Design Emergence: Beyond Modernist Orthodoxies in Colour/Form Painting

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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June 2006
Signed statement of originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, it incorporates no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

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Abstract

Through this research project I explore the operations of formalist abstraction, its visual aesthetic and its potential for communicating content and meaning for the viewer. Using the device of colour/form painting on shaped MDF board, I investigate the functional dynamic that exists between myself as artist and the work which I produce. Working with a geometric form, which I refer to as the base module, I engage in a process of design emergence which utilizes both my intuitive and cognitive faculties. This process involves a mass production of the base module, followed by the configuration of the resulting components into a number of design assemblages. As I work with the formal aesthetics of each configuration and its respective surface patterning, the visual properties of the base module change and emerge as a new design format.

Working within the parameters of colour/form painting, I make reference to basic modernist orthodoxies such as flatness, materiality, the cumulative grid and pictorial immediacy. In querying how each of these applies to my work, I succeed in circumventing their modernist prescriptions and attempt to show how they can function successfully in a postmodern conception of formalist abstraction. Basic to this inquiry is an assessment of Clement Greenberg’s formalist aesthetic, especially in relation to the form/content debate and the subjectivity of aesthetic judgement.

My references to the artists working in this field draw from those who pioneered colour/form painting in the modernist tradition, such as Ellsworth Kelly and Bridget Riley; those who took formalism into its conceptual stage, such as Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner; and those who have used formalist, conceptual and theatrical elements to
produce postmodern works for contemporary audiences, such as Sarah Morris and Matthew Ritchie.

The two key factors operating throughout the design assemblages are firstly, the theories related to design emergence and, secondly, the theatrical mediation of work which, as formalist abstraction, I propose still maintains some aspects of modernist immediacy. The design assemblages, when viewed sequentially, illustrate the phenomenon of design emergence. The gallery space, in relation to the shaped modules and their patterned surfaces, allows for a 'mediated immediacy' that connects Fried's notion of the theatrical with the self-referential quality of the formalist aesthetic.
Acknowledgements

I acknowledge and thank those who have journeyed with me throughout the various stages of this project.

As my supervisor, Paul Zika has been not only a valued mentor but also a source of encouragement and wisdom.

As friends who have provided ongoing affirmation, Brigita Ozolins and Patricia Scott have generously shared their expertise in the editing and formatting of this exegesis.

Thanks also to Phillip Blacklow for his expert assistance in the workshop during these last four years.

I count myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with my postgraduate colleagues; my thanks to them for their friendship and collegiality.

A final acknowledgement must be made to Dr. Ross Gibson who, during my first critique presentation in June 2004, introduced me to the idea of emergence theory.
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