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Narratives of Shape and Colour

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Declaration of Originality

I, Bryan Spier ......................................................... declare that this exegesis is original material that is the outcome of research undertaken during my candidacy. I am the sole author of this exegesis and I have duly acknowledged and documented the author of any artworks, references, quotations and paraphrases included in the text.
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# Table of Contents

**Introduction: Narratives of shape and colour** .............................................................................. 1  
What is narrative? ..................................................................................................................... 1  
Origin and context of the research question ........................................................................ 2  
Abstract art against narrative ............................................................................................... 4  
Narrative against abstract art ..................................................................................................... 7  
Chapters ......................................................................................................................................... 10  

**Chapter 1. Action** .......................................................................................................................... 13  
The definition and role of action ................................................................................................. 13  
Experiments: methodology ........................................................................................................ 15  
Experiments: Standard shapes ................................................................................................... 17  
Experiments: Non-standard shapes ............................................................................................ 22  
Results of the experiments ......................................................................................................... 24  
Comparison to History Painting ................................................................................................. 28  
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 31  

**Chapter 2. Sequence** ..................................................................................................................... 34  
Motion and extrusion .................................................................................................................... 34  
Plot ................................................................................................................................................. 38  
Following and paths ....................................................................................................................... 42  
Point and line to plane .................................................................................................................. 43  
First paintings ................................................................................................................................ 45  
Causality and redundancy ........................................................................................................... 47  
Stripes .............................................................................................................................................. 49  
Fragmented world ......................................................................................................................... 51  
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 54  

**Chapter 3: Character** ..................................................................................................................... 56  
Individualised actors .................................................................................................................... 57  
Montage ......................................................................................................................................... 58  
Paradigm ......................................................................................................................................... 60  
Marlow .......................................................................................................................................... 64  
Scanner collages ............................................................................................................................. 69  
Collage ......................................................................................................................................... 70  
Self-organisation ............................................................................................................................. 73  
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 79  

**Chapter 4: Narration** ..................................................................................................................... 81  
Content and expression plane ...................................................................................................... 81  
Printing onto canvas .................................................................................................................... 83  
Heavy Images ................................................................................................................................. 86  
Monochromes ................................................................................................................................. 90  
Socio-economics ........................................................................................................................... 91  


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pen and Paper</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study for the Miller Portrait</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jealous Paintings</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History Paintings</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tebbe and Victory Boogie Woogie</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flashbacks and Forking Paths</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A conclusion</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Narratives of Shape and Colour

Abstract

My practice-led research investigates how narrative concepts can be employed to generate abstract compositions in painting, drawing and print. The project challenges the view that narrative and abstract art are mutually exclusive forms by creating abstract artworks that employ narrative concepts and strategies. My research negotiates this by identifying the essential components of narrative and proposing that they can also function as formal elements in an abstract work. This is supported by theories of narrative that present it as a set of structural conventions that mediate and summarise real or imagined events, and make them conform to the material limits of an artwork. The research question is tested exhaustively in the studio using a variety of forms and methods: including digital sketches, pen and ink drawings, scanography, and densely layered paintings. My abstract compositions begin by conforming to the material limits of the flat picture plane, yet by applying narrative concepts they expand to project speculative histories and alternative versions of themselves.
List of Illustrations

All works are by Bryan Spier unless otherwise attributed.

Figure. 1. *Thrown World*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas 200cm x 200cm.

Figure. 2. *Simultaneous Paintings*, 2011. Exhibition at Sarah Scout Gallery, Melbourne.

Figure. 3. *Prologue*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas 120 x 160cm.

Figure. 4. *Denouement*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas 120 x 160cm.

Figure 5. *Arjuna’s Penance* (drawing by Fransje van Zoest of seventh century bas relief in Mahaballipuram, India) From Mieke Bal *Narratology* (*University of Toronto Press, Second Edition 1999*).

Figure 6. *Position experiments*. 2012. Digital images.

Figure 7. *Size Experiment (Small)*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 8. *Size Experiment (Big)*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 9. *Two shapes experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 10. *Different colour experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 11. *Different Shapes Experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 12. *Different Shapes one black experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 13. *Three different shapes experiment*, 2012. Digital image.
Figure 14. *Three different shapes big triangle experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 15. *More complex configuration experiments*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 16. *Non-standard geometry experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 17. *Non-standard shape repeated experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 18. *Very different contours experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 19. *Centrally Placed Circle*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 20. *Centre Top Placed Circle*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 21. *Resembles a tree*, 2012. Digital image.


Figure 24. Josef Albers, Illustration for *Color Mixture in Paper* from *The Interaction of Color*, p.97.

Fig. 25. Charles Le Brun, The Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander, c. 1660. Oil on Canvas 4530 x 2980 mm Palace of Versailles Collection.


Fig. 27, Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, 1759. Oil on canvas 69 x 119cm. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Figure 28. *Untitled* (four paintings completed before the digital experiments), 2012. Acrylic on canvas board, 20 x 30cm each.
Figure 29. *Untitled studies*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas board, 20 x 30cm each.

Figure 30. Graphic demonstrating commentary lines, from *Graphicity: The Fourth R?* by F.K Alrich and R. Sheppard.

Figure 31. Giacomo Balla. *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 95 x 115cm. Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

Figure 32. Marcel Duchamp. *Nude descending a Staircase*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 147 x 90cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Figure 33. Hilma af Klint, *No 2d, Series IV*, 1920. Oil on canvas 40 x 30. Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk.

Figure 34. Diagram to illustrate concept of Kernels and Satellites. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Cornell University Press, 1980).

Figure 35. *Untitled Study*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas board, 20 x 30cm.

Figure 36. Pieter Breugel the Elder, *Landscape with the fall of Icarus*, 1558. Oil on canvas, 73 x 112cm. Royal Museum of Fine Art, Belgium.

Figure 37. Digital sketch, 2012.

Figure 38. Digital sketch, 2012.

Figure 39. *Untitled*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas 50 x 60cm.

Figure 40. *Untitled*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas 50 x 60cm.

Figure 41. *Transient particularity*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas-board 50 x 60cm.

Figure 42. *The Axiomatic Statement*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas 60 x 70cm.

Figure 43. *Fragmented World*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas 200 x 200cm.
Figure 44. Georges Seurat, *Les Poseuses*, 1888. Oil on Canvas, 308 x 207cm. Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia.


Figure 46. Digital experiment with montage, 2012.

Figure 47. *Mash-Up*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 30cm.

Figure 48. Paddy Bedford, *Lightning Creek*, 2004. *Earth pigments on composition board, 80 x 100cm*. National Gallery of Victoria.

Figure 49. Hilma af Klint, *The Ten Largest, No. 7, Adulthood, Group IV*, 1907. Tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 315 x 239cm. Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk.

Figure 50. Oscar Yanez, *Plastifigura*, 2014. *Oil on canvas, 168 x 152cm, Exhibition at West Space, Melbourne. Photo credit: Christo Crocker.*

Figure 51. *Untitled (Embrace)*, 2011. *Acrylic on paper 20 x 30cm.*

Figure 52. *Untitled (Burst)*, 2011. *Acrylic on paper 20 x 30cm.*

Figure 53. *Marlow (Digital reconstruction of underlying structure)*, 2012, *Acrylic on canvas 100 x 120cm.*

Figure 54. *Marlow (Digital reconstruction of underlying structure)*, 2012, *Acrylic on canvas 100 x 120cm.*

Figure 55. *Marlow*, 2012, *Acrylic on canvas 100 x 120cm.*

Figure 56. *Untitled*, 2013, *Scanner collage, 108 x 148cm.*

Figure 57. *Untitled*, 2013, *Scanner collage, 108 x 148cm.*

Figure 58. *Zombie Apocalypse*, 2013. *Scanner, Collage, 108 x 148cm.*
Figure 59. *Zundie Apocalypse*, 2013. Scanner Collage, 108 x 148cm.

Figure 60. *Tear a Hole*, 2013. Scanner Collage, 108 x 148cm.

Figure 61. Liubov Popova, *Painterly Architectonics*, 1917. Oil on canvas 107 x 88 cm. Krasnodar District Kovalenko Art Museum.

Figure 62. Olga Rosanova, *Universal War*, 1916. Collage 21 x 29 cm. Costakis Collection, Athens.

Figure 63. *Ride*, February 2013. Scanner Collage, 108 x 148cm.

Figure 64. *Get Behind Me*, 2013. Scanner Collage, 108 x 148cm.

Figure 65. *Seventh Seal*, 2013. Scanner Collage, 108 x 148cm.

Figure 66. *Hero of the war*, 2013. Scanner Collage, 108 x 148cm.

Figure 67. *Spectrum08*, 2013. Scanner Collage, 108 x 148cm.

Figure 68. *Vacuum09*, 2013. Scanner Collage, 108 x 148cm.


Figure 70. *Resemblance*, 2013. Scanner collage 108 x 148cm.

Figure 71. *Rash*, 2013. Scanner collage 108 x 148cm.

Figure 72. *China*, 2013. Scanner collage 108 x 148cm.

Figure 73. *Riff*, 2013. Scanner Collage 108 x 148cm.

Figure 74. *Riff* (version), 2013. Acrylic paint and Giclée print on canvas. 60 x 40cm.

Figure 76. *Heavy Images* (Installation view), 2014.

Figure 77. Danica Chappell, *Light-Shadow (Exhibition detail)* 2012, VCA Student Gallery. *Image credit: Paul Adair.*

Figure 78. Danica Chappell, *Light-shadow (6 sec : 6.5 hrs : 105 sec + 25 sec)*, 2012 Unique chromogenic photograph.


Figure 80. *Heavy Images* (Installation view featuring Nothing too serious and Only the Desperate ), 2014. Giclée print and acetate on photographic rag, 112 x 148cm each.

Figure 81. *Who Is This?* 2014. Scanner Collage (Digital Image).

Figure 82. *Hot Coffee*, 2014. Scanner Collages (Digital Images).

Figure 83. Bryan Spier and John Nixon, *Monochromes*, 2013. Giclée print on photographic rag, acetate, 112 x 74cm each.

Figure 84. *Texmex*, 2014. Scanner Collages (Digital Images).

