

SHIFTING GEOMETRIES – DIMENSIONAL COLOUR IN ABSTRACT PAINTING

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Fields of interest: Painting – colour and geometry, visual perception, symmetry structures (also writing about painting from experience).

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Publications & Exhibitions: Liz Coats (2000-2001) Shifting Geometries, installation exhibition, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui; Physics Room, Christchurch; Hocken Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand. Bridie Lonie (2001) Liz Coats: Holding Patterns, In: Art New Zealand, No.98, Autumn. The Numbers Game: Art and Mathematics, curator: Zara Stanhope (2000) Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University, Wellington, NZ.

Abstract: *For a non-figurative painter, recognising the space around us as deep and seemingly chaotic and engaging with symmetry as a connective bridge within the fluid and volatile colours of a painting, dispersed and divided concepts can be brought into energetic contact without a single viewpoint or defining edge. This is all about thinking and making structurally in order to see into phenomena. Perhaps one might consider painting as a feedback loop in which the time-base is hidden. An image field is contained and assembled through progressive decisions. Evolving patterns within the colour layering process provide a stream of options, rebalancing interpretation and lessening the hold of logical determination. There could be a simple periodic system within each image; additional colours suggest further variations, while anticipation is lessened and the work becomes complete unto itself.*

I work with a combination of analytical and intuitive evaluations of paintings in progress, rather than through reconstructions from direct observation or applied theory. My work is exploratory in content within a geometric outline. I have usually worked in series around a single theme, pursuing an interest in visual experience of dimensional space in non-figurative, colour paintings. I am interested in ways that apparently disparate meshes of colour as brushmarks or washes can settle into formations which draw attention to circulation and depth within the two-dimensional painting plane.

What I experience and know in painting practice, I am interested to see described from other positions, including scientifically. I have been looking at sequences of movement in computer-generated fractals and lattices in relation to spatial aspects of layered colour and visual perception in my work. Self-organisation of cellular structures, indicative of underlying similarities between diverse and complex phenomena are of interest to me,

for instance, but I am not interested in reproducing theoretical diagrams as art, nor mapping the progress of ready-made theorems.

I understand visual experience to be a participatory event. For me, a painting is constructed in an exploratory, but undisguised and direct manner so that a viewer is able to engage with the structural rhythms and colour relations if they so desire, in a self-directed manner and without mediation through art theory or the authority of the maker.

As my experience as facilitator interacting with materials in painting has increased, the structural organisation and colour relations call attention to vibrational and cyclical characteristics in phenomena. Observing ways that connective patterns arise in painting has led me to an interest in cognitive functions. While colour provides an immediate visual effect, it is the small shifts in media and colour relations right through the decision-making process that provide expansive and experimental possibilities for the artist to develop a resonant image. I am particularly interested in making paintings that support an inwardly dimensional space which might encourage pre-language cognition and an experiential connection with viewers. I understand this sense of internal space is driven by a desire for connection. Awareness comes through linking or recognising external with internal pattern forms.

The challenge is to maintain concentration within the shifting parameters of the work in progress. Internal order is, I believe an essential ingredient for communication beyond personal gestures in painting, so that viewers can approach the work in an independent frame if they so desire, relating to the internal order as much as direct, graphic description.

I suggest that experiencing the space around us as deep and beyond direct focus and engaging with symmetry as a connective bridge within the fluid and volatile colours of a painting, dispersed and divided concepts can be brought into energetic contact without a single viewpoint or defining edge. Rather than sharpening and clarifying surface configurations as a means of gathering order and holding attention, surface layers might blur or separate as structures which lie deeper in the field come into focus, so that the painting is experienced visually as a sense of depth and flow and internal circulation. This is all about thinking and making structurally in order to see into phenomena.

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I find the neurophysiological concept that a person’s need for orientation is based on the ability of the neurological system to discern invariance in continuous transformation interesting in regard to painting. Dimensional coherence of embedded pattern structures encourages visual correspondence and internal reflection. This is naturally linked to a

viewer's knowledge of object relations and distinctions between the 'concreteness' of distinct objects and the artist's reconfiguration of an 'objectness' in painting, quite detached from representation. Such an experiential exchange which works internally rather than overwhelming a viewer, can encourage metaphoric connotations which are entirely personal.

