

In Search Of The Finished Painting

The paintings of Melbourne-based abstract artist Robert Hirschmann are action voyages aided by his love of jazz music and the magic of paint. Each of his works is a challenge in seeing just how far he is able to push the process of painting.

By Roger Taylor

In setting the scene for Post-War art in America, art critic Clement Greenberg wrote in 1939, "it has been in search of the absolute that the avant-garde has arrived at 'abstract' or 'non-objective' art." This "abstract" or "non-objective" art of which he spoke emerged in New York in the early 1940s, and by the end of the decade the various manifestations of Abstract Expressionism, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, de Kooning, and Still had been unified under the banner of the New York School to become the new avant-garde. According to Greenberg, art historical styles in painting had, since the beginning of the 19th century, tended to hold their positions of leadership for an average of 10 to 15 years. Visiting Australia in 1968 to deliver the inaugural Power Lecture, Greenberg said, "the case for Abstract Expressionism does more than bear out this average; it exceeds it, and would go to show that art actually moved and changed more closely over the last 30 years than in the 100 years previous."

A year earlier the exhibition *Two Decades of American Painting* had come to Australia, providing local audiences their first encounter with Abstract Expressionism.

The exhibition confirmed what most people already knew: The movement had been dominating avant-garde painting for the past 20 years, to an even greater extent than Cubism had done in the 1920s. Yet, in Australia itself, it was only one year earlier that a gallery dedicating itself to exhibiting this style of art had been launched. Central Street Gallery was established in

Sydney, around a group of young artists who had recently returned from London or New York and were working with a local form of hard-edge painting, influenced by the new wave of Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, and Ellsworth Kelly.

It was in keeping with the powerful American critics Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, who had conceived the terms

"American-type" and "action" painting to champion the Abstract Expressionism of Newman, Rothko, de Kooning, Hofmann, and Still, that local critic Terry Smith coined the phrase "Central Street-type" painting, basing it on the importance of the Gallery in developing the style. For Smith it was significant that, in 1968, the inaugural exhibition, *The Field*, at the new National Gallery of Victoria that color field or hard-edge abstraction had permeated Australian art in its search for the avant-garde, capturing a significant but transient moment in Australian art.

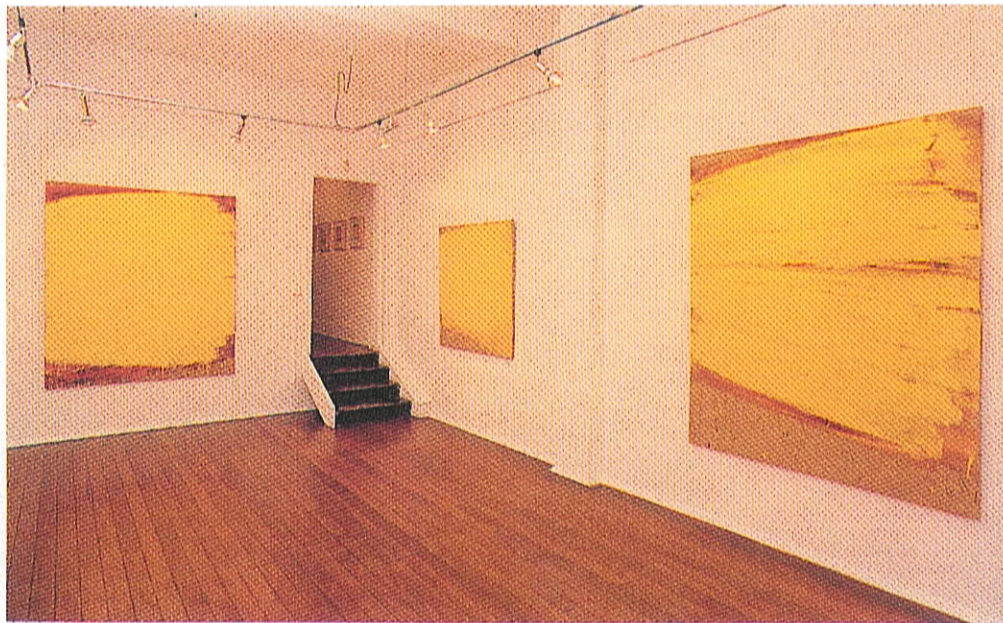
Of the 40 artists included in *The Field*, 16 had previously exhibited at Central Street. Art historian Bernard Smith has claimed that *The Field* gave the widest possible publicity to the new style and was a courageous gesture. But it had side affects,



