the space can dramatically change, yet a photograph has the power to lock the experience and existence of the space forever. Photography has the capacity to permanently record what is transitory and impermanent.

The magic of capturing these momentary spaces is evident in many of the completed works in the 'Construction-Abstraction' series. I became particularly aware of this when I photographed the first work in the series, **Darling Point No. 1.**

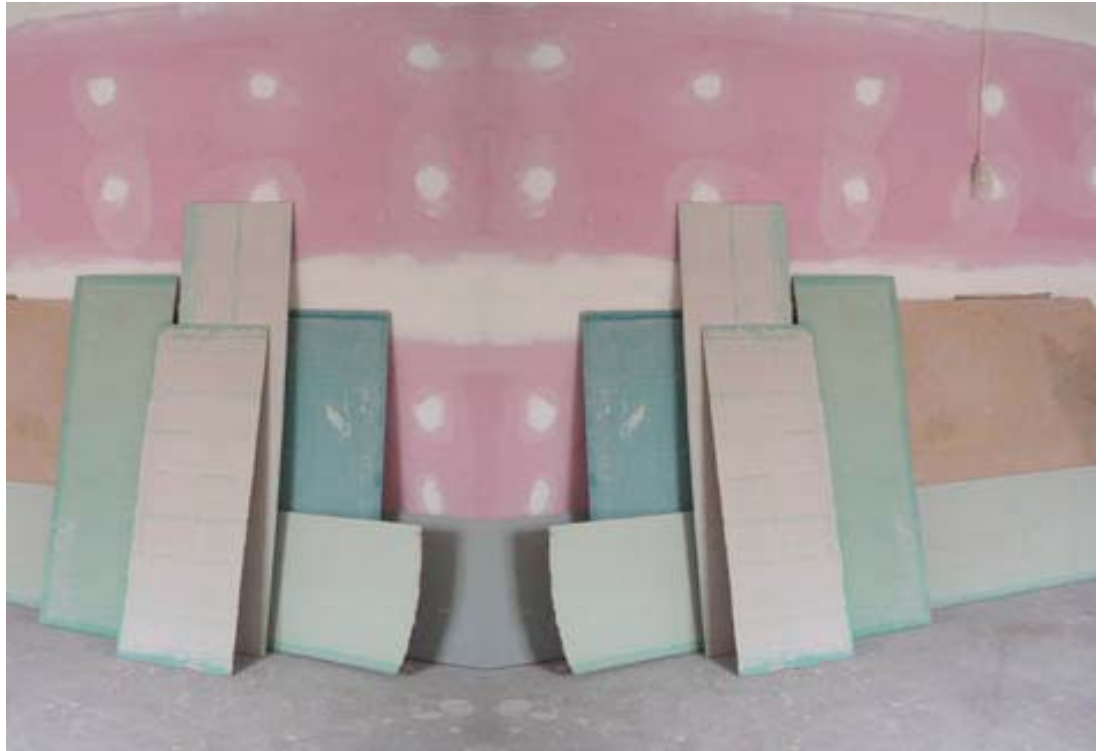
The geometry and colour arrangement of the stacked Gyprock, along with the painted surface in the background and the gracefully hanging electrical cable, all combined to create an appealing subject.

I rejoice in the spontaneous way one can find oneself in the right place at the right time. To my regret, there have been occasions like these – when I have encountered a composition of great wealth in its form and colour configurations – when I have not had my camera at hand. Returning the following day in the hope of capturing the composition, I often found that 'yesterday's' experience no longer existed.

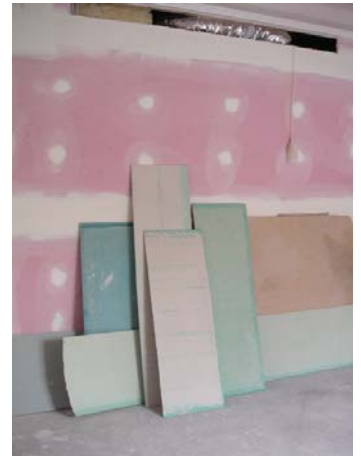
The construction site proved to be abundant in a language of geometry and colour. The repetition of stacked bricks and timber beams, the concrete, the primed surfaces and the draped tarpaulins are captured

in my initial photographs, the resulting imagery becoming the beautiful vocabulary I utilise to construct my abstract compositions.

