

Recent interventions in the built environment of Townsville provide evidence of significant spatial change to urban forms. The exhibition *Urban Construct* is an investigation into visualising space as lived experience within Townsville's evolving urban landscape in the city. Areas of focus throughout 2019 and 2020 have been Flinders Street, Ogden Street and Stanley Street, taking in Lowths Bridge and the southern side of Ross Creek. Along with prevailing public commentary regarding the overall condition of the city, this timeframe and area are witness to conspicuous changes such as demolition and construction on Flinders Street and the Stadium being materialised.

Traversing the city via pedestrian travel allows for a sensory and spatial experience. It encourages listening to the sounds of human activity, observing colour and perceiving changes of light and shade on built geometric objects over time. In parallel to developing ways to visualise this space, I endeavor to research and understand spatial theory in varying contexts of urban reality, conceptual representations and lived experience. In this way, a platform emerges to explore all three simultaneously through artistic practice.

In the studio, a reflective approach to physical and lived aspects of space is undertaken. Adopting processes of translation rather than representation, works develop as abstract visual descriptions of space where a combination of mark-making, colour and tone collectively contribute to overall coherence. Through taking on this type of reductive process over time, a number of ways to visually represent space as lived experience can be realised.

Neil Binnie, 2020

Urban Construct

Neil Binnie

27 June - 9 August

Even to the casual observer Neil Binnie's work could easily be categorised as both *abstract* and *hard edge*. Before venturing further, it would be helpful to consider briefly what is meant by both 'abstraction' in the visual arts canon and where the term 'hard edge' originated.

The terms abstract and abstraction possess a variety of interpretations within different disciplines, which can in itself be a cause of considerable confusion. However, at a basic level abstraction means to remove one thing from another - An activity which happens to be a crucial element in Binnie's practice. In an overview of abstract art, the Tate Gallery (n.d.), London, provides the following definition; "art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality, but instead uses shapes, colours, forms and gestural marks to achieve its [visual] effect".¹ The Tate also notes that the term may be applied to art that employs figures, objects or landscape "where forms have either been simplified or schematised". The term hard edge was coined during the 1960s² and referred specifically to a genre of painting generally included under the umbrella of *Post-painterly Abstraction*. Certainly not unique to the 1960s and 70s, this form of abstraction can be traced back to its origins almost a century ago. From that time to the present, abstract art has formed a central stream of modern art³.



Fig. 1

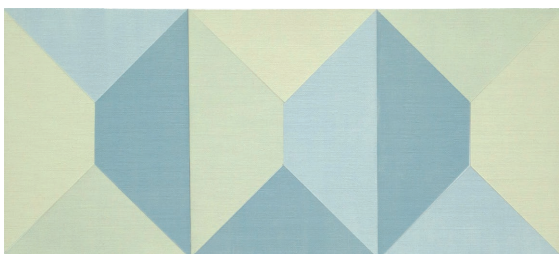


Fig. 2

The basic premise of abstraction is that the formal and / or factual qualities of the work are as, if not more, important than any concerns regarding literal representation or "mimetic perspectival considerations".¹ The philosophical justifications for appreciating the value of a work of arts' formal qualities is nothing new and was advanced in antiquity by the Greek philosopher Plato (via Socrates), in his dialogues (Philebus) who asserted that "... straight lines and circles are not only beautiful but eternally and absolutely beautiful"². Plato was simply stating that non-naturalistic images – lines, circles, triangles, squares etc... – are in themselves possessed of an absolute unchanging beauty. In making his assertion Plato had, among other visual forms, architecture firmly in mind.

Having reached this point, it is worthwhile pointing out that the essential components of Binnie's work have been directly concerned with the creation of non-naturalistic works. In addition, he strives to distil the essence of his mutating source material and through it attempts to seek out something of that absolute unchanging beauty.