Robert Hirschmann, *Blue Trane*, 2000, oil and pigment on linen, 213.5 x 183 cm. Private collection, Melbourne. Courtesy of Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art, Melbourne.

it forced the pace. Smith maintained that in America, where it had originated, the emergence of color field painting was a much slower process, and many of the artists responsible had been painting for over a quarter of a century. In Australia, the artists were much younger, and had the disadvantage of being carriers rather than originators of the style. Accordingly, in the matter of quality, the exhibition did not meet the expectations of either the participating artists or the public. The best of the painters in the exhibition sensed that their art was not unique, but that it settled too often for easy solutions to tough problems and so *The Field* served not to begin a new movement, but to fragment the one that had only been in existence for a short period of time.

With obvious exceptions, notably Robert Hunter and Tony Tuckson, this rupture would last 20 years before a significant body of abstract work would appear within the milieu of younger artists in Australia emerging from the so-called "return to painting" of the 1980s. A recent survey of contemporary abstraction, *On the brink: Abstraction of the 90s*, staged at the Museum of Modern Art at Heide, suggests that the rekindling of interest in painting abstract



Robert Hirschmann, *Southern Accents Exhibition* (installation view), 1999, King Street Gallery, Sydney.

pictures had its genesis in 1989, and that, for the past 11 years, a group of dedicated senior, mid-career, and younger Australian artists have worked steadfastly to diminish the possibility of narrative content in their works, instead allowing their work to variously function as contemplations of color, texture, and form.

Although the exhibition included works by more established artists such as Angela Brennan, Richard Larter, Robert Owen, Robert Rooney, and Melinda Harper, one of the artists to stand out in

the exhibition was also one of the youngest: Melbourne-based painter Robert Hirschmann. The thick textured surface of his pulsating *Mountain View* (1999) reverberated with all the hallmarks of the painterly Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s, yet Hirschmann's painting also revealed a journey of a different kind. The painting took its title from the rugged countryside the artist had been visiting on a regular basis, thus revealing landscape tendencies Hirschmann had long incorporated into his work.

Born in 1968, Hirschmann was still at high school in South Australia when he encountered a book that would change his life, James Lord's *A Giacometti Portrait*. Lord's book details his sittings over an 18-day period while his friend, the sculptor Alberto Giacometti, did his portrait in oil. Early in the book, Giacometti claims "the more one works on a picture, the more impossible it becomes to finish it." This statement becomes the essence of the book, an essence which Hirschmann was to take into his own art. "It was through reading that book that I came to understand the process of painting," he says. "You don't just paint a picture. You go through a process, you have a relationship with the picture that is at once exciting but also challenging. My first pictures were figurative pictures, expressionistic figures which had their genesis in Lord's book. They were all about the process of dealing with paint, scrubbing it off, then repainting. I didn't know Giacometti as a sculptor then, I knew him as a painter."

Hirschmann completed his studies at the Liverpool College of TAFE in Sydney in 1988, and took up residence in Papua New Guinea for 12 months, where his paintings became very colorful and depicted the lush landscape which he found himself surrounded by. "To paint a picture you hold an image," Hirschmann says. "If you're lucky you become that image,



Robert Hirschmann, *K's Hope*, 1999, oil on linen, 122 x 122 cm. Private collection, Sydney. Courtesy of King Street Gallery, Sydney.

that's what I was dealing with. I visited very remote areas where white people were unknown. That power and strength of everyday life in New Guinea was what I brought back with me. When I returned to Australia I was looking at the Australian landscape, using it to translate that power and strength I'd found in New Guinea." Hirschmann's paintings from this period all deal with the landscape seen not from a horizontal, but a vertical perspective, expressed in somber, muted colors, with a sense of abstraction already beginning to impregnate the work.