I recognise the irony of finding beauty within the dirty and gritty space of the construction site. This sense of irony is also present in the 'Photography-Free Zone' series: the fact that I find potent creative potential, and an abundance of visual material with which to construct my compositions, in unexpected and often overlooked locations.



Darling Point No. 1



Original Photograph

Part of the beauty of the experience is the fact of stumbling upon beautiful 'installations'; as an artist I have had no control over these arrangements, only the ability to capture them in the brief moment that they exist. Each of the construction spaces has its own history; I then add a layer of meaning. The final works, then, have had the input of many creators, including the construction workers using the site. What is unique to my work are my chosen observations, colour palette and arrangement of forms.

Of the multitude of construction sites I see, I may find only one that possesses a beauty in arrangement, colour and form that is in keeping with my interests and concerns. Such a site is illustrated in **Darling Point No. 1**.

It is rare to find a monochromatic colour palette in a construction site. A rubbish skip in the streets of Elizabeth Bay in Sydney proved to be rich in aesthetic appeal: namely the beauty of peeling paint on an ornate antique ceiling surround, contrasted with modern white plastic woven bags filled with rubble. The combination of forms and tonal white was a beautiful and exceptional find and evolved, through the process of photographic-construction, into the compositions **Skip No. 1** and **Skip No. 2**.



