

Cathy Blanchflower 2009

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I vividly remember the first time I encountered Cathy Blanchflower's work, during my first semester of art school in the mid 1990s. Despite my then limited knowledge of abstract painting and contemporary art in general, I recall a keen sense of recognising on a fundamental level just how good her paintings were, without quite knowing why. It was a formative moment in terms of my aesthetic education - the first time I really felt a connection with contemporary abstract art, that I had gotten it. I have keenly followed the evolution of Blanchflower's practice since then, from her visually jarring technologically-inspired early works, through her Atlas series (now something of an icon of Western Australia's burgeoning Geometric Abstractionist movement in the late 1990s) and the increasingly complex webs of lines and spikes that were to follow, as well as her occasional forays into installation practice. Throughout, the qualities of Blanchflower's work that first impressed me have remained constant, and disarmingly simple.

Firstly there is her paintings' surprise factor, how they change as one approaches them from the illusion of hard edge Op, to a painstakingly tender cluster of gestures at close range. I am still amazed at just how satisfyingly painterly her surfaces are, with their thickly-applied brushstrokes, fuzziness, even the occasional paint spatter. They celebrate their cool historical lineage at the same time as they humanise it via the hand-wrought. Viewed from a

distance, they provoke a different kind of pleasure, that of having one's eyes deceived by optical trickery, dragged into the composition they are meant to be appraising. There is no optimum position from which to view Blanchflower's works, they reward from every distance, and continue to do so upon repeated viewings.

Blanchflower's latest paintings conform to this whilst reflecting several new developments, one being a wider and yet more muted colour pallet – pastels and greys, rather than the blocks of black, white and navy that often underpinned her earlier compositions. The artist acknowledges this as a subconscious reaction to the more muted light in Melbourne (where she has lived since 2004) compared to the harsh light of Perth.ⁱ

A further shift is her simple progression from using mainly straight, to all curved lines. Blanchflower's paintings have often been compared to electronic musicⁱⁱ due to their rhythmic quality and pulsating appearance. If Atlas and its contemporaries evoked the mesmerising beat of rave music, these new works seem to overlay a more lyrical melodic line. This reflects a break with the tightly-gridded structure she had adhered to throughout her career and a subsequent "loss of control" for the artist,ⁱⁱⁱ a sense that the works themselves are directing their own composition.

The resulting fields of swirls and flourishes

unheroically evoke practically the entire history of pattern - Islamic texts and mosque decoration, Celtic designs, tartan, William Morris and Minton tiles, to say nothing of Op, Modernist prints, psychedelia and ugly 1970s wallpaper. Being in the midst of researching Gothic decoration when I first viewed these new exhibition works, they immediately suggested illuminated manuscripts and stained glass. This is not to suggest the work is 'about' any of this, rather that it is perhaps testament to an inherent generosity in Blanchflower's practice that her paintings function to make one think about such historical precedents. And in the same way her compositions connect colours and shapes, her works reveal a network of relationships: between decoration and function, sound and vision, different cultures and eras, the way belief – religious and otherwise – has been articulated through pattern, even between one side of Australia and the other. Like her painted surfaces, such associations knot more eloquently together the more you attempt to unravel them.

ⁱ Personal correspondence, October 2008

ⁱⁱ For example see Crawford, Australia ARCO, exhibition catalogue, Sydney 2002 and Pegasus, The Colour of Music, exhibition catalogue, Adelaide, 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ Personal correspondence, September 2008