By 1992, a major shift had taken place in Hirschmann's life. He had completed his studies at the National Art School in East Sydney and moved to the rural environs of Wedderburn, outside of Sydney, resulting in a major change in his palette. Choosing red to express himself, Hirschmann began to 'contain' the landscape, representing it as an abstracted red square of both horizontals and verticals contained by the picture frame. "The verticals turned into a square and the landscape was contained within that square," Hirschmann says. "The square was a device to hold that image. Then, in 1993, I traveled to New York, looking at the works of Matisse, Agnes Martin, Morandi, and Basquiat. When I returned to Australia I kept pursuing the red, making big red paintings for my next exhibition. A month before the exhibition I painted all the paintings out with white. I obliterated them all, just leaving the red at the edges. With just the red, the paintings were abstracted landscapes, but once the white went over the top they became purely abstract pictures. Suddenly I was dealing solely with paint and the process of painting that Giacometti had talked about."

Reaching his zenith with *Great White Australian Dream* (1997), Hirschmann inverted what he saw as landscape into abstract planes of paint. "There was an element of, not hiding, but containing the image, putting a sheet over it," he says. "I was making references to landscape, to dust, remembering as a child driving through the outback, seeing dust cover everything. But I was also grappling with pictorial elements. The brushstrokes were horizontal lines, all-over horizontal lines which

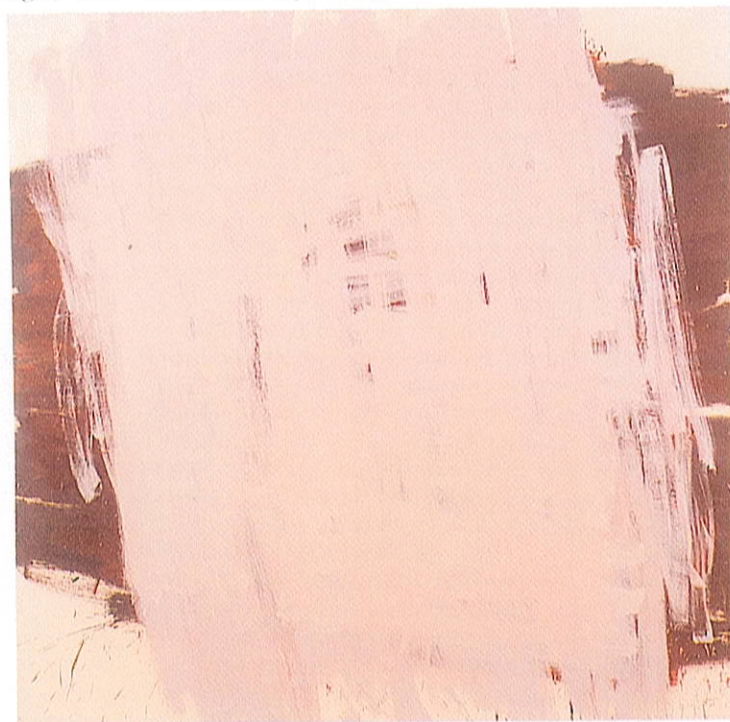


Robert Hirschmann, *Envy*, 1999, oil on canvas, 136 x 132 cm. Private collection, Sydney. Courtesy of King Street Gallery, Sydney.

did reference the horizon line. I was creating the horizon line, not as a line, but as a mass, expanding the horizon line as

landscape, but also as an abstract image."

Continuing this theme into his next body of work, Hirschmann relocated to Melbourne at the beginning of 1998 and the following year mounted his most successful exhibition to date, *Southern Accents*, at Sydney's King Street Gallery. Yellow replaced red as the preponderant color in the artist's palette, although a number of works in the exhibition did still contain red under-painting, visible at the bare edges of the pictures. "Those edges were like the edges of a page, an allowance for the viewer to get in behind the picture if you like," Hirschmann says. The pre-eminent work in the exhibition, however, was *K's Hope* (1999), a color field of yellow paint suggesting that Hirschmann had now achieved his goal of a purely abstract picture. Yet the horizontal brush strokes remained obvious and the fact that the top and bottom of



Robert Hirschmann, *Great White Australian Dream*, 1997, oil on canvas, 282 x 282 cm. Private collection, Sydney. Courtesy of King Street Gallery, Sydney.

the linen remained bare indicated that the artist still grappled with issues of landscape. "It was still a square, contained by the canvas," Hirschmann says. "I was pushing the painting outside the boundaries of the square as a visual image, but it was still a frame."