Skip No. 1



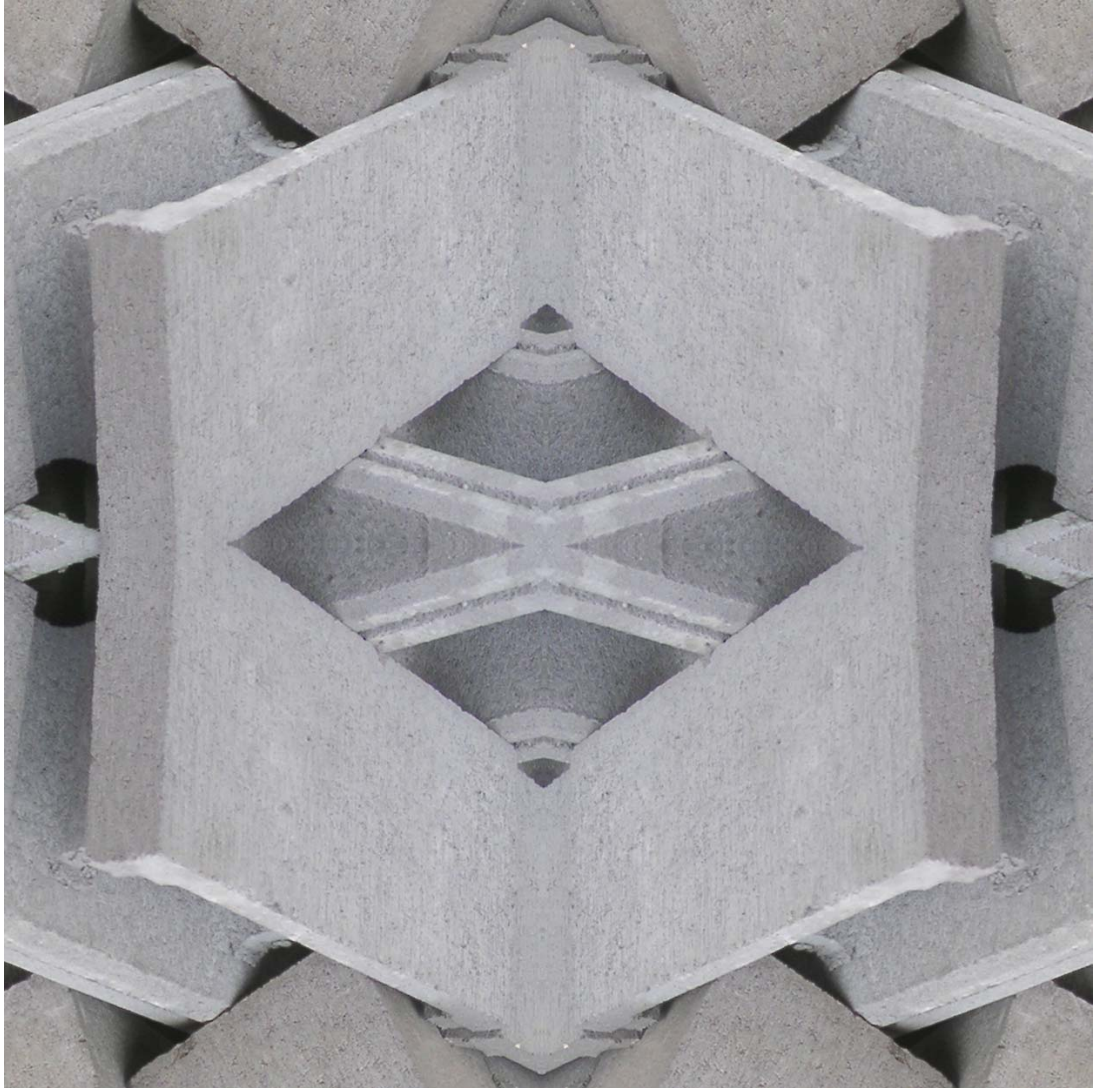
Skip No. 2



Original photograph

In other instances, raw materials have proved to be plentiful in subject matter. As illustrated in **Besser Bricks No. 1**, a stack of concrete bricks was utilised as the foundation of one composition in the 'Construction-Abstraction' series. The imagery appealed for three reasons: its monochromatic colour, the texture of the cement, and the geometry of the bricks. The resulting work is reminiscent of a sculpture, where the mass or weight of the subject can be felt despite its actual form being absent.

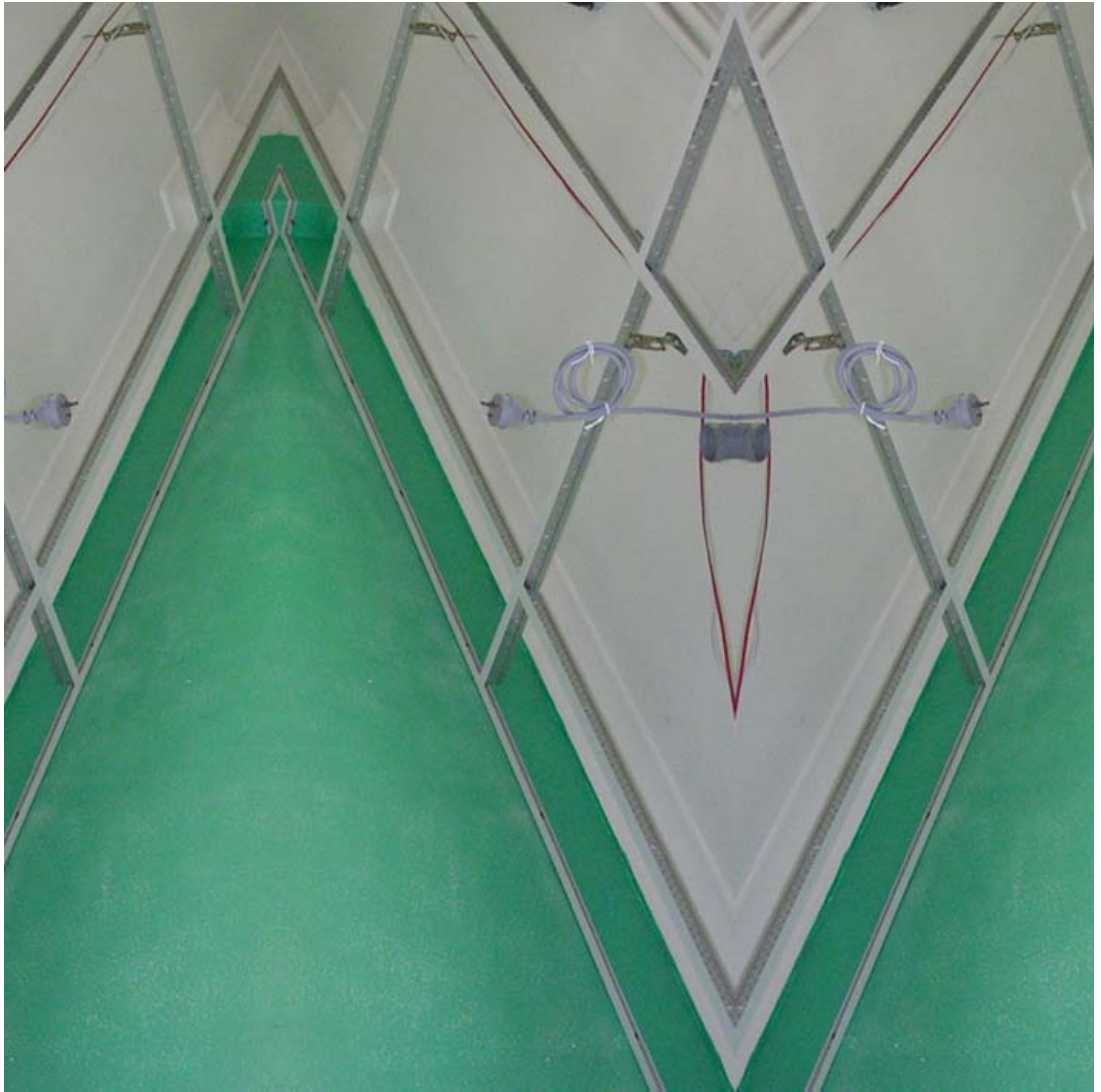
The basis of **Kings Cross No. 1** was green-painted walls in a pulled-apart shop that I photographed in Kings Cross, Sydney. I utilised the configuration of the ceiling white and the green walls to create the diagonals that, compositionally, refer to the square perimeter of the composition. The ceiling surrounds, the metal ceiling support and electrical cables are recognisable in the final works, giving the viewer a link to the original setting from which the composition was derived.