Figure 85. *Texmex* (two views) 2013. Laser print and masking tape on paper, 30 x 40cm.

Figure 86. *Ponder*, 2014. Ink on paper, 21 x 29cm.

Figure 87. *Listen don’t talk*, 2014. Ink on paper, 21 x 29cm.

Figure 88. *Un titled*, 2015. Ink on paper, 21 x 29cm.

Figure 89. *Un titled*, 2015. Acrylic paint on canvas board, 30 x 40cm.

Figure 90. *Study for the Miller Portrait #1*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas board, 30 x 40cm.

Figure 91. *Study for the Miller Portrait #2*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas board, 30 x 40cm.

Figure 92. Detail of *Study for the Miller Portrait #1*, 2015.
Figure 93. Detail of *Study for the Miller Portrait #2*, 2015.

Figure 94. *The Jealous Painting*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas board, 50 x 60cm.

Figure 95. *A Jealous Painting*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas board, 50 x 60cm.

Figure 96. *Jealous Painting (schema)*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas board, 50 x 60cm.

Figure 97. *Jealous Painting (X-ray)*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas board, 50 x 60cm.

Figure 98. *The Death of Archbishop Sharpe*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 118 x 170cm.

Figure 99. *The Bigshot* (Digital sketch) 2014.

Figure 100. *The Bigshot*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 118 x 170cm.

Figure 101. Tomma Abts, *Tebbe* 2001. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 48 x 38cm.

Figure 102. Piet Mondrian, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, (1942. Oil and tape on canvas, 126 x 126cm. Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

Figure 103. Piet Mondrian, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, (Detail) 1942. Oil and tape on canvas, 126 x 126cm. Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

Figure 104. *Flashbacks and Forking Paths*, work in progress (upside down).

Figure 105. *Flashbacks and Forking Paths*, (digital sketch).

Figure 106. *Flashbacks and Forking Paths*, work in progress.

Figure 107. *Flashbacks and Forking Paths*, (digital sketch).

Figure 108. *Flashbacks and Forking Paths*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 148cm.
Introduction: Narratives of shape and colour

How can narrative structure be employed to create abstract compositions? My practice-led research explores this question by the production of artworks, in painting and other media, that engage with principles of abstract art and theories of narrative. The purpose of this research is to articulate and build upon concerns that already inform my art practice, and to make a contribution to the ongoing tradition of abstract painting.

Abstract artists and theorists have traditionally rejected the use of narrative on the basis that it is inherently opposed to the medium-specificity that drives abstract art, while theorists of narrative regard the use of abstraction within narrative to be a logical impossibility. Yet, prompted by an ongoing interest in narrative structure within my own work, my research challenges this orthodox view that narrative and abstract art are mutually exclusive. It does so by considering the formal contribution that narrative concepts can make to purely abstract artworks, and by creating abstract artworks based on these principles. I begin by examining narrative theory and examples of narrative artworks to understand the common structure of narratives. This allows me to extract a number of key concepts that can be practically applied to non-figurative arrangements of shape and colour. The exegesis then traces a gradual development in my practice from tentative digital sketches to large-scale paintings, and frames each stage of the research around those key narrative concepts – particularly action, sequence, character, and narration. The result is a diverse body of work that explores multiple ways that narrative structure can be employed to create abstract compositions.

What is narrative?

Before I can consider how narrative structure is to be applied to non-representational elements I must identify what narrative actually is. It is common to describe narrative as a story or as the telling of a story, but this requires a definition of story. In the Cambridge Introduction to Narrative, H. Porter Abbott describes a story as “an event or sequence of events”, and then defines narrative as the telling or presentation of a story.¹ Other definitions vary but tend to agree on a story consisting of “events” and narrative constituting an account or presentation of those events. The concept of narrative is often conflated with that of story

for good reason: a story must be told or presented—and thereby transformed into narrative—in order to become known at all.

Narratives are not just a presentation of events: they are also a creative interpretation of events. Hayden White points out this important characteristic when he contrasts narrative to the annal or chronology. These forms similarly represent a series of events that have occurred over time, however no attempt is made to make causal links between the separate events.\(^2\) Conversely, a narrative typically threads disparate actions into a teleological sequence, as though they naturally lead to one another and culminate in a resolution. This does not reflect objective reality but is rather a creative interpretation that imposes certain meanings on the events.\(^3\)

An important idea about narrative underpins my whole argument: that narratives have a particular form and structure that can be identified and applied to abstract shape and colour content as it would to traditional story content. Consequently, my study of narrative theory and artworks aims to identify that formal structure. My studio practice then explores ways to apply these formal principles to shape and colour content.

**Origin and context of the research question**

I started theorising the possibilities of narrative structure in my work long before I began this research, despite the resolutely abstract nature of my paintings, and the more-or-less formalist methodology that underpins them. It is work created from shapes and colours upon a flat surface, and premised on exploring tensions and harmonies between these elements rather than any figural, metaphoric or symbolic allusions. Nonetheless, paintings such as *Thrown World* (2010) and the exhibition *Simultaneous Paintings* (2011) were created around ideas of narrative structure. In these examples I employed narrative as a methodology to motivate the placement and interaction of different shapes, and to create a premise for interrupting and varying patterns. I also believed that a narrative methodology might bestow a sense of purpose upon individual elements by allowing them to function as components on a path towards teleological resolution.

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\(^3\) White, *Content*, 5.
Thrown World is based on a narrative idea of journey and change (Fig. 1). It features a series of stripes that radiate from the edge and pass through progressive changes of colour as they travel to the other side. In Simultaneous Paintings, a square is gradually broken into smaller pieces across a suite of seven canvases as a way to approach narrative concepts of character, causality and memory (Fig. 2). The paintings Prologue and Denouement (2012) from this series present the first and the final stage of the dissolution of a square, with each featuring
the faint echo of a past and future state (Figs 3, 4). These strategies were not designed to express story content but, rather, provide a formal logic to guide the compositions. The present research is a way to consolidate and articulate this position, and to investigate other possibilities it may offer.

Other research on this topic
This particular application of narrative structure to abstract art has not been articulated by other writers and practitioners. Some texts consider a correspondence between narrative and abstract art, but they generally take a different approach. For instance, it is not uncommon to identify the sources of abstract art in traditional narrative material, such as Rose-Carol Washton-Long’s essay that traces Kandinsky’s abstract paintings to biblical images of the Apocalypse.\(^4\) David Anfam similarly argues the narrative intentions of the Abstract Expressionists and suggests possible sources of narrative content in myth and personal experience.\(^5\) Neither text ventures a theory about how formal structures convey these narrative intentions. Another potential precedent was the Australian film maker Paul Fletcher’s thesis, “An Abstract Narrative Form of Film”. It proposes a hybrid of abstraction and filmic narrative, and although this was an insightful study I found Fletcher’s concept of “abstract” was not aligned to mine. He treats it as an obscuring or distorting addition to otherwise realistic content, whereby the abstract is not regarded as content but as an effect.\(^6\)

Abstract art against narrative
I believe there is little written about this idea because commentators on abstract art and theorists of narrative consider narrative and abstraction to be mutually exclusive quantities. The rhetoric surrounding abstract art is often strident in its rejection of narrative, which I will argue is based on a strong association of narrative with literature. On the other side, there is equally unanimous rejection of abstraction, because narrative is thought to be reliant on verisimilitude.

In the 20\(^{th}\) century, abstract painting emerged as an exemplary manifestation of Modernism, which advocated the reduction of form to the essential elements needed to fulfil a given

\(^6\) Paul Fletcher, “An Abstract Narrative Form of Film”, (Masters Thesis, University of Melbourne, VCA Film and Television, The Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts, 2009), 9.
function. Abstract painting was often considered an exemplar of this idea because it stripped content to the fundamental flatness, materiality and opticality of the painting medium.\(^7\) In this sense ‘abstract’ is the name for what is left of a painting after shedding spatial illusion, mimetic realism and literary content such as symbolism, allegory and narrative. This idea was championed by the Modernist critic Clement Greenberg. He expresses a specific distaste for narrative when he says “for an ambitious painter by the 1860s ... who cared about telling a story in visual art?”\(^8\) Rosalind Krauss echoes this when she refers to “Modern Art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse”.\(^9\)

Greenberg’s essay, “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940), presents one of the most comprehensive arguments for modern painting’s rejection of literary content. The title refers to Gothis Ephraim Lessing’s 18\(^{th}\) century work of aesthetic criticism, Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry (1766). In this work, Lessing exhorts painters and poets to honour the boundaries of their respective spatial or temporal arts. He argues that intermingling the arts leads to inert passages of text and awkwardly posed figures, and that artists should instead emphasise the unique competencies of their medium.\(^10\)

Greenberg’s text continues this argument, advocating a radical evacuation of all surplus elements from painting to leave only that which expresses the flatness and materiality of the painted surface. He is particularly damning of the literary pretensions of pre-Modernist painting in which “everything depends on the anecdote or the message”.\(^11\) Under those conditions he saw painting enslaved by literary subject matter to the impoverishment of pictorial values.\(^12\) Conversely, he argues that abstract art concentrates pure visual sensation in the materials that occasion its experience.\(^13\) Greenberg does not mention narrative as such in this essay, but I can think of few better examples in which literary values are prioritised over pictorial ones than History Painting, which is a genre that is synonymous with narrative.\(^14\)

14 Norman Bryson affirms this view when he describes the History Paintings of Charles le Brun as ‘husks’ once the literary content has been extracted. Norman Bryson, Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime, (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 42.
number of other artists and writers support this view of narrative as fundamentally incompatible to abstract art. For instance, when Phillip Guston explains his reason for abandoning abstraction after many decades, he states that: “I got sick and tired of all that purity! Wanted to tell stories.” David Anfam has another take on this, by which the temporal nature of narrative is the problem. He states that “narration is the antithesis of the iconic immediacy that the most famous works of the movement [abstract expressionism] aspire to embody”.