His Sydney success quickly brought Hirschmann the realization that he needed to mutate his style if he were to perpetuate the breakthroughs he had made since his move to Melbourne. His cold inner-city Brunswick studio had provided him the optimal location to create such breakthroughs; now his challenge was to maintain his standing at the forefront of contemporary abstraction in Australian painting. "I became aware that I needed to break up the picture space I had created in those yellow paintings," Hirschmann says. "I had some green paint lying around the studio, so for my next painting, *Envy* (1999), I avoided brushes because I knew that using brushes would just push the paint across the surface field. Instead I used my hands to push wet paint into wet paint. It was a very spontaneous, brief action and I left it at that." Although *Envy* did comprise some of what had become Hirschmann's signature image, the painted square contained within the field of the canvas, it differed from his previous work on many levels. It presented itself as a purely abstract picture with its thick, textured, painterly surface to be read entirely in terms of color, texture, and form. The emphasis had shifted to the sheer physical *paint*.

Envy was the painting which led the artist into his most recent body of work, a monumental series of large, colorful, expressionistic, and painterly canvases [to be shown at Melbourne's Span Galleries in November]. It is no coincidence that a number of the paintings are titled after the polyphonic and, in some ways, discordant music of jazz legend John Coltrane, since these were the discordant sounds Hirschmann had blaring in his studio during the creation of master-works such as *Blue Trane* (2000), "*Ascension*" *Part I* (2000), and "*Ascension*" *Part II* (2000). These works represent a polyphony of paint, and it is this, together with their jazz-based titles, that encourages positive comparisons with the so-called American action painting of the 1950s and the 1960s, the time when avant-garde moments in jazz were synchronous with avant-garde moments in art. For 35 years, Coltrane's "Ascension" has stood as a monument, either as the supreme, ecstatic statement of his musical liberation or as his abandonment of all jazz tradi-



Robert Hirschmann, "*Ascension*" *Part II*, 2000, oil and pigment on linen, 213.5 x 183 cm. Lavery Collection, Sydney. Courtesy of Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art, Melbourne.

tion. The same could now be said of Hirschmann's art.

Championing the action painting of Hofmann and de Kooning in 1952, Rosenberg wrote, "Art as action rests on the enormous assumption that the artist accepts as real only that which he is in the process of creating." For Hirschmann, this is now the reality of his *oeuvre*, paint is now free to do anything it wants, the paintings themselves cry out with the manic exigency of paint on their abandoned surfaces. "These paintings have no direct reference to any particular artist," Hirschmann says. "They are simply my response to a challenge to go somewhere I'd never been before. I was dealing with stuff called paint, and whatever paint was available I painted with. I was enjoying paint and seeing how far I could push it."

Although "*Ascension*" *Part I* and "*Ascension*" *Part II* stand as two of the rawest and most coercive abstractions executed in recent Australian contemporary art, it is the ancillary sparseness and sheer beauty of *Blue Trane* (2000), which represents Hirschmann's ultimate accomplish-

ment on his journey thus far. "That painting splintered and evolved over a long period of time," he says. "There was real spontaneity in the large brush and broom marks which were about strength and boldness. I wasn't particularly aware of color as I was doing it. It was only at the end that I became aware of the variety of color that I'd been working with. You don't know what's going to happen when you put wet paint into wet paint. I only look at the structure, at the fragmentation, which can be related to the cacophony of Coltrane and the cacophony of paint. The drips are the nature of the process of painting, paint falls, paint drips. They are not deliberate drips. They are just part of the process of painting. I want the audience to be aware of that process and the unanswered questions it raises. It's not a finished painting, it never is." Δ

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