

## **Abstraction, architecture and the everyday in the recent work of Trevor Richards, by Carolyn Barnes**

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière highlights the restricted basis of modern art, the idea of artistic independence framing all ways of making, seeing and judging art in modernity. Certainly, most theories of modernist abstraction represent art as something to be experienced in and of itself, but the idea that art should conform to a single possibility and direction collapsed decades ago. Current societies are formed around differentiation, diversification and distributed systems, people's sense of the specificity of their needs and desires increasingly driving contemporary society in contrast to the uniform, centrally-imposed standards and processes that emerged in modernity. Indeed, Trevor Richards's current work shows that contemporary abstraction involves wide-ranging renegotiation of modernist models, leading to unforeseen, particular and distinct outcomes in the work of individual artists.

In Richards's work, the mixing of abstraction, everyday objects and site-specificity has long addressed the relationship between human experience and place. Historical context is also a factor in his current work. The outward appearance of his latest paintings and sculptures is reminiscent of 1960s hard-edged abstraction. Yet closer consideration of the paintings in particular reveals a systematized approach to composition, contravening the role of formal invention as a guarantee of authenticity in modern art. The visual reference to a hard-edged aesthetic draws attention to the changing conditions for the production and interpretation of abstract art over the past four decades, contemporary abstraction being critically engaged in the world in exploring the diverse uses of aesthetic form.

Like much of Richards's work over the past ten years, his current paintings start with a grid. Each work is comprised of a network of different coloured diagonal, horizontal and vertical lines, each one unit wide. The lines are organised according to the basic stipulation that each should travel from one edge of the canvas to another, or at least appear to do so. It was artists of the neo-avant-garde who assiduously employed numerical and other conceptual sequences as generators of form, rejecting modernist values of aesthetic truth and intuitive creativity. Richards's paintings are too ebullient to be taken for artistic negation. Although they employ an approach to art-making grounded in process, the resultant works are not so systematic that they suggest some pre-determined end. Rather, Richards's paintings evoke the complexity and disorder of everyday life in which intent plays only a partial role and most intentions are only partly realised.

The paintings have a strong and immediate visual impact, but don't aspire to the formal resolution sought in 1960s hard-edged abstraction. Localised optical effects introduce inconsistencies of depth and viewpoint, suggesting that understanding space and form involves the mind as well as the anatomical machinery of vision. The optical illusion of the paintings is replaced by actual space and form in the sculptures, enabling a more straightforward spatial consciousness. Together, the paintings and sculptures explore the role of architecture in creating and informing our experience of the world. The paintings reveal the basis of architectural form in conventions of

graphic representation such as isomorphic drawing, highlighting the role of geometry as a reference point for the field. The realisation of the grids in both two and three dimensions explores the interplay of surface, space and objecthood in architecture.

Sensory experience is vital to the reception of Richards's work, its grammar of colour and form highlighting the immanence of perceptual phenomena. Recently, the sensory has returned as an important critical framework in debates that seek to understand the social world and people's place in it, challenging the previous concentration on semiotics and deconstruction. For Brian Massumi, the sensory resists interpretation in sitting outside social signification, suggesting the scope for abstraction to interrogate human experience. Richards's current work—which depends on the apprehension of similarity and difference—encourages a mode of critical visual thinking that challenges the increasingly superficial terms in which difference is represented in our globalised society of spectacle, the combination of simple formal means and optical illusion forcing the viewer to look hard at what is presented. That the spotlight is turned on architecture highlights its dual life as something that people bring into being only for it to become a primary context in which they act. Richards's paintings and sculptures, which establish a multi-level dialogue with the gallery architecture, underscore the implications of this duality in respect of art, architecture being a primary context for art's presentation.

For Richards, architecture embeds abstraction in everyday life. He wonders whether his recent works are an unconscious response to the patterned, terrazzo floors of his house in Fremantle. Previous series of works have engaged the industrial architecture and surroundings of his studios. Ben Highmore argues that all serious efforts to explain the nature of everyday life have to begin with an aesthetic foundation. Arguably, today's everyday and artistic cultures have their roots in the 1960s. The symbolic languages of consumer and media culture became increasingly pervasive during this period, eclipsing established patterns of meaning provided by the family, the nation, ethnicity, tradition and social custom. The formalist theory of modern art may have lost its currency by the early 1970s, but it has been a persistent reference point in contemporary art ever since. Similarly, although vanguard architects have long rejected the formalism of late modern architecture, its pragmatic version of truth to form and function continues to drive building design across the world.

Today, modernist aesthetics are part of daily experience, not an unfamiliar and intimidating expression of the new. In spreading throughout Australian society, the modern has become stylistically varied and impure, forging countless open associations rather than resulting in the restrictive situation its rigorous aesthetic principles initially suggested. In addressing the circulation of modernist aesthetics through art and architecture, Trevor Richards's latest works explore the formal and representational logic behind what is now ordinary; his practice of improvisation within limits uncovering the many small, aesthetic transactions that make the modern a part of lived experience in the here and now.

## Endnotes

1 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of the Aesthetic*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London and New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 20.

2 Robin Murray, Geoff Mulgan and Julie Caulier-Grice, 'How to Innovate: The tools for social innovation', The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (UK) and The Young Foundation, undated, p. 3. Available at <http://www.youngfoundation.org.uk/research/news/generating-social-innovation-how-innovate-tools-social-innovation>, accessed 16 March 2009.

3 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991.

4 Clare Hemmings, 'Invoking Affect: Cultural theory and the ontological turn', *Cultural Studies* Vol. 19, No. 5 2005, pp. 548-567.

5 Brian Massumi, 'The autonomy of affect', in P. Patton, ed., *Deleuze: a Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, pp. 217-239.

6 See Lefebvre.

7 Ben Highmore, 'Homework: Routine, social aesthetics and the ambiguity of everyday life', *Cultural Studies*, Vol.18, No. 2, 2004, p. 312.

## Biographical note

Dr Carolyn Barnes is a Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Design, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, where she is involved in a range of research projects investigating the role of art and design in public contexts. She is an assistant editor of the *International Journal of Design*, book reviews editor for *Artifact* and a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Visual Arts Practice*. Craftsman House published her monograph on the Hong Kong-Australian artist John Young in 2005.