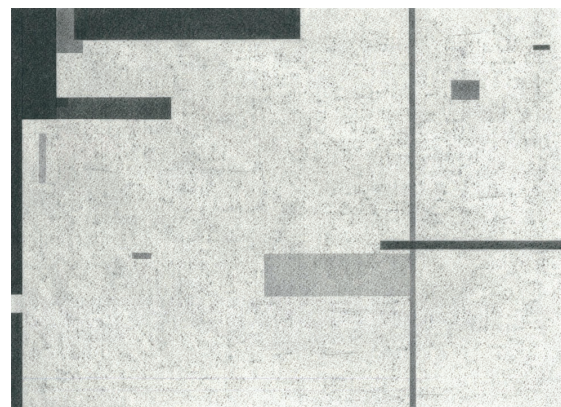


Fig. 3

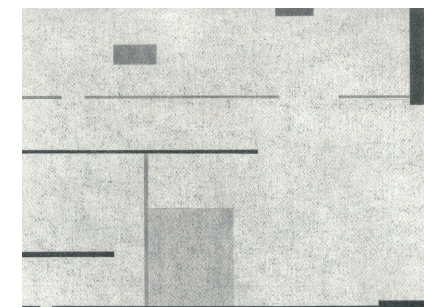


Fig. 4

Some discussion of Binnie's methodology and how it relates to his overall practice might prove to be both instructive and illuminating. The artist has already identified in his statement the significance of his perambulations through the city streets, the evolution of the urban landscape and the mutable and transformative nature of the built environment. In tandem with his walks, Binnie has not only created a comprehensive photographic record of sites visited within a bracketed timeframe, but also the changes that have occurred there. Further, the collected material has been used as a primary source for planning and executing the finished works. The collection of this material greatly assisted with the reflective process on his return to the studio. From a phenomenological standpoint, Max van Manen¹ (2007) maintains that this process is one of "sober reflection on the lived experience ... sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications".²

Van Manen's observations concerning recollection and reflection mirror Binnie's own approach to both his methods of work and trains of visual thought. Related to this is his close examination and isolation of details of particular visual interest, for example, the fall of light across the façade of a building and the shadows created as it rakes across decorative cornices¹, pipes, cables and other eccentric projections². The passage of natural light is of course, married to the passage of time and the transient nature of the exact appearance of objects subjected to it.

¹ Tate Gallery, 'Abstract Art', in *Art Terms*, n.d., viewed on 30 June 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-art>

² H.H. Arnason, *A History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture*, (rev. ed.), Thames and Hudson, New York, 1977, p.677.

³ Arnason, pp.678-79.

¹ M Carter, *Framing Art: Introducing Theory and the Visual Image*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1993.

² A.R. García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1999.

¹ Max van Manen, (1942-) is Professor Emeritus – University of Alberta and has written extensively on phenomenology and pedagogy research, see www.maxvanmanen.com, p.12.

² M. van Manen, 'Phenomenology of Practice' in *Phenomenology & Practice*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2007, pp.11-30, viewed on 30 June 2020, <http://www.maxvanmanen.com/files/2014/03/Max-Phenomenology-of-Practice1.pdf>

¹ See Figure 1 and Figure 2.

² See Figure 3 and Figure 4.

Important developmental steps in the investigation of such phenomena have been the two-fold activities of collage and drawing. Both undertakings were entirely interdependent, one informing the other in whatever order the work dictated. An important accessory to the collages and a prerequisite to the finished works are Binnie's meticulous colour studies. In some measure these have been dictated by the original source material and in another by the mechanics of creating colour mixtures through the production of matrices. In passing it should be noted that the drawings fall into two categories: the first being finished pieces in their own right and the second drawings made from collage.

Whilst discussing the drawings it is noteworthy that all the source material (i.e. the disparate elements comprising the urban environment) began life themselves as drawings in the form of site plans, architectural sketches, visuals or renderings, and by their very nature were, mathematical, geometric and abstract.

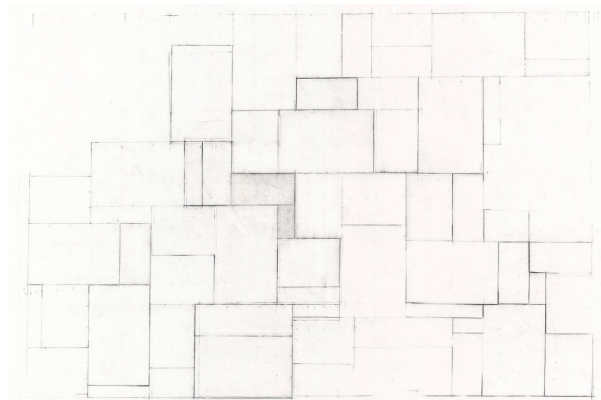


Fig. 5

A number of drawings have their origins in the collages and indeed have been carefully transcribed from them in the form of measured drawings¹. It is through these that Binnie has investigated compositional structure without the distraction of colour. The drawings together with the accompanying collages and paintings² represent a further development in his work.

According to the artist's own account, the idea for these works first originated whilst visiting the site of a demolished building in the remains of which were floors of jumbled tiles. Carrying the observation forward towards the paintings he arrived at a compositional arrangement in which the length and breadth of the paintings determined the proportions of the tile-like elements within them. A number of these small rectangular units remain unchanged whereas others have been further divided by proportional subdivisions. The high key of the work and the close-tone colouration also represents a more recent development in Binnie's practice.