The *Nature Paintings* of 1999 apply a simple fractal design of convex and concave shapes in rotated layers of liquid colour embedded in a soft gesso ground. The hexagonal grid evident within these images repeats lattice formations that I have been investigating for some years. There are also fractal indications at the junctures between liquid flow and material resistance within many of the colour applications. While these paintings are concerned with structural relations in painting terms, they also suggest uncontrived comparisons with growth forms in nature.

If colour in light is a keen measure of colour quality and spatial value, supporting vitality in the pigment colours necessitates careful differentiation between visually inert paint surfaces and colour in paint form that will ensure the dimensional impact of the image. Colour pigments contain a dimensional aspect within their light refraction and density. Colours are also changeable in relation to each other on a paint surface, so that careful attention to overlaps and variations in coverage and degrees of transparency can be seen to effect depth within the field. I have found symmetry to provide a certain expansiveness and steadiness to the fluid effects of colours in lateral, layered and depth applications, suggesting more an appearance of inclusiveness than rigidity.

I usually mix powder or liquid pigments with water-soluble binders which are flexible in dilution, absorption and management of drying time, so that applications occur in a progressive and visible manner. Drying time in relation to material resistance determines the physical texture. An appearance of depth within the plane does have a physical base and does not occur through simulation. A colour is applied across the whole plane, while organisation varies from layer to layer. These lattices stabilise and balance random qualities which arise within the extended, fluid and 'accidental' colour interactions. Structurally complex images can emerge which are in fact combinations of individually simple applications.

I have described the process, thus: 'Layers of colour are worked across each other to touch off 'disorder' and to generate structural separation within their associations. There are points of meeting which are variable within each layer. When it happens that two or more layers (each of which have been developed independently through assessment of the whole field) meet within the field, that indicates the beginning of an image formation. The whole field remains co-joined with these points of congregation and this geometry of symmetry, while relative to the frame, repeats within and beyond the frame, creating a flexible stability. This occurrence of meeting is something I observe during the initial process and is an indication that I have found an image which may become a series of paintings.'

Symmetric organisation can also create a bridge between formal geometries and organic allusions. I am interested in geometric analyses of structures innature, but similarities to natural forms in these paintings are developed with a logic that is independent of those visual comparisons. In the *Morphic paintings*, for instance, the symmetry mirrors and stabilises divergent layers and supports circularity within the field.

Because symmetry is thought to lead to rigid outcomes it has been unfashionable in painting. I think this concern has been carried forward from the long tradition of reproductive and scenic imagery in oil painting; in spatial terms because of the need for numerous points of focus for subject figures within the field and where figurative details refer indirectly to symbolic and narrative aspects. Symmetry in painting is also sometimes understood as a sign of instability in the maker and a need for control. My experience suggests that the more a painter is concerned with analyses of vision and relates as a facilitator to progressive developments in the colour field, such prohibitions become irrelevant.

There is potential for disorientation in complex spatial relationships with colours, but if the maker attends to individual qualities of each colour and connective visual logic through the layering, this will avoid chaotic dispersion. In early modernist painting, spatial co-ordination of colour was described in detail by the painter Cezanne, at a crossroad between scenic painting and expression of an holistic visual field. The sustained intensity of his vision, particularly in the late landscapes, shows a concentric ordering of brushmarks with direct visual comparison of the scene before him.

I am strongly attracted to qualities of ambiguity and visual shift within regular and repetitive forms, conferring with a long-term interest in the projective nature of seeing and the regular, recurrent pulse which generates and sustains everything. The Canopy #2 set of panels contain pentagonal images that are derived from computer-simulated Penrose clusters, originally made to demonstrate sequential change in the fabric of crystalline alloys where a definitive form could not be identified. These images are interesting to me because they identify repeating sequences of change in a particular geometric shape. The pentagon image is identified through patterns of circularity of its parts in motion rather than by a single, static shape. In my work, overlaying several images in sequence, the symmetry component in the colour relations brought these pentagonal shapes into close visual correspondence with appearances in nature.

While working with these pentagon images I was frequently drawn to the appearance of the sky. I could imagine in the continuous colour shifts of the day and cloud formations, the pentagonal organisation of these paintings. When shifts in habitual visual references are unanticipated, our analytical functions can be circumvented and associations are reconfigured. One can be looking at something quite ordinary, and the view is somehow subverted; our centre of vision is dislodged and there is no fixed point within a visual frame. I am suggesting that an experiential connection is clearer if we consider the subject matter – amongst a profusion of appearances – to be in essence ungraspable. Moreover this flux of possibilities surrounds us and is within us.