Bricks No. 1



Original photograph



Kings Cross No. 1



Original photograph

To date, I have applied my method of photographic-construction to geometric forms and visual imagery. Being aware that abstraction can also be exemplified in an expressive manner, I experimented with non-geometric images, giving myself the challenge of applying my photographic-construction technique to organic forms. The previously mentioned Skip in Elizabeth Bay in Sydney, on which the work **Skip No. 1** is based, provided a point of departure and a new direction for my work – an approach that is less formal but rich in visual associations.

I am aware of a cyclical process that occurs when I work. The initial subjects are photographed, the compositional construction takes place and then I present the final works in the gallery context. Calmness distilled from noise and disorder. In these works the original environment photographed is elevated from a transitory, dirty and noisy place to a space where beauty and calm exists. The forms in the final photographs remain connected to their origins; the original subject matter is sealed within the photograph forever, yet physically disconnected from its original location when displayed within the gallery/museum context.

I hope that the 'Construction-Abstraction' series captures the beauty of the construction site and points to the creative potential of ordinary, everyday, overlooked spaces. It also presents my new approach to compositional construction, using photography as the basis of abstract compositions that have equilibrium in colour-form combinations.

7. ARTISTIC PARALLELS

I have made several comparisons between my artistic methodology and that of other artists and artistic movements.

One of the Russian Constructivists whose work I admire is Alexander Rodchenko. Although Rodchenko was working in the mid 20th century, I identify with him as a creative kindred spirit. Through my investigations I have become aware of several similarities in our creative output and approach. This includes his interest in geometry; the tools he uses to arrive at his works; and his work across a range of diverse media, including painting, photography and sculpture. I find a particular parallel with Rodchenko in his use of everyday materials:

Rodchenko used the compass and the ruler to design abstract-geometric forms and spatial principles. His preferred materials were cardboard, plywood, plain wooden slats and boards, which he used not only to find visually traceable paths from the flat surface to three-dimensional space, but also to discover a new sense of closeness to life, to everyday industrial reality.¹⁵

In the same way that Rodchenko uses familiar, non-elitist materials, I base my work on familiar environments. I have intentionally derived my abstract language from the shared environment of the gallery/museum and the construction site in the hope that such subject matter will make a connection between my audience and the completed works.

