

Design Emergence: Beyond Modernist Orthodoxies in Colour/Form Painting

by

Ona Kaukenas

Diploma of Teaching (Secondary), Tasmanian College of Advanced
Education

Bachelor of Education (In-service), South Australian College of Advanced
Education

Bachelor of Theology, Yarra Theological Union (Melbourne University)

Graduate Diploma of Ministry Studies, Melbourne College of Divinity
(Melbourne University)

Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours), University of Tasmania

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

University of Tasmania

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.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ona Kaukenas', written in a cursive style.

Ona Kaukenas

Signed statement of authority of access to copying

This thesis may be made available for loan and limited copying in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

Ona Kaukenas

Ona Kaukenas

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.

Contents

Part One: The Description of the Project

Introduction	01
Statement of Aims.....	07
Earlier Work.....	10
The Parameters of the Project.....	15
Summary of Central Argument	21

Part Two: The Context of the Project

1. The Bauhaus Aesthetic	24
2. The Greenberg Formalist Aesthetic	28
Bridget Riley and Sarah Morris	33
3. The Theatrical Aesthetic (cf. Michael Fried)	39
Ellsworth Kelly and Mel Bochner.....	45
4. Working with, and in, the Gallery Space.....	50
Sol LeWitt and Matthew Ritchie.....	57
5. Summary of the Contextual Framework	62

Part three: The Development of the Project

1. The Design Process: Emergence Theory	66
2. Construction Phase: Modules and Mass Production	74
3. Final Outcomes: Repetition, Pattern and Decoration	80
4. Summary of the Development of Individual Works	81

Part Four: Conclusion

Conclusion.....	89
-----------------	----

Appendices

Appendix One: Bibliography.....	95
Appendix Two: List of Illustrations	101
Appendix Three: Curriculum Vitae	104
Appendix Four: Plimsoll Gallery Floor Plan.....	105