

Close Window

John Peart (born Brisbane 1945), is one of Australia's more prominent abstract painters working today. He first achieved recognition through The Field exhibition of 1968, the National Gallery of Victoria's landmark survey exhibition of Colour Field painting and geometric abstraction in Australia. He has shown regularly at Watters Gallery in Sydney and over the years the formalistic changes in his work have been uncompromising in their intent while avoiding any identifiable style. He has been awarded numerous prizes and is represented in all State and National collections. In 1997 he won the Wynne Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The Campbelltown Arts Centre mounted a travelling exhibition covering four decades of his painting in 2006, the first comprehensive survey of his work.

He was interviewed by Harvey Shields at Watters Gallery during his exhibition Themes & Variations in September, 2007.

Harvey Shields: Your vision seems to be about vision itself, the visual experience, the way we see and how we interpret what we see?

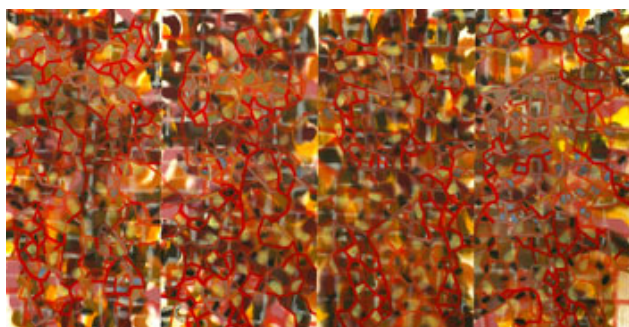
John Peart: Well I guess I was influenced by that way of thinking, that modernist concept of reducing art to its essentials, but of course it is also about the act of painting. Sometimes it is hard to see what you are doing while you are doing it. While you are involved in the process... it tends to be more subjective, active and subjective, but of course when you get some distance from it, you tend to be more objective, not absolutely, but more objective and reflective. Sometimes you feel like you are seeing it in a new way, so there is always the possibility of seeing something afresh.

HS: How do you keep that freshness going? Is it a matter of taking time out to look at other work?

JP: Of course I'm influenced by things I see around me, and other people's work, but I don't consciously work from that. It kind of goes into a central account...

HS: ...a memory bank...

JP: ...then it is withdrawn and spent in various ways.



Hot Iron Red II 2007
Polymer emulsion on canvas
174 x 332 cm
[click on image to enlarge](#)

HS: This body of work seems to be more calligraphic; you seem to be going back to ideas in your early work.

JP: I felt a real connection with the sixties when I was working on these canvases because I was staining the canvas and working horizontally, both of which I was doing in the sixties and seventies.

HS: So you are combining the Morris Louis staining with a superimposed drawing?

JP: Yeah.

HS: Is the drawing done horizontally also?

JP: 90% of this painting was done horizontally although when I superimposed a grid or a web, like the one we are looking at now (Hot Iron Red II) that was done vertically. But the panels were not painted with any plan of how they were to be assembled, that's something I kept to the very end.

HS: So you are painting the panels separately?

JP: Yes, but in series of four.

HS: Do you keep the same palette going through them all?

JP: Yeah, I keep the same colours for each set of four.



Brice Marden
Untitled # 3 1986-87
Oil on linen 182.9 x 147.3 cm
Agnes Gund Collection
© 2006 Brice Marden/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

HS: They are incredibly consistent considering they have been painted separately. When it all comes together it just looks like one painting.

JP: Yes, well I think the idea was to have the unity and the separateness pulling in different directions creating a tension. You can see where the joins are and there are no deliberate connections across the joins, so that creates a discontinuity.

HS: Well that was something I was wondering about, the function of the panels. There is a separateness there but then the whole thing is integrated by the eye as one painting.

JP: I think that is because of the consistency of the process I follow, but there are variations. You will notice shifts in density or subtle changes in character from one panel to the other.

HS: So is that the endgame, to arrive at that web?

JP: Well the web wasn't the aim in the beginning. The aim is nearly always to arrive at something with an economy of means. Coming back to this painting Hot Iron Red II, the first stage of the painting was much more amorphous than any of the others. In all the other paintings I created separate zones of colour, fairly clearly defined, but with this painting I tilted the canvas while the paint was wet and I had a lot of colour running into one another. It became a cloudy amorphous space but with the odd high definition area still remaining. I tended to work wet in wet most of the time.