He has explained that his palette was prompted in the first instance by the narrow range of local colour on the façades of the buildings in Flinders St and in the second, the bleaching and flattening effect on them produced by the intensity of summer sunlight. The fabrication of the painted surface demanded a careful application and juxtaposition of colour to produce the small chromatic and tonal shifts whilst maintaining the notion of the flatness of the painted surface in keeping with its source.

¹ See Figure 5 and Figure 6.

² See Figure 7 and Figure 8.

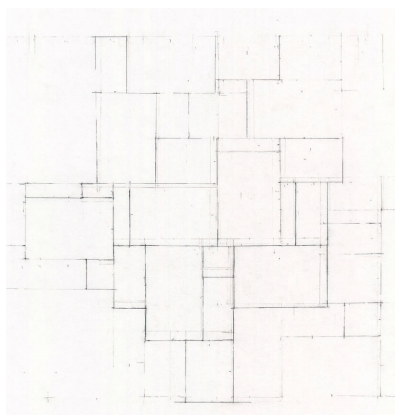


Fig. 6

In conclusion, a quote from Henri Lefebvre¹ concerning the urban environment would seem most appropriate. The urban environment, he states, is: "...pure form... This form has no specific content, but is a centre of attraction and life. It is an abstraction, but unlike a metaphysical entity, the urban is a concrete abstraction... It is associated with mathematical form ... calculable [and] quantifiable..."²

Dr. Bob Preston, Professional arts educator and practicing artist

¹ Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) was a French philosopher, sociologist and author. Key texts (with English translation) include *The Critique of Everyday Life*, *The Urban Revolution* and *The Production of Space*, which introduced the concept of the social production of space.

² H. Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (R. Bononno, Trans. 2003), University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 1970, pp.118-119.

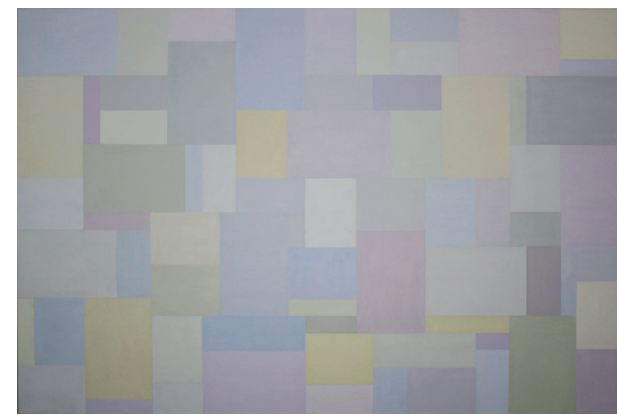


Fig. 7

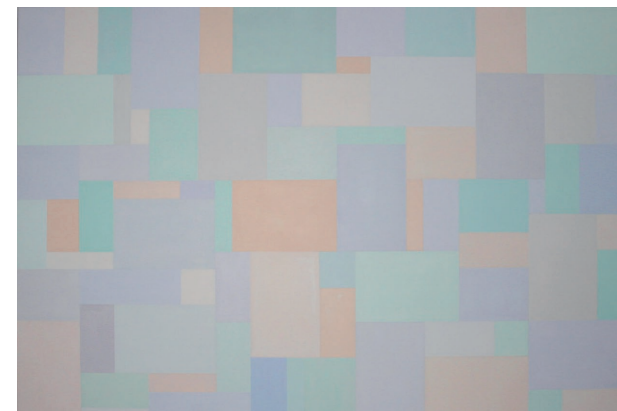


Fig. 8

Image List.

All works by Neil Binnie.

Front cover:
Ogden Street #1918 (detail), 2019, Charcoal on paper, 35 x 25cm.

Figure 1:
Colour Study (Flinders St East #1), 2020, Oil on paper, collage, 14 x 31.5cm.

Figure 2:
Colour Study (Flinders St East #2), 2020, Oil on paper, collage, 14 x 31.5cm.

Figure 3:
Flinders St Façade #1940, 2019, Charcoal on paper, 25 x 35cm.

Figure 4:
Flinders St Façade #1941, 2019, Charcoal on paper, 25 x 35cm.

Figure 5:
Flinders St (East), 2020, Charcoal on paper, 59 x 84cm.

Figure 6:
Flinders St (West) (detail), 2020, Charcoal on paper, 59 x 84cm.

Figure 7:
Summer Morning, Flinders St (East), 2020, Oil on linen, 80 x 120cm.

Figure 8:
Summer Morning, Flinders St (West), 2020, Oil on linen, 80 x 120cm.

Back cover:
Urban Construct photograph studies (roomview detail).

Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts

408 Flinders St, Townsville | 4772 7109 | www.umbrella.org.au
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