As I have previously mentioned, I also identify with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's considerations of abstraction, particularly his rejection of the 'limitations of traditional definitions of art, and [his appreciation of] the artistic

¹⁵ Alexander Rodchenko, *Spatial Constructions*, Hatje Kantz, Germany, 2002, p. 10.

potential of mundane subject matter such as railway bridges, machines and mathematical numbers, and the value of humour and irony as creative strategies'.¹⁶

While I share an affinity with Moholy-Nagy's interest in the artistic potential of what could be regarded as mundane subject matter, my work retains visual references to the gallery/museum and construction site – the spaces from which my abstract compositions are created.

The Australian artist Peter Atkins works in a manner similar to my own approach to photographic work. As Margaret Moore has written: 'The work of Peter Atkins challenges perception and persistently questions that divide between representation and abstraction in both art and life.'¹⁷ I share a number of interests with Atkins. Firstly, we are both collectors of objects that are non-hierarchical in a market value or cultural sense. Secondly, although Atkins collects objects and I collect visual imagery, both our collections become a resource that we rearrange or reconstitute in our artworks.

Josef Albers was also a creative collector: 'Albers's first abstract works were collages made from roughly cut shards of coloured glass ... Albers later recalls trawling the streets of Weimar, equipped with knapsack and hammer, on the hunt for broken bottles and windows ... eradicating the boundaries between art and life.'¹⁸ Like Albers, I trawl the streets of the world, camera in hand, collecting photographs that become the foundation of my abstract compositions.

Looking to more contemporary terrain, the American artist Mathew Barney is of interest. Barney is a footballer turned artist who is renowned

¹⁶ Achim Borchardt-Hume, op. cit., p. 68.

¹⁷ Margaret Moore, 'Peter Atkins', *Soft Edge*, exhibition catalogue, Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 1998.

¹⁸ Achim Borchardt-Hume, op. cit., p. 67.

for his film series the Cremaster cycle (1995-2002). However it is not his Cremaster films which are of interest, it is his ongoing series '**Restrained Drawing**'. Aesthetically no connection can be found yet his approach to mark making provoked contemplation.

An exhibition housed at the Serpentine Gallery in 2007, highlights photographs, sketches, video and sculpture – all based around his ongoing project 'Drawing Restraint'. Within this series Barney's physical act of mark making is an integral and significant part of the work.

'The sequence [Drawing Restraint] began in 1987 with Barney testing his strength and stamina by scaling the walls of a gallery to draw on the ceiling. The Drawing Restraint series is now at number sixteen with the artist setting increasingly grueling and laborious tasks for himself.

For the Serpentine show he climbed a vertical dumbbell pole over seven meters high to make a mark on the ceiling before gouging out great handfuls of congealed petroleum jelly from vats in the centre. Petroleum jelly, as with all the materials used, holds specific relevance for the meaning of the piece.

Barney believes that the 'making of form' comes in stages: the 'situation' where raw energy is unchecked (symbolised by the petroleum jelly), the 'condition' where discipline, restraint and structure then leads to the growth of the 'production' where form begins to emerge.

The process of hypertrophy is central to this development. Hypertrophy is the process whereby muscle size is increased by inflicting resistance (as with body building). In Drawing Restraint,

Barney is meeting harsh resistance in order to grow.'¹⁹

When considering Barney's 'Drawing Restraint' project, I recognized a contrast in our approaches to mark making. In the creation of the 'Painting by Eye' series I became aware that the completed works are removed from the physical act of painting. The mixing of the colour pallet and the painting with a brush is absent in the creative process. The only action imbedded in the works is the action of taking the photograph followed by the process of photographic-construction. The physical hand and body action of painting is absent.

I recognize the contrast to the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' series in which I celebrated the hand of the maker by maintaining the evidence of the brush stroke in the final work, yet in the later 'Painting by Eye' series the final works are devoid of any brush stroke. In the later series I embrace my new process of compositional construction, painting by eye not by hand.

