

STEPHEN BRAM

PERSPECTIVE PAINTINGS

1987-2023

3 June – 29 July 2023

Australia's relationship with abstraction is an awkward account – selective acceptance from the 1950s, ideological conflict, declarative claims and bemusement with *The Field* exhibition.¹ The strident division between abstraction and figuration left its historical mark. A group named *Sydney 9* formed in 1960 and all were abstractionists, including Robert Klippel and Clement Meadmore amongst others. It was an immediate response to Melbourne's *Antipodeans* and their exhibition – all seven artists were figurative. Robert Hughes championed the former, Bernard Smith the latter.²

Within the space of 10 years Melbourne went from the *Antipodeans*' scrap to the opening of the new National Gallery of Victoria on St Kilda Road with *The Field*, the most radical and contemporary exhibition it had ever undertaken. Robert Hunter was one of a few who remained constant to their formative work; but most shifted in attitude and style, some became figurative, some flirted with Greenbergian post-painterly abstraction. *The Field* is regarded as a landmark exhibition and continues to be the subject of reflective and revisionist art history; it influenced no one: but it set a tone for the acceptance of art which was international in its underpinning. And Sidney Nolan was at his wildest and slickest, still churning out *Burke and Wills* paintings at a breathtaking rate.



None of this means much to Stephen Bram let alone the way in which we might see his enduring commitment to abstraction. He was born between the *Antipodeans* and *The Field*, neither shaping his outlook. But he is one distinctive marker of a new attitude of Australian abstract painters.

Store 5 and its interest in abstraction meant more to his generation – a small unpretentious and improvised space in Maples Lane, Prahran: Bram showed in its first exhibition.³ It was a close coterie of like-mindedness, providing intellectual assurance and reciprocal support, a substantive context and independent counterpoint to the teaching in art schools.

The smallest work in the current exhibition is the earliest; made in 1987, *untitled* measures 22.5 x 14.5 centimetres. It is foundational as a resolute idea that would model more than thirty years of painting, invoking an endlessly mutable concept, a preoccupation with flatness and perspectives, suggestions of architectural space but never illustrative of it, where seeming contradictions become paintings of sublime logic and, as Greenberg might suggest, self-critical. But to place too much emphasis on Greenberg and his stances on American modernism is a distraction.

Bram, along with John Nixon and the *Store 5* group, were more interested in the European avant-garde, than they were in New York. He has avoided being linked to a formative model of abstraction, let alone an individual artist. We might find various associations with the history of abstraction, but these are intellectual, not stylistic and do not derive from a singular position. He and his *Store 5* associates were never swept into a post-modernist milieu of appropriation but worked both within and beyond modernism's avant-garde.

Clement Greenberg's theories, however, are not remote when thinking about Bram's introspection. Kantian philosophy was central to Greenberg's theoretical position. Kant's 'transcendental idealism' and the 'logic to establish the limits of logic' and to critique reason all make sense when we look at Bram's work.

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Perspective: all the paintings have a beginning beyond the physical presence of each work. Compositional arrangements take their form from a perceived perspectival origin. The result is an experience, a surface, into which we are drawn. They are paintings which are self-contained – geometric arrangements within the scale of the canvas, the space within. The canvas becomes the surface expression of points of beginning and arrival. There is no singular point of view, nor a single vanishing point, the painting plane is delicately fractured and becomes a personal, idiosyncratic planar aesthetic. Any illusion of spacial depth invariably returns to surface flatness.

Bram paints in halftones, often creating sensations that exceed pure pictorial inquiry. There is an ambience, a mood, which takes us beyond our relationship with formal elements, they become hauntingly beautiful. He is capable of intimacy and bigness. Oil paintings on Belgian linen, handheld in size with a handcrafted surface of a seemingly burnished texture, suggest a nod to tradition. In the perspective paintings we find vastness compressed. Bram moves comfortably to larger works with a neo-industrial look of acrylic on smooth canvas, a manufactured reproducible surface effect suggesting the absence or remoteness of the artist's hand. Each provides a different visual and intellectual position with their own self-reflective inquiry. We never sense he's meeting any expectations other than his own. To experience them together, can be exhilarating; it is not a word commonly used when talking about geometric abstraction.

It would be wrong to suggest that there is an observed subject, an interior, as his wellspring: the source of what we see is beyond the painting itself. We won't find a so-called progression in Bram's art per se, but different manifestations of adaptations arising from a concept with streams of physical and visual possibilities.

A cursory glance might suggest that many paintings appear similar. Self-evidently, they are never the same and nor is the pre-planned idea of a 'series' part of his repertoire. When we become absorbed in the syntax of Bram's art, differences can be subtle, nonetheless striking. As the arrangement of this exhibition reveals, context, space and arrangements within it are inseparable. This is revealed also in his installation work where a fuller, often imposing, presence defines his ideas of our relationship with physical space, not just its façade.⁴

Theories and opinions about the history of abstraction and spirituality are common - its transcendental potential is something frequently acknowledged and left for subjective responses. Our relationship with the transformative nature of space and objects or arrangements within it is a well-described phenomenon in the psychology of space. Its effect crosses cultures.

Literalism is Bram's anathema. In a world of sophistry and ordinariness as spectacle, we need the introspective quality of Bram's art. Quietness and poise holding a special understanding of the mutable character of looking, the structure of things and our relationship with them.

1. *Antipodeans*; Victorian Artists' Society Galleries, East Melbourne; 4-15 August 1959; *The Antipodean Manifesto* written by Bernard Smith.
2. *The Field*, National Gallery of Victoria, 21 August-28 September 1968
3. *Store 5*; Hall, D; Present Tense, Anna Schwartz Gallery and Thirty-Five Years of Contemporary Art; Black Inc., 2019; pp. 165-169
4. Projects include, *Song of sirens*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne University, 2009, and 200 *Gertrude Street*, a site specific installation; Gertrude Contemporary, 2014

– Doug Hall