The view that narrative is a literary value, and therefore contrary to the medium specificity of abstract painting, could be ignored because it reflects the objectives of 20th century American Modernism, except that it still significantly informs the objectives of 21st century Australian abstract art with which my work has been aligned. Contemporary abstract artist John Nixon most stridently demonstrates this in a manifesto from 1994, printed for an exhibition of monochromes at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space. In this, Nixon declares that he is “AGAINST: the use of antiquity, landscape, craft, narrative + funniness”. This doctrine is expressed in his artwork through austere monochrome paintings and the use of ready-made objects that signal only the fact of their material presence. I recall seeing this exhibition as an undergraduate student at the Australian National University School of Art and being struck by its trenchant minimalism. I later found that Nixon exerted a significant influence on contemporary abstract artists practicing in Melbourne, the city in which I have lived and worked since 2001. He is widely regarded as a mentor figure to the generation of artists that comprised the Store 5 group, that is credited with reintroducing geometric abstraction to contemporary art discourse in Melbourne in the 1990s. It included artists such as Melinda Harper, Stephen Bram, Rose Nolan, and Kerri Polliness. These artists presented a reinterpretation of the values of non-objective and formalist abstraction that is reflected in the work of a younger generation of artists, including Justin Andrews, Masato Takasaka and Renee Cosgrave.

15 Robert Storr, Elizabeth Murray, (Thames and Hudson, 2005), 58.
16 David Anfam, ”Interrupted stories”, p 21.
I have been loosely associated with this circle of artists by virtue of my exploration of abstract themes and techniques. Consequently, I have been involved in various exhibitions and projects alongside them, such as *Shifting Geometries* at the Australian Embassy in Washington D.C. in 2012, and *Some Abstract Things* at the Griffith University Gallery in 2014. My work was also featured in both iterations of Nixon and Andrew’s curated project *Drawing Folio* at Block Projects in 2009 and 2012, and its Nixon curated incarnation as *Drawing Now* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2014. This association is referred to again in chapter four when I discuss a collaborative artwork made by John Nixon and myself. The artwork combines some of Nixon’s iconic monochrome works with my scanner collage method. It can be seen as an acknowledgement of Nixon’s influence, as well as a gentle subversion of the values he extols in documents such as the catalogue cited earlier. My example of Nixon should not be read as a refutation or challenge to him or his milieu specifically, it simply illustrates my proximity to a contemporary discourse that excludes narrative concepts from the creation of abstract art.

**Narrative against abstract art**

A different problem that faces the integration of narrative with abstract art is the insistence that realism is essential to narrative. This is asserted by narrative theorists such as Werner Wolf when he states that: “totally abstract art cannot be narrative because representationality is a major characteristic of narratives”. 21 Wendy Steiner also holds that a condition of narrativity is that “some approximation of realist representation be evoked”. 22 Mieke Bal hints at the reason for this when she suggests that narrative is a homology of real world events, and, if this were not the case, its conventions could not be understood. 23 Yet Seymour Chatman explains that the structure of narrative is artificial, and these artificial conventions are naturalised through the use of verisimilitude. This exploits the audience’s experience of reality to facilitate the progress and coherence of the narrative. 24 Without this the conventions that govern the narrative may need to be overtly explained. 25 The novel *Flatland* by Edwin A. Abbott provides a very good example of this latter condition. This tale of sentient geometry does not depict realistic events, and so cannot rely on realism to carry the narrative.

25. Chatman, Story and Discourse, 51-52
Therefore, a large part of the novel is given to a detailed explanation of the rules and conditions that govern Flatland.\textsuperscript{26}

The preceding paragraphs illustrate some of the challenges that the research topic poses. My project contests the views of Greenberg and followers which associate narrative with literature by positioning narrative as a formal structure by which content is ordered and presented. The objections of narrative theory, based on the belief that realist representation is essential to narrative, will be dealt with by treating abstract shapes and colours as a type of content that can be negotiated and represented in narrative form.

I have approached this research by following some broad strategies, such as reading narrative theory, analysing narrative artworks, experimenting with narrative concepts in the studio and, finally, presenting finished artworks. I began by reading narrative theory to gain an understanding of narrative structure in isolation from specific instances. Then I sought concrete examples—primarily in literature and painting—that demonstrate narrative structures in practice. I chose a few key ideas that are fundamental to narrative form and potentially translatable to the perimeters of my project. I then experimented with an array of different media to manifest these ideas into compositions of abstract shape and colour.

The narrative theory I have focused on is mainly of a structuralist persuasion. Structuralist theory, as the name suggests, attempts to break its object of analysis down to structural components that can be isolated from specific instances.\textsuperscript{27} It generally presents narrative as a complex form that is independent of any specific medium.\textsuperscript{28} I have found that narrative theory usually focuses on literature and cinema, with only occasional forays into painting. Because of this, my application of narrative concepts often involves a degree of adaptation from a literary context to a visual art purpose. Of course, there are many examples of painting throughout history that present narrative content and that utilise narrative concepts. I have drawn on this history but overall found it less useful than expected. This is partly due to the almost universal use of figurative forms in acknowledged narrative paintings, that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Edwin A. Abbott, \textit{Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions} (Penguin, 1998) p. 7
\item \textsuperscript{27} Roland Barthes. “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative”, \textit{New Literary History}, Vol. 6, No. 2 (The John Hopkins University Press, 1975 ), 238.
\item \textsuperscript{28} “The transposability of the story is the strongest evidence for arguing that narratives are indeed structures independent of any medium” Chatman, \textit{Story and Discourse}, p. 20.
\end{itemize}
consequently require a comparable degree of translation to my purposes as literary examples. It is also because the assignation of a story is often the sole criteria by which a painting’s narrativity is determined.

I have focused on three key writers on the subject of narrative: Seymour Chatman, Mieke Bal and Rick Altman. I chose these writers because their analyses incorporate a broad and comprehensive overview of the subject, with the inclusion of paintings to explicate their arguments about narrative structure. They each present a unique angle on the subject but agree on some fundamental aspects. For example, they agree that narrative divides into layers that roughly correspond to a “content plane” and an “expression plane”, and they all present isolated components of narrative as conceptual tools for the understanding and construction of narrative form. In his book, *Story and Discourse*, Chatman presents tools for the analysis of narrative artworks based on a consensus of literature on the subject. Mieke Bal’s *Narratology* also offers a good overview while also asserting the broader application of narrative as an analytic tool across a wide range of disciplines. Both writers are aligned with the field of structuralism and semiotics, whereas Rick Altman’s field is comparative literature. His *A Theory of Narrative* (2008) presents an accessible model of narrative structure that is formally schematic and quite amenable to the abstract parameters of my practice.

From this reading I have developed a small inventory of narrative concepts around which the research is structured: action, sequence, character and narration. I have chosen these partly because the writers agree on these characteristics—albeit using different terms—but also because they roughly correspond with themes explored in the studio at different periods. In some cases this correspondence has been retrospectively recognised while in others the studio practice has explicitly addressed the concept. In each case I have had to think quite laterally about what the narrative concept might represent in its most simplified form so that it can be applied to abstract content.

The concepts derived from narrative theory are then put to work in the studio where the drawings and paintings have often begun as material responses to the theory. These responses in turn direct my reading to other areas, or else deliver new perspectives with which to understand the texts. Consequently I have attempted a wide array of material solutions that prod the question from every angle: from schematic pencil drawings and digital designs to
large-scale giclée prints, installations and ambitious paintings. Some of these have provided important insights that contributed to further experimentation. In rare cases, the artworks have succeeded in embodying a self-contained solution to the problem. Many more of my efforts in the studio have led to unsatisfactory results. Some of these provided useful counter-examples that helped define a path through the material, while others were simply dead-ends. This exegesis provides a summary of the steps taken towards artworks that embody some kind of solution. It combines a chronological account with thematic investigation, and is divided into four chapters that accord with the narrative concepts of action, sequence, character, and narration.

Chapters

The first chapter focuses on a series of simple digital images that experiment with the concept of “action”. These experiments attempt to answer a specific question: can images composed from simple shapes constitute a sense of action, and how? A systematic process was adopted in which simple shapes were cycled through variations of size, position, and colour. After this I made observations about the “narrativity” of each one. I then examined conventional figurative depictions of narrative action, to determine if there were formal attributes that identified them as such. I wanted to know if these examples could support my observations about the potential narrativity of the abstract experiments.

The next chapter is concerned with “sequence”, asking how a visual sequence can be used to portray a sense of time and causality. To this end, I deployed a common convention for the depiction of motion, and tested whether it would have the same impact in non-figurative images. I went on to explore how this depicted motion could be transformed into paths that lead the eye around the picture plane. I then looked at ways that a visual image could evoke an expectation about the subsequent stage of a sequence without explicitly showing it.

The third chapter deals with “character”. It begins by examining the structural function of character within a narrative, and goes on to consider how abstract elements could perform a similar role. I find that characters help to mark out a path that leads us from the beginning to the end of the narrative. In addition to this they possess unique traits to emphasise their individuality. I will consider why that is important to the role they play in narrative, and how it may be approximated by abstract elements. I also investigate some ways that abstract elements could approach a sense of personification without resulting in anthropomorphism.
Finally, in Chapter Four I draw a parallel between the style and medium of the artwork and the function of “narration”. Narration is a specific concept within narrative theory, concerning the manner in which a narrative is presented; the style and emphasis lent by the particular instance of telling or showing the story content. This exploration stems from my equivocation about the best type of media to manifest a series of digital works. I find that realising these works is largely a process of editing and embellishing ready-made content, yet I find that decisions about the media and presentation do offer scope to creatively transform the content. This extends to drawings and paintings where I must decide on a host of variables, including the style of line and brush-mark, the colour, and when and where to stop. How do I make these decisions, and is there a right decision to make? The concept of narration provides the key to this question.
Chapter 1. Action

Can a still image of abstract shapes and colours express an action, and under what conditions is this possible? I pose this question because action is frequently named as a defining feature of narrative, and so it was the first concept I put to test in the studio. This coincided with a hunch that certain juxtapositions of shapes could evoke or represent an action. I put this hypothesis to the test by producing a series of simple images of one or more shapes against a blank field. This allowed me to observe concrete arrangements of shapes, and then report on whether certain configurations could plausibly be read as actions. My observations about each image were then recorded as a short text that is offered as proof of the proposition.