HS: On raw canvas?

JP: Yeah, so if one layer dried I would rewet it for the next layer, so I wasn't really looking for hard-edged forms. Then I came back on top of that amorphousness and established a network of lines, which I fiddled and worked at quite a lot. I changed some of the lines to make them fall back into the painting so that there is more push and pull on the lines themselves.

HS: When I first saw Hot Iron Red II I thought of Brice Marden's calligraphic paintings where in some lines he drops out some of the tone, which pushes the lines back, then he adds highlights to others to bring them forward, creating a spatial effect.

JP: Yeah. I guess because that painting was so different to the others I didn't really know if it was going to hang in the show - if it was going to be up to scratch. I felt like I was fussing with it whereas with the others I was determined not to fiddle but to have a more robust kind of attack. Something different happened with this one, I was working away on these fairly narrow lines, adjusting and changing, so it became something much more intimate. I guess one shouldn't judge the kind of activity when you are doing it, I guess the secret is to just do it and see, and you can judge it later.

HS: Well it can lose that spontaneity and become over worked.

JP: I think the difference in the process was that the painting drew me in; I resisted to a certain extent because I didn't really want to fiddle with it, but it was pulling me in and I was responding to what was there, so I was compelled to make the changes.

HS: What was the initial motivation for the square panel works?

JP: They came from using square panels as palettes. Once they had colour on them, once they'd reached a certain stage of interest to me, I put them aside and let them accumulate. Then I could rediscover them later. In other words I wanted that detachment of a found object. You asked about freshness of vision earlier, well I think that is related to the element of

surprise. I find it hard to separate the two, freshness and surprise, they seem to go together and one has to devise strategies to allow for surprise, something I seem to have a yen for.

I am attracted to the process of cropping in painting also. In the seventies I was influenced by Pollock and the Colour Field painters who were working on a big scale and cropping, that is, not necessarily accepting the initial expanse – deciding at a later stage where the edges will be. I've done that too at times and I think it can be a revelation, another way of discovering what's there. I think sculptors have always been open to chopping off parts or adding...

HS: Well this is another function of the panel isn't it because it does truncate or cut off in the way a lot of modernist sculptors work. It changes the space. What you have in that painting (Hot Iron Red II) is a juxtaposition of the constructed and the amorphous. It's not a matter of blending, it is just like they are there, side by side; I can't quite explain it...

JP: The thing about cropping, and I haven't done it recently, it is one way of freeing up the painting process, because you don't paint towards an end product. You can freewheel and improvise. I think the same goes for working on these panels because I'm not sure what role each panel is going to play. That is something for later.

HS: With present day media and video, do you think there is a young audience for painting?

JP: I don't feel now there is as much hostility towards painting as there was in the seventies. When conceptual video and performance artists felt they had discovered a new art form, there was quite a knee jerk reaction against contemporary painting. The death of painting was discussed a lot more then than it is these days.

There may be an indifference towards painting in some curatorial and critical areas, but I don't think it is quite written off, it is accepted as one art form among many.

HS: In 1967 the exhibition Two Decades of American Painting came to Sydney and caused quite a stir among Australian abstractionists. They understood they were experiencing something new and important. With the pluralism that is happening now do you think painting will have that status ever again?

JP: Painting that was part of an avant-garde had a different feel, a different look compared to painting that was made after the era of the avant-garde. I'm not sure there is such a thing as an avant-garde anymore.

HS: Well are we in a period of reflection and consolidation?

JP: I guess recycling is fashionable. What people find interesting aesthetically is partly discovering something brand new and partly rediscovering something old. The old becomes the new. It's all part of the mix these days. The whole historic process of the avant-garde depended on a mainstream. You cannot have an avant-garde without a mainstream. I see modernism, mainstream and avant-gardism as all part of the same deal, but it doesn't have that much currency nowadays.

I don't find it very rewarding to see myself in an historical context. I think it is partly because the template of the mainstream and the avant-garde is not there, and so it is meaningless to imagine how one may be contributing to a linear historical process. I value the unpredictable, so I just need a framework in which the unpredictable can work. So it's very hard to locate myself. I couldn't make these works without the history of painting, but in terms of placing myself within it, I don't think it's my job.



