

# Detours through abstraction

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ARTS PROJECT AUSTRALIA

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# Detours through abstraction

This exhibition presents artists who engage with aspects of abstraction, but who are not necessarily flag bearers for abstraction, certainly not with a capital 'A'. In the 21st century, few artists would present such a fervent ideology. In fact, the artists included in *Detours Through Abstraction* may see themselves first as landscape painters, storytellers, image makers, and realists—or with no categorical allegiance whatsoever—rather than abstract artists. The word 'abstraction' is fraught with problems anyway we look at it. All paintings, even those that feature things or phenomena such as figures, sunsets, nudes, trees, flowers—you name it—are abstractions. And all paintings, even the most abstract (think of a black- or red-square painting by Kazimir Malevich or a white monochrome by Robert Rauschenberg) are to some degree representational because they end up depicting space, whether that space is 'real' or not. This exhibition will underscore some of the issues that are generated by this age-old discussion. In fact, abstraction still resonates strongly with artists today because of the very dilemmas inherent in its foundation. Featured artists in this exhibition choose a variety of abstract approaches, or explore the unsteady ground on which abstraction has always found itself, even if these approaches are simply detours en route to another destination. Detours include the monochrome; distillation and reduction; pattern and decoration; text as image; abstraction and inelegance (so-called 'bad painting'); and the relationship of abstraction, mark making and depth of field in creating fictional spaces.

Tony Garifalakis creates new narratives by altering poster advertisements for movies, but his use of all-over black spraypaint that obliterates existing imagery brings to mind the monochrome paintings of the Modernist era. They also have a resemblance to de-classified top secret government documents in which black ink continues to obscure more sensitive information. Like Garifalakis, Rebecca Scibilia often begins her paintings with nods to popular culture by using images and texts (replicating DVD covers of popular Hollywood films is a frequent point of departure). However, she obscures overt references by burying her narratives under layers of paint and felt tip marker.

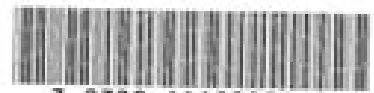
Abstraction can also be a distillation process where objects and images in the world are reduced to a formal simplicity. John Bates' landscape paintings underscore this process of abstracting reality into elegantly minimal forms. His images of open skies and geologic features such as Uluru venture into the realm of colourfield painting and polychromatic camouflage patterning—simultaneously abstract and representational. Similar to Bates' take on abstraction, Julian Martin's pastel drawings exemplify an astute formal reductionism often basing the work on real objects. Even when Martin's pastels seem to have no direct correspondence to things in the world, they still retain a representational sensibility. Like other artists in the exhibition, Martin reveals the Janus-like nature of abstraction as it forever looks backward and forward towards both the realms of the real and the imaginary.

Kitty Norster's delicate, small-scale plaid paintings point to the conundrum that lies in much of abstract art: Can abstraction be just another mode of representation? While Norster's works are patterns conjured by the artist herself, without this knowledge we might just as easily interpret them as being based upon existing plaid patterns in the world of textiles. In fact, at first glance, viewers may be duped into believing that they are looking at stretched tartan fabric that mimic the format of paintings, when actually they are paintings in themselves. Visual art that utilizes text as its central focus has always confounded critics privy to simple binary classifications like abstract versus representational. Is language an abstraction or a representation of thought and, when artists get a hold of it, might language also be used as an image, akin to concrete poetry? Boris Cipusev ventures into just this sort of terrain with his inventive use of typography and his clever juxtaposition of words that conjure new meanings and associations through an economy of means—most of his felt-tip pen text drawings feature just two words.

Kate Smith's abstractions take the heroics of painting to task through an emphasis on small-scale format, abject awkwardness, and use of found and discarded materials that are sometimes incorporated into the surfaces of her works. Abstraction is often equated with a certain sophistication and Smith does everything in her power to literally knock it off its lofty pedestal. She makes abstract paintings that look like op shop cast offs. She often treats her paintings as sculptures, leaning them against walls or arranging them on floors alongside clusters of found and crafted objects—scattered installations that spill across space like sordid messes. In terms of method, Steven Asquith's paintings might appear to have more in common with drawing as the building blocks of his compositions are marks: lines, circles, hatches, and grids laid on top of arabesque spraypainted gestures that resemble graffiti. These are cryptic works that evoke early Modernism's fascination with so-called 'primitive' (in less politically problematic terms, Non-Western) art and culture, but Asquith's imagery is wholly imaginary and non-appropriative. Asquith, like many of the artists in the exhibition, reminds us of painting's continued relevance to conjure fictional realities that exist in the netherworld between abstraction and representation.

Alex Baker





above: Rebecca Sobble *Untitled (green)* 2006  
acrylic and marker on paper 35 x 35cm

left: Tony Garfield's *Liberty* 2010  
enamel paint on offset print, 91 x 61cm  
courtesy of the artist and  
KALIMANDRAWLINS, Melbourne

front cover: Julian Martin *Untitled* 2010  
pastel on paper 38 x 28cm

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