To judge the plausibility of these observations I first needed to determine the role that action plays in narrative structure to make it so important. I drew on a number of theories in order to identify the characteristics that define narrative action, and I looked at conventional examples of narrative art to observe some of the ways it manifests in visual art. Does this theory and analysis support the observations that I have made about my experiments? Is it possible to distil narrative action to a form that is amenable to abstract arrangements of shape and colour?

The definition and role of action

Action and events are commonly named as the most fundamental elements that define narrative. Rick Altman states this bluntly: “Narratives require action. Without action, we may have portraiture, catalogue, or nature morte, but not narrative.” 29 Roland Barthes affirms this when he bestows the name “actions” upon one of the three layers of his proposed narrative structure. 30 The archaeologist H.A Groenewegen-Frankfort offers another perspective with her definition of narrative as being the “re-presentation in a coherent form of an event, real or fictitious, significant or trivial”. 31 In these examples we can see the terms “action” and “event” referring to overlapping ideas. I prefer action but will treat the terms as having the same meaning. This is consistent with narrative theory, which frequently conflates action and events, suggesting that they mean the same thing within its context. Mieke Bal offers a formula for the interchangeability of these terms when she states that: “to act is defined here as to cause or to experience an event”. 32

In order to apply the concept of action to my artwork I had to think about it as an abstract quantity. At the time of producing these experiments my thinking was influenced by H.A Groenwegen-Frankfort’s text “Narratives’ in Ancient Egypt” (1959). This text is written from an archaeological standpoint and due to its age relies on some out-dated ideas. Nonetheless it is a compelling perspective, offering an inverse demonstration of narrative principles by pointing to their absence in the art of Ancient Egypt. In addition, it pertains specifically to a static visual art. Groenwegen-Frankfort argues that narrative was absent in the art of the Pharaonic period because the regime forbade the depiction of ephemeral events. Instead, a predilection for stasis prevailed. She dates this to the reign of King Narmer who led the campaign that united the two lands that would be called Egypt, yet she tells us that art of the time failed to report on this momentously significant campaign. She attributes this to the divine status of the King and belief in the eternal order of his rule. Because of this, contemporary depictions find the Pharaoh in a “symbolic statement of victory” without reference to specific acts.\(^{33}\) We are told that “all reference to a connection with historic, that is transient event, was avoided” at the service of a “monumental denial of [the Pharaoh] being ephemeral”.\(^{34}\)

Groenwegen-Frankfort goes on to qualify the type of action or event that identifies narrative, stating that: “a story is concerned with a particular occurrence; a static situation or typical act does not provide a story”.\(^{35}\) For this reason “scenes of daily life” such as fishing and farming were permitted in the Pharaonic Era, yet she describes such images as “typical”, “timeless”, and lacking “the dramatic import of events, that they are for all their liveliness virtually pictorial concepts”.\(^{36}\) Contemporary theorist Wendy Steiner supports this view in *Pictures of Romance* (1988). She argues that genre scenes of “typical” or “perennial” actions have “low-narrativity” because the depicted moment lacks specificity and certainty about the circumstance of its occurrence.\(^{37}\) Such depictions represent a figure or situation in an isolated state that denies its contingency in relation to changeable circumstances. Conversely, a narrative action will include or openly refer to the ephemerality of the pictured occurrence

\(^{33}\) Groenwegen-Frankfort, “Narratives’ in Ancient Egypt”, 113.
\(^{34}\) Groenwegen-Frankfort, “Narratives’ in Ancient Egypt”, 120.
\(^{35}\) Groenwegen-Frankfort, “Narratives’ in Ancient Egypt”, 113.
\(^{36}\) Groenwegen-Frankfort, “Narratives’ in Ancient Egypt”, 117.
\(^{37}\) Steiner, Pictures of Romance, 11.
and its dependence on changeable conditions. This suggests that narrative action could be approached in an abstract composition by emphasising a sense of instability and contingency.

The emphasis on contingency and transience hints at the role that action plays in distinguishing narrative from other forms. Mieke Bal goes some way to explain this when she describes an action or event as “the transition from one state to another state”. Actions disrupt the stasis of a perennial state—characterised by “portraiture, catalogue, or nature morte”—and catalyse change towards a new state. Rick Altman suggests an additional function of action to complement this. He explains that actions are “like verbs creating contact among the separate substantives populating a narrative”. In doing so, actions connect separate elements by a shared outcome. This shared outcome is a new element born solely of the interaction that occurs within narrative space, and it is this new element that generates progression to successive stages of the narrative. In this way actions create a “node or hinge” that distinguishes narrative structure by creating “branching points which force a movement into one or two (or more) possible paths”. Actions introduce change and it is against this pulse of constant change that other structural features of narrative are defined: the sequentiality of plot, the continuity of character and the rolling report of narration.

**Experiments: methodology**

It was with dim awareness of this theory that I first attempted to stage actions using basic geometric shapes. I began with the simplest combination of shapes and gradually varied and added elements to build more complex arrangements. Initially I worked on a series of canvases on which I had painted one or more geometric shapes in different positions. I soon found this method too slow and restrictive, and I set the canvases aside in favour of a digital medium. I continued the experiments with a vector drawing program that allowed me to churn through multiple variations very quickly. These were made by moving shapes around; changing their scale and colour; and adding new shapes. A new JPEG image was generated for each one of these variations. I was not attempting to represent a specific action when I composed the images but to systematically execute as many variations as I could. Under these conditions I produced 120 images that can be divided into two categories: standard geometry and non-standard geometry. In the category of standard geometry, I produced nineteen sets of variations involving circles, squares and triangles, with each set containing

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five iterations of the configuration. I then began a similar process using non-standard geometry that consisted of irregular shapes drawn by hand.

After completing each set I wrote a brief text in which I describe or suggest what might be happening in the image. I conceived of this text as a kind of proof of the proposition, based on whether I could plausibly describe the composition as an action. I later recognised this as a form of “reading out”: a term borrowed from Seymour Chatman. According to Chatman, ordinary reading concerns itself with the surface features presented by a text, image or object. By contrast, reading out extrapolates from this to speculate about the unstated and implied connections that draw the surface features into relationships of meaning. A good example of this is Mieke Bal’s analysis of the Indian bas-relief *Arjuna’s Penance* (Fig. 5). This image presents a man adopting a balancing position on the left, while in the lower right section a cat adopts the same pose, surrounded by laughing mice. Bal interprets the image as follows: “Arjuna is in a yoga position and is meditating […] The cat, impressed by the beauty of

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42. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 41.
absolute calm, imitates Arjuna. Now the mice realise they are safe. They laugh.”

Bal explains at length how she arrived at this narrative. Suffice to say, it succeeds in drawing a satisfying relationship of sequence and causality between these otherwise static and discrete figures.

In my own process of reading out I tried to remain within certain logical limitations dictated by the image, without embellishing my description with metaphor or reference to existing narratives. However, it must be acknowledged this was a speculative exercise that drew on subjective imagination rather more than scientific observation. In the following summary of the experiments I have decided to quote my speculations from the original notes to emphasise the distance between my initial intuitive reading and the present analysis.

**Experiments: Standard shapes**

The experiments began with a black ground of A4 size. I then added a single white circle for the first image because it contrasted most with the rectangular frame (Fig. 6). I placed this on the black ground and executed a number of variations—changing the position of the circle, placing it in the centre in one image; at the bottom in another; and at the top in another. Of this I wrote: “its difficult not to read the circle that sits at the top as *hanging*, whereas the ones on the bottom edge as *resting*”, adding that this “highlights how meaningful already the edges are”. In the next set I reduced the size of the circle (Fig. 7). Of this I wrote: “when the circle sits on an edge, it feels as though it is about to traverse the edges of the rectangle.” I later put this down to the expanse of black exerting a kind of pressure on the white circle. In the next example a large circle dominates the image: “The obvious suggestion here is distance. The small seems far away, this large one feels close” (Fig. 8). I also observed that: “the circle seems most like a discrete autonomous figure when it is cropped by the edge” but, when surrounded by ground colour equally on all sides, the circle seemed to be static.

43 Mieke Bal, *Narratology* p.144
44 Mieke Bal, *Narratology* p.144
45 Quoted from my own notes of May 2012, some of which have been published on my blog [http://bryanspier.blogspot.com.au/](http://bryanspier.blogspot.com.au/). Following quotations without footnotes are from the same source.
Figure 6. *Position experiments*, 2012. Digital images.

Figure 7. *Size experiment (small)*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 8. *Size experiment (Big)*, 2012. Digital image.
Adding another circle seemed to produce tension between the two objects (Fig. 9). I wrote that: “When they sit on the same horizontal plane they seem like social equals. When one is directly above the other it seems like a hierarchical arrangement”. At diagonal extremes the circles “seem curious of each other but not dependent or imposed upon by one another. Even so the relationship seems implicitly antagonistic”. I noted with the two circles that it was “possible to read [them] as a pair of eyes rather than two discrete forms” which seemed to diminish the activity of the arrangements. I found that this was “lessened by the vertical or diagonal arrangement”. Difference in colour with equal scale seemed to create tension about the way pictorial space was shared, as though the colours represented opposing values (Fig. 10).

The introduction of a different shape triggered a strangely static interaction. I observed that the shapes appeared to have been placed for the purpose of comparison, as in a catalogue (Fig. 11). I added that: “the image in which the shapes are cropped by the frame has the greatest sense of movement, however I still perceive the relation between the shapes as static: it is rather the frame that moves”. In the next variation there is a black circle that is visible only when it overlaps the white square (Fig. 12). I commented that the first image appears “the most static. It presents the novelty of the single [composite] shape, rather than the relationship between the two objects.” In the other examples I perceived not only a dynamic relationship but also multiplication because “although we see only [a fragment] of the circle, the sense is that in the darkness other forms huddle. This is emphasised by the surfeit of [black] space surrounding the figures.”
Figure 10. *Different colour experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 11. *Different Shapes Experiment*, 2012. Digital image.