Raoul's Dream 2007
Polymer emulsion on canvas
174 x 332 cm
[click on image to enlarge](#)

HS: I'm not comparing your paintings to his, but I think Jules Olitski was a similar painter to you in that he was always pushing the parameters.

JP: I don't think the emphasis is on consistency, or having a product or a signature style. I find all that too restricting. People who are familiar with my work can often identify something of me in the differences, but it's very hard for, say, the average collector, or someone at an art auction or even most curators, to be able to follow all the differences in my work.

HS: When I saw your retrospective at the Campbelltown Art Centre, which represented forty years of painting, I thought it hung very well together, there was nothing that jarred.

JP: Yes, there were some big changes, but it was all within the preoccupation of the pictorial I suppose. With the licence or leeway I've given myself I should be thankful there's even a market for my work. Also... being with a gallery where there is no pressure to produce a saleable product has helped a lot.

HS: Well yes, you have been with the Watters Gallery now for a long time. I think you were among the first artists to show here weren't you?

JP: Yes they had work of mine in stock from close to the very beginning. Because I was so young I wasn't ready to exhibit for a couple of years after they opened but Frank kept the odd painting they were willing to have in the stockroom. I have been with Watters since 1964.

HS: Then you went to England; you took over Paul Selwood's studio didn't you?

JP: Yes it was in Wiltshire. He was renting an old farmhouse with stables out the back, it was idyllic. It was called Watersmeet. There were two streams, which met behind the house, with swans coming and going. It was a great environment to live and work for about five years.

HS: Are there many paintings that exist from that period?

JP: Yeah, some were large scale. I used to send them back to Australia.

HS: When you look back over the periods do you think there were periods that were more successful than others?

JP: You are bound to have your ups and downs. There are a few paintings over the years, which I probably shouldn't have shown. There have been a couple of times after major shocks to the system when I may not have been very focused, but I kept working through those periods, out of doggedness or determination. It probably served its purpose as therapy or whatever. Most of those works have been destroyed or painted over

HS: So is maturity a good thing?

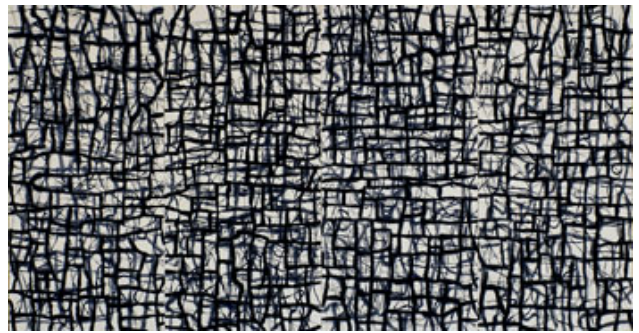
JP: Well you want to see the present in a positive light. I think absorption in the work is the key really. Of course one can become distracted from that, get preoccupied with the end result because you want the best work for an exhibition or just to hang on the wall. I'm interested in the relationship between absorption in the act and concern about the finished product.

HS: Looking at this work Wedderburn Moment, it came out well.

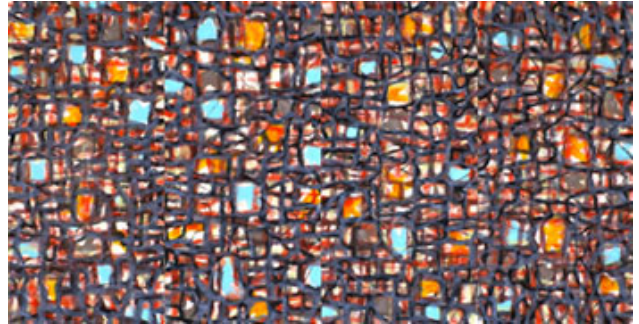
JP: Most of the stages of working on these canvases involved wet into wet. With Wedderburn Moment I started off painting directly onto a dry canvas, then for the next stage I wet the canvas with a very diluted white, then painted into that. The final layer was painted onto wet as well.

HS: With the four panels that make up the painting, the continuity is interrupted at each division and yet one sees it as one continuous work.

JP: You probably notice that the lines tend to not stop and start except at the edges. I think that gives a uniqueness to the join. Working on the panels separately you are more inclined to take risks, try something out and see how it goes.



Wedderburn Moment 2007
Polymer emulsion on canvas
174 x 332 cm
[click on image to enlarge](#)



Bhav 2007
Polymer emulsion on canvas
174 x 332 cm
[click on image to enlarge](#)

HS: You are not thinking compositionally the whole time.