When elaborating and questioning what defines a painting or a painter I consider several types of approaches to painting. Jackson Pollock, Yves Klein and Morris Louis highlight the different approaches artists have adopted in their painting practice.

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) applies his paint to canvases laid out on the floor allowing him closer engagement with the picture plane. He almost becomes immersed in the painting as he paints, in many instances his footprint remains evident in the completed compositions illustrating that his whole body is involved in his process of applying

¹⁹ I. Harvey (2007) 'Drawing Restraint' - Mathew Barney at The Serpentine Gallery
http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/exh_gfx_en/ART50809.html
viewed 22.9.07

paint.

Similarly Yves Klein [French Conceptual Artist, 1928-1962] adopted various unorthodox methods of painting. He directed girls to smear their body with blue paint and fling themselves on to canvas spread on the floor, in order to achieve the painted mark.

Morris Louis [American Abstract Expressionist Painter, 1912-1962] exemplifies yet another approach to painting. He is '...not so much a painter as a stainer. The colour is an integral part of the material the painter has used, the colour lives in the very weave of it' ²⁰

My contemplations about the mark-making act of painting also extend beyond the art world. I consider the commercial house painter, the kind of 'painter' who predominantly engages with paint and brushes, and the physical act of painting. Does this make them a painter? He is immersed with the medium and the physical act of the painting yet I perceive the difference lies in that he does not think like an artist. The intention is not to create a composition or to portray a conceptual story instead it is to cover the surface of a house or building.

When reflecting on the multiple approaches to a painting, I am of the belief that the 'Painting by Eye' series dissolve the boundary between painting and photography. We are living in an exciting time where boundaries and frameworks of perception are constantly being blurred and dismantled, allowing creativity to be explored without limitation. I embrace oscillating between the two mediums and processes of painting and photography, in addition I celebrate the different approaches I have adopted in the creation of my abstract compositions.

²⁰ Edward Lucie-Smith, *ibid.* p.103.

8. CONCLUSION

As my Masters research nears completion, I have reflected on the creative journey that I have taken over the past years. My conceptual and aesthetic concerns have remained consistent – I have continued to be primarily interested in using the fundamentals of geometry, mathematics and colour (and my interest in abstract imagery) in the creation of abstract compositions. These concerns have been constant, despite the shift that has occurred in my practice from painting to photographic medium.

In closing, I would like to reflect on the comment by the German abstract painter Oskar Schlemmer, who asked: 'Does painting still have a *raison d'être* in the face of photographic achievements?'²¹ I would like to emphasise that I have not abandoned my painting practice. As illustrated by the 'Colour:Form:Ratio' Dimensional Painting Series, I have embraced painting and I foresee a continuation of my endeavours in this medium. I have an appreciation for the act of painting; the process is a calming, almost meditative act and the completed paintings are a vehicle through which I can express certain observations or ideas that cannot be articulated through photography.

In the latter stages of my Masters research I embraced the photographic medium and developed a new approach to compositional construction. The camera has enabled me to capture particular experiences and observations in the brief moment they exist. The photographs themselves have proven to be an abundant source of imagery for utilisation in the creation of my art works, the completed works documenting my creative journey to museums, galleries, construction sites and other spaces around the world.

²¹ Achim Borchardt-Hume, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

I am conscious that the outcomes of my research reflect my personal interests. However, it is my hope that the 'Photography-Free Zone' and 'Construction- Abstraction' series will encourage viewers to look at their surroundings in a new way. By 'surroundings' I mean not only the two spaces I have chosen to work with – the gallery/museum and the construction site. I would like to awaken viewers to the creative and aesthetic potential of the world around them and to encourage them to see this world with new eyes.

The time taken to undertake my Masters research has been invaluable for the evolution of my practice. This period of exploration has expanded my creative parameters and has enabled me to expand my repertoire of artistic processes. For the purpose of my studies I have completed three series of work, however I am now embarking on further explorations using my process of photographic-construction and also painting. I anticipate an ongoing alternation between the two mediums, and have already identified subject matter for new works. I am inspired and confident about the work that will materialise.

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