Figure 12. *Different Shapes one black experiment*, 2012. Digital image.
When three shapes of different colours were used it revealed an inherent tension in heterogeneous groupings (Fig. 13). I noted: “the difference of shape and colour begs the question as to why these things are together. Perhaps this is because they don’t ‘fit’ in a decorative or compositional sense; the difference between them remains jagged and irresolute.” When the triangle was larger than the others, I wrote that it: “takes on an architectural/ landscape reading against the smaller figures” (Fig. 14). This monumental status seemed to animate the smaller shapes, which “negotiate each other with the triangle as an architectural intermediary”. The final image of this set has a different character despite having the same elements. The shapes unite within it “to form a single figure”, which seems to arrest any suggestion of movement. I wondered if this immobility occurred because the image resembled a tree.
I went on to add more variables, but found that effects such as outlining or transparency contributed little to my reading of the relationships. The more objects that I added, the more I had to huddle them into confusing clusters, or else spread them into every corner of the picture space. The latter resulted in an even balance of visual weights that focused attention on the overall composition instead of the interaction of objects. I found I was no longer able to satisfactorily describe these images as actions, and so abandoned the standard geometry at that point (Fig. 15).

Figure 15. More complex configuration experiments, 2012. Digital image.

Experiments: Non-standard shapes
I began the process again using non-standard shapes. My immediate observation was that the identity of these shapes was not as resilient as the standard shapes, because a circle or square is understood as a discrete object that maintains its identity even when cropped or composited. Conversely, I found that non-standard shapes lent themselves more readily to fugitive interpretations (Fig. 16). I wondered if this ambiguity would be remedied if both forms were identical. Might that create an expectation in the viewer, so that altering relative values had more meaning? When I tried this I found that: “the first one, in which the forms are the same size, angle etc gives the greatest sense [of] discrete objects in the pictorial field. The others tend to read as rabbit ears, the letter L all too easily...” (Fig. 17). In another set I
used shapes with very different contours (Fig. 18). One of the shapes is very straight, while the other is curvy: this gave more emphasis to the identity of each one. I observed that:

even when the forms overlap it seems possible to distinguish them as separate forms in relative proximity. [When] the curvy one is partly concealed it feels possible to infer its whole from the visible part. The [middle] image shows that the angular form fairs a little less better, and it looks like a part of the ground plane.

This ambiguity was remedied by tapering the rectangular shape, which seemed to suggest termination within a certain distance without explicitly showing it. It seemed that further variations of non-standard shapes offered little advance on what I had found with the standard shapes, and at that point I decided the experiment had reached its end.

![Figure 16. Non-standard geometry experiment, 2012. Digital image.](image)

![Figure 17. Non-standard shape repeated experiment, 2012. Digital image.](image)
Results of the experiments

The written observations allowed me to venture some tentative formal principles to produce a sense of action using abstract shapes. Although not exactly scientific in method, the text functioned as a plausible measure of the “narrativity” of the images. Certain arrangements lent themselves to a narrative type of description, whereas others remained impervious. To begin with, the text asserts an underlying assumption about the individuation of each shape, expressed by the verbal capability to describe each one separately. I found certain images more conducive to this and, consequently, I was able to describe relative values between objects rather than the entire impression of the image. This is evident in one of the earliest images in which the position of the circle is set in relation to the frame (Fig. 6), and in a later example where the black circle and white square negotiate the space around a large red triangle (Fig. 14). A space exists between these constituent objects in which values of scale, position, and colour are relative and, consequently, changeable. As a result, I was able to speculate about states that were concurrent or prior to that pictured. This is apparent in the use of transitory and dynamic verbs to describe them, such as hanging, traversing, negotiating and huddling.

Conversely, the images I found least successful were those that invited inert descriptors. This includes the centrally placed circle that seemed “to be held within a static grid” (Fig. 19). Of the example with two white circles I cautioned it is “possible to read this as a pair of eyes rather than two discrete forms” (Fig. 20). Another image resembled a tree, which I blamed for
its immobility (Fig. 21). I also noted that the busier arrangements seemed to focus “attention on the novelty of the overall composition instead of the interaction of objects” and as a result I was unable to ascribe actions to them.

My conclusion is that when the arrangement is perceived as a stable composite it is difficult to describe it as a sequential action. In these cases, the values of scale, position and colour in the image appear to be absolute and immovable. It is most pronounced when the image resembles something like a tree or eyes, or a geometric grid or pattern. This effect is anticipated by Gestalt psychology, which posits a bias in the human mind towards perceiving complex groups of objects as “simple shapes wherever circumstances allow it”.

The theory posits that certain visual cues such as similarity, proximity and structural economy allow discrete objects to be merged into a single form. Conversely this suggests that perceiving a group of discrete objects rather than a Gestalt will rely on different visual cues.

A diagram by Max Wertheimer, one of the founders of Gestalt psychology, hints at the kind of formal arrangement required (Fig. 22). In his drawing of overlapping shapes, they are “perceived as two transparent figures until, in a specific figuration, they are perceived as one whole or one Gestalt”. Another diagram, this time attributed to a Bauhaus student named Hannes Beckman, demonstrates a similar principle (Fig. 23). A note on this drawing asserts

49. van Campen, “Early Abstract Art”, 133.
that the shapes “give up their independence” when they appear to align as a single contour. It is worth noting that the elimination of individuation between these objects also makes the verb “overlapping” redundant.

![Figure 22. Drawing of overlapping planes by Max Wertheimer.](image1)

Figure 22. Drawing of overlapping planes by Max Wertheimer.

![Figure 23. Drawing by Bauhaus student Hannes Beckman.](image2)

Figure 23. Drawing by Bauhaus student Hannes Beckman.

Similar configurations can be found in Josef Albers book *The Interaction of Colours* (1970). The purpose of this book is to demonstrate how perceived colour values change depending on the colours around them. Albers advocates the use of coloured paper cut-outs for these exercises rather than paint, because the pieces can be freely moved around to quickly execute a wide range of colour interactions. In one demonstration Albers uses three separate pieces to create the illusion of two planes of overlapping primaries that produce a secondary colour at the intersection (Fig. 24). He is then able to narrate the arrangements as actions: “blue and yellow producing green — red and blue producing violet — black and white producing grey”. Although static, these arrangements of shapes invite a verb to describe them—as though the action of producing the mixture is still occurring. Alber’s description evokes a continuum of causes and consequences of which the image is a temporal fragment. In another example he describes a red that “appears to come through the brown at the left, and the brown seems to come through the red at the right”. This description alludes to a state before the image in which the two planes were separate and the mixture colour did not exist. Albers asks the reader to visualise an incomplete configuration of only one primary plane and one secondary that “invites one to draw conclusions backward” and to speculate about the colour

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of the primary that is not shown. We are invited to visualise the arrangements of shapes as actions that occur in time, rather than stable compositions.

![Figure 24. Josef Albers, Illustration for *Color Mixture in Paper* from *The Interaction of Color*, p. 97.](image)

Accordingly, the experiments of mine that could be described using static nouns were unsuccessful at evoking a sense of action. Conversely, the successful ones defied the tendency to become a Gestalt, and attracted the use of verbs to create contingent connections between discrete objects. It is as though the failure to grasp the arrangement as a Gestalt demands a different logic to justify the spaces between shapes. In this case, the logic may be in each shapes capacity to produce an effect on others: to transform their value by its relative proximity. Despite this the shapes retain a constant identity, in a way that is analogous to the effect of a verbal predicate upon the subject of a clause. This sets off a temporal dimension in which the contingency of the resulting effect is evident, and thereby projects states leading up to, and occurring after, the pictured arrangement.

Comparison to History Painting

I wondered if conventional examples of figurative narrative painting could support these observations. Is it possible that the depiction of action in figurative paintings relies on similar formal qualities as I have identified in the abstract images? For this comparison I chose two works from the History Painting genre, which is conventionally understood to be synonymous with narrative. The examples are *The Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander* (c.1660) by Charles Le Brun (Fig. 25), and *The Death of Archbishop Sharpe* (1797) by John Opie R.A (Fig. 26).

![Figure 25. Charles Le Brun, The Queens of Persia at the Feet of Alexander. c. 1660.](image)

These are usually established as narrative paintings based on the story content that can be attributed to them. *The Queens of Persia* is said to depict Alexander the Great’s meeting with the family and courtiers of the Persian King Darius, whom he has just defeated. According to the story, the Persians feared Alexander’s retribution for mistaking his friend Ephestion for their new conqueror; whereas instead he offered them clemency and compassion.  

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paintings that assist the attributed meaning of the depicted scenes. For example, the vertical position of figures seems to correspond to their hierarchy or dominance within the story. In Le Brun’s painting Alexander and Ephestion tower over the defeated Persians, while their equality with one another—which is central to the story—is signified by their even height. In the painting by Opie, the dominating advantage of one of the Fife Lairds is made clear by his placement above the Archbishop’s head. These are useful observations to demonstrate that formal values contribute meaning. However, meaning is not an exclusive trait of narrative and cannot be taken as proof of its presence, therefore this line of inquiry is of limited use.

My primary concern was whether these paintings presented unambiguous actions, such that fulfilled that key criteria of narrative. To this end, I compared these paintings to one that is not conventionally identified as a narrative artwork. Mr and Mrs Andrews (1759) by Thomas Gainsborough is generally recognised as a landmark of the portrait genre and prized for representing the likeness and character of its subjects (Fig. 27).\footnote{Nadia Tscherny describes how this painting tackles the problem of ‘likeness’ in the genre of portraiture, by not concentrating solely on the facial features but on the “setting and costume” as well. Nadia Tscherny, “Likeness in Early Portraiture” in Art Journal, Vol. 46, No. 3, Portraits: The Limitations of Likeness (1987), 193-199. It is also noted as “A new style of Portrait” during the 18th century in Sister Wendy Beckett’s account. Sister Wendy Beckett (RD Press, 1995) Beckett. The Story of Painting. p. 241} In it, the subjects look like...
impassively at the viewer against a backdrop of moody landscape, and no particular story appears to be unfolding within its frame. Are there visual features that signify a categorical difference of function between this work and the two narrative paintings?

There is a calm stasis to the Gainsborough that contrasts with The Death of Archbishop Sharpe, in which the figures appear frozen at the apex of violent action. This is not the case with the Le Brun painting which has only subtle indications of motion. That comparison forces me to concede that Mr and Mrs Andrews are also taking part in an action, which is posing for a portrait. But it is a generic action in which the sitters engage entirely with the external spectator rather than any activity occurring within the picture. The activity does not command the viewer to visualise the cause of its occurrence or its likely outcome, therefore it is perceived as static.