JP: No, I am trying to avoid preconceptions of composition and see it simply as pictorial energy. Because I work horizontally I tend to move around each separate panel while painting, so there is no assumption about which is top or bottom. I'm not preoccupied with asking myself if it is a good composition. For a work like this it is about rhythm, density and layering, and that applies to Bhav as well.

HS: Well these two works Wedderburn Moment and Bhav relate very well to each other. Bhav is like a coloured version of Wedderburn Moment.

JP: I guess one of the things I was trying to do, using the network or grid, was to suggest a ground through which you can glimpse layers beyond. In earlier works I resorted to more dense layering which, although superimposed, would act illusionistically as a ground. I wanted these recent paintings to be more direct.

HS: But you've kept the freshness, you've carried it through to these works.

JP: I guess what I was trying to achieve with those superimposed grounds was an illusion of transparency. So that was something I had in the back of my mind to suggest figure and ground without it becoming dense and opaque.

It does compare to the earlier paintings where I evoked figures and grounds, but with Bhav, the way the windows of colours are isolated by the grid is much more spontaneous. With the earlier works I tended to paint around shapes more deliberately, here every stage is evident; there is not much that is hidden.

Editor's note: The work of Ian Fairweather can be found in many national collections in Australia. Here is [Epiphany](#) from the Queensland Art Gallery collection.

HS: Wedderburn Moment has a strong sense of Ian Fairweather about it.

JP: Fairweather was a major influence. Those early influences come to the fore every now and then. They come into focus.

HS: Did you actually meet him?

JP: Yeah, I did.

HS: When he was living on Bribie Island?

JP: Yes, he wasn't very well when I met him. He had a few paintings lying around but I don't think he produced much around that time. He had just come out of hospital and the local Council had built him a concrete bunker to replace his grass hut. I turned up with Roy Churcher who was living in Brisbane at the time; he knew Ian and introduced me. Ian was sitting on his little verandah with a crate of warm beer and a carton of paperback detective stories; I guess he was just recuperating after his time in hospital

HS: Did you talk about the work at all?

JP: No, he talked about what had happened with the Council and the new building. Apparently his old hut was rat infested, so the Council thought it would be healthier for him to have this concrete bunker. It was a bit characterless and he didn't really look at home in it. He was very withdrawn and we didn't want to tax his energies and stay too long.

HS: But you knew of his reputation?

JP: Oh yes, if I'd had the chance there would have been a lot to talk about...I just appreciated the fact that I got to meet him.

HS: This was in the early seventies?

JP: Yes, he died in 1974. It would have been nice to have met him at the height of his powers, when he was the great adventurer. Every now and then I think his influence becomes really obvious in my work. The same with Paul Klee who was also a very early influence. Whenever you see a playfulness, in the use of line, or even squares and rectangles of colour in my work, there is likely to be a connection with Paul Klee. Pollock is another major influence. When there is a tendency to an all-overness it probably relates to Pollock, although I am always trying to find ways to create differences and divisions in order to counteract that.

HS: Are you specifically talking about his drip paintings?

JP: They are the ones that impress me the most. The fact that he didn't actually touch the canvas; the way paint traveled through the air, enabled him to shed a lot of art baggage. There is a flux of energy in the work that intrigued me when I was younger and still does. I think it influenced me to see painting as energy, as pictorial energy whatever form it may take. I guess that's what unifies for me all the changes in my work, seeing the work as pictorial energy.

HS: With this series do you see a direct link back to Pollock?

JP: Well I've done a bit of dripping and pouring in the past and again with these recent works. I mixed up a lot of acrylic paints in squeeze bottles with spouts. So all of these big canvases started with paint poured and squeezed out of those bottles, so I guess that is the connection with the Pollock technique - the paint moved through the air before it hit the canvas.

HS: So then you work back into the canvas with the brush?

JP: The brush is one way of trying to make some sense of what happened in the first, more spontaneous stage.

HS: I guess painters try different things just to break the routine of a particular technique.

JP: I guess if we were artisans we would be more inclined to perfect our techniques, and end up with a more polished product, but I prefer a raw, slightly undigested look to the thing.

In order to keep interested I devise strategies and games that allow for an element of surprise. I guess that is part of the management or the practice, to leave room for that.

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TOP