By contrast, the figures in the History Paintings interact only with one another without acknowledging the spectator or the pictorial situation. Their actions are specific and atypical, as opposed to generic, and cannot be understood in isolation from events that occur outside the frame. These external events are evoked by the pictorial construction of a “pregnant moment”. This is a term used by G.E. Lessing to describe a composition that “best allows us
to infer what has gone before and what follows.” Mieke Bal calls this the “crisis”: the representation of an instant of time that “can only be understood as following the past and announcing the future”. Charles Le Brun’s painting exemplifies this. For instance the Persian courtiers are pictured physically regaining their composure from an attitude of abject prostration, as fear gives way to cautious optimism. The pictorial construction forcefully beckons to events before and after. This “pregnant moment” does not precisely dictate what is outside the frame nor leave it wide open, rather it implies a limited range of possibilities that may be deduced from the depicted instant. The attitude of the figures is not determined by the composition, as with the Gainsborough, but by a sequence of causes and outcomes that exceed the frame.

The History paintings do not rely solely on the attribution of story content to define them as narrative, instead they present specific visual attributes that elicit a reading that is different to the portrait example. The attitudes and interactions of the figures are highly particular, and unable to be apprehended by reference to a generic pictorial convention such as posing for a picture or achieving compositional balance. Instead the viewer is induced to speculate beyond the immediate visual information to find an explanation for the specific arrangement of figures. In other words, what is painted on the surface is a mere fragment of the total content that is represented because the narrative exceeds the limits of the picture plane. With a little adaptation, these observations about narrative action in History Painting are consistent with the conclusions about my own abstract experiments.

**Conclusion**

Narrative action can be characterised as a configuration of elements that leads to a change of circumstance. This is true of the “pregnant moments” depicted in the figurative History paintings, and this principle can be extended to the interactions of geometric shapes that I have staged. The examples of these that appeared most static tended to merge into a composite form. They precluded any curiosity about the specific placement or interaction of parts because they were able to be understood as absolute values in the construction of a Gestalt. Conversely, the examples that could be read as actions allowed space for the shapes to interact and produce an effect on one another; an effect that is seen as transitory because it depends on the relative configuration of individual shapes. This, in turn, enabled me to

speculate about sequential states and trajectories of motion, despite the actual inertia of the objects. Therefore the depiction of action does not require literal motion or figurative cues. Instead it can be thought of as a meeting of objects that produces a transformation, either by modifying the constituent objects or creating a new one.

My experiments suggest a formula to achieve this: by choosing arrangements that emphasise relative values of scale, position and angle, while maintaining the individual identity of each shape. These are juxtapositions that produce an effect upon the constituent shapes without fundamentally redefining them. Throughout this chapter a supplementary text has been presented to make these properties manifest, and I have suggested that the ability to evoke verbal predicates is proof that the image represents a kind of action. However, I did not wish to continue relying on an external text to produce these properties, and so in the next chapter I describe my efforts to find a purely pictorial means to manifest the temporal and sequential qualities of narrative action.
Chapter 2. Sequence

In this chapter I describe my attempts to create a sequential order of movement and interaction within a static image. This follows from the previous chapter in which I argued that action could be signified by a transformative interaction between discrete objects. Such actions imply a temporal dimension of consecutive stages before and after the transformation. This sequentiality was strongly supported by a supplementary text that allowed me to rely on verbs and the inherent sequentiality of language to project a temporal dimension to otherwise static images. The challenge detailed in this chapter is to make this temporal dimension explicitly manifest within the image, and this is achieved by the use of visual sequences.

This process is compared to the narrative concept of “plot”, which is a sequence that creates connections between disparate elements and so constitutes them as a continuity. I have sought to mimic this property by finding types of arrangement that align differentiated elements into a single visual sequence. This begins by extruding the geometric objects that were the subject of the prior chapter, and turning them into vectors that traverse the planar space of the canvas. Then I look at ways to link discrete objects together using these vectors, and so draw the viewer’s gaze in a continuous path around the image.

This develops into modular constructions in which choices of placement and colour are contingent upon previous decisions. Visual patterns are also introduced as a way to establish continuity between disparate parts, and to create temporal shifts across different parts of the composition. I also experiment with the conspicuous repetition of shapes as a strategy to fragment the picture plane and divide it into episodic time zones. This chapter also heralds the reintroduction of painting, and I begin to consider how this medium can emphasise sequential and temporal properties.

Motion and extrusion

In the last chapter I used text to attribute actions to images of static geometry, but that text was essentially speculative and relied on certain leaps of imagination. Josef Albers demonstration of overlapping forms is perhaps the only example where the verbal description corresponds unambiguously with the image itself (Fig. 24). In that example, two rectangles of different colour intersect to produce a mixed colour, creating a third element that makes

58 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 45.
visible both the cause and the effect of the transformation. The three constitutive elements remain individually intelligible, yet they are lined up in an array that allows them to be read consecutively. This example functions as a visual sequence by presenting progressive states set out in a horizontal array. In this way, the heterogeneous parts are contained by the sequence, but prevented from merging into a permanent composite.

![Figure 28. *Untitled* (four paintings completed before the digital experiments), 2012. Acrylic on canvas board, 20cm x 30cm each.](image)

My next paintings extended this horizontal array by drawing echoes of geometric forms to indicate directional motion. For this, I returned to the paintings I began before the digital experiments, which I now felt license to work back into. The four original compositions featured one or two sharply delineated geometric figures against a flat coloured ground (Fig. 28). I decided to change these compositions by drawing into them with a ruling pen and paint, and adding thin lines that act as multiple repeats of the initial geometry (Fig. 29). In the blue and red canvas this resulted in worm-like forms that trail from the initial shape. This transforms the shape into a vector that suggests the origin and destination of a migration. In the violet canvas the square is echoed only once as a sketchy outline, but that is enough to create a sense of motion by projecting a displacement of the square.
The paintings now recall a convention that is familiar from comic books, cartoons and diagrams. That is the depiction of motion by the use of “commentary lines”. These typically consist of echoing lines that radiate as if to propel the object in the direction it is seen to be moving (Fig. 30).\textsuperscript{59} Commentary lines suggest motion by making sequential stages of movement visible at once rather than separating them in time. Typically, one object is repeated several times, and one of these repeats is rendered with solid detail while the others are merely indicated by cursory lines. This difference of quality signifies a distinction between past and present states.

The effect of this difference in quality is clearly demonstrated by Modern painting that use a similar technique, such as Giacomo Balla’s Futurist painting \textit{Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash} (Fig. 31) and Marcel Duchamp’s \textit{Nude Descending a Staircase} (Fig. 32). In Duchamp’s painting the subject is significantly abstracted. This is because the stages of the sequence are not clearly differentiated and, therefore, distend the subject into a solid continuous form that barely resembles a figure. Conversely, in Balla’s painting we clearly recognise the subject despite the echoing lines. This is because only one iteration of the subject is clearly articulated while other iterations are indicated by increasingly faint and broken lines. This appears to make one stage most “present” while the more sketchy outlines seem to trail behind as notional indications of past states.

Figure 30. Graphic demonstrating commentary lines, from Graphicacy: The Fourth R? by F.K. Alrich and R. Sheppard

Figure 31. Giacomo Balla, Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash, 1912. Oil on canvas, 95 x 115cm. Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

Figure 32. Marcel Duchamp, Nude Descending a Staircase, 1912. Oil on canvas, 147 x 90cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Figure 33. Hilma af Klint, No 2d, Series IV, 1920. Oil on canvas 40 x 30. Stiftelsen Hilma af Klints Verk.
The way in which lines are layered on the canvas can further enhance the temporal allusion made by successive repetitions. This is demonstrated in a gouache by Hilma af Klint (Fig. 33). The image appears to depict the projected transformation of a black and white square into different and successive states. A linear diamond shape leans at a skewed angle from the bottom edge of a solidly rendered square. I read this as a repetition of the initial square, and the difference in shape emphasises it as a distinct stage in a progressive movement. Another diamond shape leans a further 45 degrees, its broken line suggesting another transformation from the initial state. These outlines appear as sketched additions atop a solidly rendered square, and this suggests another temporal dimension. Logic dictates that the elements drawn on top would have been added last, thereby placing them at a later point in time.

A similar layering of elements seemed to produce a temporal effect in my own paintings. In the blue and red canvasses the diagrammatic lines appear to be underneath the initial geometry (Fig. 29). This gives the impression that they are trailing behind, as if to indicate where the shape has been. In the violet canvas, the placement of the linear square on top of the solid one appears like a projection into a future state: as if this is where the shape will go. Echoing shapes in this way suggests states before and after the present image. This technique also transforms single shapes into vectors that trace a spatial and temporal trajectory across the image. This is an important development, but so far the vectors fire off in one direction with little consequence afforded their origin or destination.

**Plot**

The addition of commentary lines gave the shapes motion, but this motion created a unidirectional line that led off the canvas. I wanted to know how this movement could lead to a more complex compositional structure that activated the whole picture plane. To achieve this I decided that the motion had to terminate at destinations within the composition. This could be other shapes, so that the motion would effectively draw a line connecting different shapes together. The meeting of shapes at these terminals would enable the line of motion to change direction so that it remained within the picture plane. In this way a continuous path around the surface could be described, and its course plotted by the interaction of different shapes.
The above suggested that the temporal sequence and progression of narrative could be abstractly presented as a path plotted across points. It reminded me of a diagram that Seymour Chatman uses to represent narrative plot as a continuous line strung between anchor points (Fig. 34). The diagram illustrates the concept of “kernels”, which is the name Chatman assigns to actions that cannot be removed or altered without fundamentally transforming the narrative. It also shows secondary components called “satellites”: these are not pivotal but function to maintain continuity by the temporal succession, spatial proximity, or causal logic that is necessary to maintain a thread between kernels. Narrative is seen as a chain that requires actions to occur in a certain order to maintain plausible and unbroken continuity.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 34. Diagram to illustrate Seymour Chatman’s concept of Kernels and Satellites.

Chatman’s diagram led me to speculate that an abstract painting could be composed in a similar manner, as one action leading to another in sequence. My next painting, *Untitled Study*, attempted to realise this approach, with a complex configuration that included multiple shapes with vectors creating connections between them (Fig. 35). It began with a solid white circle and square upon a black ground. With a ruling pen I drew outlines of other shapes at different positions around the canvas, and then connected these shapes together with a network of straight lines. These are a distilled form of commentary lines,

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in that they correspond to the contour of the terminal shape but do not include any of the internal detail. After this I painted a pale colour in the space around these forms to emphasise a figure and ground relationship.

The use of connective vectors in Untitled Study suggest that the shapes lead to one another in sequence and, in this way, started to mimic the narrative concept of “plot”. The plot is a form that unites multiple actions by making them appear to lead to one another as a continuous path from the beginning to the end of a story. In my painting, the sense that shapes lead to one another is created by the thin white lines. They indicate a notional connection between the solid shapes. The tapering of these lines suggests direction because the narrow end feels as though it recedes, while the wider end is closer. These elements combine to make Untitled Study appear as a directional path of movement plotted by different shapes.

Figure 35. Untitled Study, 2012. Acrylic on canvas board, 20cm x 30cm

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61 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 19.
The continuity that narrative plot creates is not necessarily an inherent feature of the content. Rather, it is a creative interpretation concerned with arranging the content to accommodate both the narrator’s discourse and the limits of the medium. This is necessary because the content of narrative—generally real or imagined events—is a constellation of elements that can encompass a multitude of actions over large expanses of time and space. By contrast, the medium of a narrative is necessarily restricted by the length of the text; the time of the performance; and the space of the canvas. The plot resolves this by summarising and rearranging. It selects only those actions that are necessary to progress the narrative, then arranges them to be intelligible as individual components, and logical as a continuous sequence.

The plot does not mirror the natural order of the content but arranges it into an artificial “syntagm” to make it intelligible via the narrative medium. Syntagm is a term borrowed from linguistics that refers to the arrangement of words or signs in sequence. It is often described as a “horizontal” relation to indicate how signs are related to each other in an array across the surface of the text. This is to be contrasted against a “vertical” paradigmatic relation, which will be covered in the following chapter. Suffice to say, that paradigm concerns what the sign is, while syntagm concerns where the sign is placed in relation to other signs on the surface of the text or image. The order in which a sign appears in a sequence can significantly alter its meaning, therefore, it is an inherently temporal concept: its meaning can only be ascertained by following the signs in their correct order.

Untitled Study hinted at a way to bestow meaning on abstract objects by their position in a sequence or syntagm, but I felt the meandering path described by the painting undermined this effect. The path does not seem to lead anywhere. As a result, there is no sense that the parts add up to something greater than themselves and, therefore, their placement in the syntagm fails to bestow meaning. Untitled Study provided some important insights but I found it unsatisfactory. I tried to remedy this by working into it further but I ultimately destroyed the painting.

64. Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics (Routledge, 1991) 14.
Following and paths

Plot bestows meaning on constituent elements by placing them in a syntagmatic structure of one thing following another towards a destination. Accordingly, Rick Altman states that the very action of “following” is a key feature of narrative. He describes it as a device that forces the audience to move between events and entities in the narrative “according to an itinerary fixed by the narrator”. This itinerary is fixed by imposing continuity between elements that are sometimes spatially and temporally disparate. Altman outlines a number of ways this is achieved. One way is to evoke spatial or temporal contiguity between different elements, which he calls “metonymic modulation”.

“Metaphoric modulation”, meanwhile, relies on a shared property that can create a transition between different elements. In this case, a formal similarity between objects within the narrative may be enough to create such a link.

Figure 36: Pieter Breugel the Elder, *Landscape with the fall of Icarus*, 1558. Oil on canvas, 73 x 112cm. Royal Museum of Fine Art, Belgium.

Altman also suggests that sight-lines and pathways can induce following by drawing a vector from an origin to the destination. He offers the paintings of Pieter Bruegel as an example of how such devices can encourage sustained and circuitous movement around the picture space. Bruegel’s paintings often feature multiple figures that are compartmentalised as

70. The example Rick Altman gives is that “Visually sensitive filmmakers […] often modulate from one character to another simply by superimposing an object from one shot onto a similarly shaped object from the previous shot”. Altman, *A Theory of Narrative*, 25.
separate episodes or vignettes, despite appearing to exist in a unified space.\textsuperscript{71} In order to circulate the viewer’s gaze around these episodes, Bruegel uses figures or paths to create directional cues that lead away from a central and static point of focus.\textsuperscript{72} Altman describes the figures in Bruegel’s paintings as “vectorizers of space”. They rarely meet our eyes or capture our gaze, instead their own interested point of view is used to “project our attention elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{73} Our gaze is continuously directed to another section and, thereby, drawn into a complex path around the surface of the painting.\textsuperscript{74}

Bruegel’s \textit{Landscape with the Fall of Icarus} does this to mischievous effect (Fig. 36). The sight-lines, paths and perspectives of this painting conspire to lead our gaze away from the famous subject to whom the title refers. In it, a man walks a donkey down a path that leads off the canvas to the left, while another man stares intently at a point located in the air above them. A pair of galleons sails in the direction of a distant port in the centre left, and a man with a bright red hat points into the water in the lower right hand corner. All these directional cues lead us away from the ostensible subject of the painting, which is a tiny pair of legs flailing in the water as if having dropped from a great height. According to Altman, the purpose of this game is to keep our eyes moving and sustain our engagement with the picture’s surface. To achieve this, the unity of the composition is “sacrificed to the vectorising, narrativizing influence of line and point, path and character”.\textsuperscript{75} This example made me consider the potential for paths to circulate attention around different sections of the composition.

\textbf{Point and line to plane}

\textit{Untitled Study} showed promise except that its path meandered and lead nowhere. As an antidote to this meandering, I needed to motivate all lines of motion in the composition towards a single endpoint. A potential solution was offered by Kandinsky’s treatise \textit{Point and Line to Plane} (1926). In this, Kandinsky posits the titular point, line and plane, as the basic elements from which all paintings are built. As the title suggests, his formula has a teleological structure: the point leads to the line which leads to the plane. Accordingly, the point is the most fundamental element, “the result of the initial collision of the tool with the

\textsuperscript{71} Altman, \textit{A Theory of Narrative}, 232.
\textsuperscript{72} Altman, \textit{A Theory of Narrative}, 199.
\textsuperscript{73} Altman, \textit{A Theory of Narrative}, 199.
\textsuperscript{74} Altman, \textit{A Theory of Narrative}, 212.
\textsuperscript{75} Altman, \textit{A Theory of Narrative}, 202.
material plane”.76 The line is described as a “secondary element” that is formed as a trace of the point in motion.77 The fundamental difference between the point and the line is length, which Kandinsky points out “is a concept of time”.78 I was reminded of how the motion trajectories I began with resembled lines strung between points. This parallel between line and time underpins the adoption of paths and chains as a formal principle in the work that follows.

The third element of Kandinsky’s formulation—the plane—suggested a solution to the problem of “meandering”. The completion of a plane provides motivation for the movement of point and line to progress and conclude in a self-enclosed form. It compels the line to “sooner or later arrive again at its starting point”.79 The point and the line are therefore subordinate to the drawing of the plane, and the plane constitutes both the trace of their journey and its teleological resolution.

I went on to develop a formal motif based on Kandinsky’s formula. It consisted of modular units based on a circle as the exaggerated representation of a point, with lines connecting its circumference to another circle positioned a short distance away. This produced a rounded rectangle or pill-shape that can be thought of as an extruded point or a line-segment. I returned to the digital medium to sketch this before committing the motif to painting.

As the first digital sketch demonstrates, these forms can be strung together on a pivoting axis at each end like limbs (Fig. 37). A gradual change in colour attends each segment of the paths to suggest a progressive sequence. As more link together they become paths that, in turn, create planes when they enclose an area on all sides. In the second example, the creation of planes is emphasised by a difference in colour between the enclosed section and the surrounding area (Fig. 38). The result is like an exaggerated drawn line in which each line segment is conspicuous, making its causal role in describing a larger form more evident.

First paintings

The next step was to adapt this to paintings, the first of which feature significant variations on the digital sketches (Figs. 39–40). These variations were adopted to accommodate and
emphasise the specific properties of the medium, including the transparency of pigment and
the physical boundary of the canvas. I began these paintings by drawing outlines of the line-
segments on canvas using a ruling pen with a compass and ruler. This drawing did not accord
with a design but progressed intuitively in response to the available space.

I immediately varied the construction of the line-segments to accommodate the different
attention that I thought the paintings would engender. While the digital sketches were for my
own use, the paintings were implicitly intended for an audience. Therefore, I felt they
required more internal detail to justify sustained looking. I created this internal detail by
constituting each line-segment from a series of smaller internal shapes, thereby multiplying
the visual information and giving the shapes a skeletal appearance. By painting the
overlapping internal shapes with glazes of different hue, I was able to transform the shapes
into more optically active bands of colour.

Colour mixing plays an important role in emphasising the modular and progressive action of
the line-segments. The transparent glaze produces a new colour mixture where the parts
overlap. Not only does this emphasise the transformative crux occurring at these overlapping
intersections, it also precipitates the range of colour variation that continues along the chain.
It does this by necessitating a certain degree of chromatic contrast in successive segments to
produce a noticeable difference when mixed. I found that the colour of the line-segments also
helped to determine the colour of the planes, in so far as the plane must contrast enough with
the surrounding elements to be recognised as a separate element.

The edges of the image play a more important role in the painted compositions than the
digital. The boundaries of the digital medium are infinitely variable whereas the limits of the
painting support are rigidly fixed, therefore I could not avoid responding to them in some
way. For example, in the first painting a series of line-segments describe internal frames that
mirror the picture plane (Fig. 39). The frame on the right corresponds precisely to the edge of
the canvas, while the one on the left crosses the edge only slightly. This displays a sensitivity
to the boundary that is lacking in the digital sketches.

In the next painting, the line-segments follow a more fugitive path and respond to the edges
differently (Fig. 40). The paths in the top half bend when they touch the edge but, in the
bottom half, the paths lead off the canvas entirely. Even though the paths do not fully enclose a plane, the colour inside them is differentiated from the ground, as if the edge of the canvas effectively functions as the enclosing line. An alternative inference is that the path encloses at a point beyond the edge, which projects the continuation of the composition beyond the visible bounds of the painting. In either case, the edge becomes an active participant in the composition.

**Causality and redundancy**

A sense of logical progression was beginning to appear that mirrored the concept of plot, in so far that decisions about one part of the composition would seem to motivate the next decision. The jointed construction of the paths meant that the position of successive shapes had to respond to the previous ones. The direction in which the shapes pivot also depended upon the space available within the picture plane. The resulting plane can only be the result of the sequential and contingent negotiations of point and line. A “cause” can be located to force each variable within the arrangement, therefore, “causality” becomes an organising principle that underpins these compositional structures.

Causality is frequently regarded as a defining feature of narrative. Mieke Bal asserts that the raw material of narrative is “successive events [that] are logically related in a causal chain”.

Causality can be defined as “the production of a change by a preceding event”, and as such it is an intrinsically sequential concept that projects a succession of events occurring in strict order. Chatman explains that causality is important to narrative because it creates plausible connections between elements by eliciting logical expectations as to how a sequence should continue.

Causality suggests a logical—and therefore predictable—pattern by which effects follow from causes, and vice versa. The “point and line” schema assists this by prescribing a limited number of elements that restrict variations to within a certain degree of directional movement and colour difference. Within these limits, a pattern of behaviour can be logically deduced so

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82. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 46.
that the placement of each new element appears to be caused by the previous. In this way, part of a causative sequence can function as an index to objects and states that are not explicitly pictured but strongly implied as a completion of the expected pattern.

Such expectation creates the possibility of including elements in the composition by implication only and, thereby, expanding the available space of the painting. This realisation encouraged me to explore other ways to enfold elements that otherwise exceed the physical limits of the surface. One very simple method is the overlapping of elements. As the psychologist Albert Michotte states, the “partial overlapping of one object by another is … the most ancient method of representing the extension of space in depth.”

A corollary of this is that objects can be perceived to continue beyond what is visible in the image. We are able to anticipate that the extension of a form or pattern will continue in a predictable way, and this is assisted the high degree of redundancy possessed by the particular forms I was using.

The concept of redundancy informed many of the experiments that I ventured in the studio at this time. I became familiar with the concept through reading E. H. Gombrich’s study of the decorative arts The Sense of Order (1979). He argues that redundancy is one of the means by which decorative patterns exploit psychology to amplify the impact of the limited pictorial means of geometric and repetitive designs. According to him, redundancy is a concept from information theory in which there is more signal than necessary to convey a unit of information: that a sign is repeated, is longer than required, or contains details that appear superfluous. A good example of this is the ability for words to be abbreviated without sacrificing legibility. The theory dictates that a portion of every signal has low information value because the message is communicated by other parts. However, this excess is important because it gives another chance to communicate the message in the case of signal loss or distortion. Accordingly, unless evidence to the contrary is received, we hypothesise that a redundant signal will extend and complete itself in a known manner, and we focus instead on detecting changes to the pattern. Gombrich suggests this allows us to anticipate the extension of simple geometry or patterns beyond the limits of the visible signal. It also creates significant drama where the pattern is interrupted.

83. Thines, Costall, Butterworth, Michottes Experimental Phenomenology, 193.
84. Ernst Hans Gombrich. The Sense of Order (Phaidon, 1984), 104
85. Gombrich, Sense of Order, 104.
86. Gombrich, Sense of Order, 105.
Stripes
The compositions that followed explored the potential of visual redundancy further by the use of dense patterns of stripes. These also mark the first artworks of the research project that I considered to be resolved, and as such I began giving them proper titles. The titles given to the paintings that follow have been chosen for the rhythm and cadence of the words, and for the paradoxically ambiguous specificity they impart. My hope is that they may prompt viewers to consider what the titles reveal about the image, whilst allowing the image to remain open and unhindered by specific references.

Initially the stripes in these paintings were intended to create another level of differentiation besides colour, but I soon found them creating complex continuities between different parts of the painting. In *Transient Particularity* a field of wavy stripes covers the ground plane (Fig. 41). A pink plane in the middle is distinguished from the ground by its colour, but the pattern of stripes appears to create continuity between these distinct areas. The repetitive drill
of the pattern makes it persist despite the gaps and change of colour. As a result, this section appears as part of the ground plane that has been transformed by the enclosing path.

The stripe patterns also produce a subtle mode of contrast that is not as quickly perceived as the colour contrasts that had differentiated objects up to this point. In the background, a subtle form is revealed that is discernible only as a consistent disruption to the stripe pattern. The form is clearly delineated yet it has no chromatic contrast to the ground, making it harder to perceive than the planes of solid colour. This is perhaps because we must apply finer focus to analyse the pattern of stripes than we do the bold forms. A corollary is that it is difficult to focus on both elements at once. This effectively divides the composition into successive time zones as the subtle contrasts in the phase and position of the stripes emerges more slowly than bold contrasts of colour.

I explored the effect of redundancy further in another painting, *The Axiomatic Statement* (Fig. 42). The initial impression is of a canvas dominated by a uniform pattern of blue stripes, punctuated by segments of contrasting colour, until a foreground form slowly comes into view. It is filled with the same pattern of stripes as the ground but shifted slightly to the right. The apprehension of this form adds a new dimension to the image as it is revealed to be a series of continuous forms threading over one another. Even when partially obscured the whole form can be perceived because of the action of redundancy. The repetition of line-segments establish a predictable pattern, making it possible to mentally construct forms even when they lead off the picture plane. Truncated sections can indicate expansive forms, and so allow me to enfold a multitude of forms into the limited space of the composition. This is facilitated by the loose and overlapping construction of line-segments, which implies they can be spread out or folded into a different configuration. It becomes possible to visualise an alternative composition, and this is helped by the predictability of the simplified formal mechanism.
These experiments culminated in a large painting called *Fragmented World* (Fig. 43). It has a composition similar to the earlier ones with the important difference that its shapes have become quite jagged and irregular. On inspection, it becomes clear that the shapes are not random but that four shapes are precisely repeated in different configurations across the canvas. This is as a result of their being traced from templates. The individual specificity of the shapes is intended to make them more identifiable and, therefore, to emphasise their reappearance in difference parts of the composition.

In *Pictures of Romance*, Wendy Steiner suggests that repetition of figures can represent successive states and so establish the minimal conditions of pictorial narrativity. To achieve these minimal conditions an image must “depict more than one temporal moment” by being broken into separate zones and “that a subject be repeated or at least implicated” in more than
one of these zones. This requires a degree of pictorial fragmentation that would be scandalous by the conventions of naturalistic European single-point perspective, but it is easily accommodated by the radical experimentation of Modernism, as well by pre-renaissance and non-Western traditions.

Steiner presents Georges Seurat's *Les Poseuses* as an example of this pictorial fragmentation in a Modern painting (Fig. 44). In it, the same model is repeated at different stages of undress within the otherwise unified space of the picture plane. In the background of this space is a reproduction of Seurat’s own *La Grande Jatte*, which again features the same model. Steiner explains that the image represents a journey through time as a consecutive series of stages, with the repetition of figures drawing a path that links them in sequence. A similar strategy can be found in the painting *Jamirtilangu Parrja Purruku II* by the Indigenous Australian artist Jimmy Pike (Fig. 45). In this painting, two large figures dominate the top half of the composition. Underneath them appears a smaller figure, spread on the ground and

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87. Steiner, *Pictures of Romance*, 144.
89. Steiner, *Pictures of Romance*, 152.
90. Steiner, *Pictures of Romance*, 152.
being attacked by dogs. Wally Caruana explains that the painting presents a sequence of events: a boy makes camp with the grandfather that mistreats him, and later the old man is set upon by the dogs and killed.\textsuperscript{91} The placement of the smaller figure at the bottom creates a spatial disjunction that holds successive events side-by-side. If placed at the top, the diminution of the smaller figure would read as a spatially coherent recession into the distance, as though the event is occurring in the background at the same time. In this painting, as in \textit{Les Poseuses}, the repeated figures divide the image into discrete time zones because logic resists the alternative reading that the figures can co-exist simultaneously.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Jimmy Pike, \textit{Jamirlilangu Parrja Purrku II}, c. 1987. \textit{Synthetic polymer on canvas, 60.7 x 50.6.}}
\end{figure}

\textit{Fragmented World} similarly uses repetition to suggest forms in successive states that divide the canvas into separate time frames. The repetition of foreground shapes is made explicit by their characteristic morphology. This assists the identification of shapes so that their repetition in other parts of the painting is recognisable. Repeating them in different configurations in the same image is to represent the shapes in multiple and successive states.

Repetition also gives the viewer an opportunity to become familiar with each shape in order to recognise changes to its state in different parts of the image. For example, towards the bottom-centre of the canvas a shape is identified by slender tail that thickens to a straight

\textsuperscript{91} Wally Caruana, \textit{Aboriginal Art}. (Thames and Hudson, 1993), 157.
length that bends just before it terminates at the top. The same tail shape is repeated at the top right of the painting, but stops just after the initial curve. The first instance of the tail provides an example of the full extension of the shape, and this allows us to anticipate how the second instance continues after it cuts off. The use of fragmented and repeated shapes invites the viewer to compare disparate sections of the work, which in passing back and forth draw vectors across the canvas. This movement encourages a gradual apprehension of the composition that unfolds over time.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have investigated pictorial structures that evoke a sense of sequence. The narrative concept of plot has provided a model to form diverse actions and objects into a temporal succession. I have experimented with various formal strategies to achieve this result. This began by echoing shapes so that they appeared to have a trail that indicated motion, and that led me to arrange multiple shapes into a chain that traced a path around the image. The paintings that develop from this are based on rounded line-segments that are placed successively in response to what is already in the picture, allowing the composition to be determined by contingent and causal factors. They exploit the redundancy of repetitive patterns and predictable configurations to create an expectation of how compositional objects continue, even when they are obscured or interrupted. As a result the compositions feature long chains of shapes that must fold into the picture plane, or breach the boundaries to activate the spaces adjacent. I have also explored techniques that divide the image into different time zones. First, I have done this by rendering segments of the composition with a low contrast to modify the speed at which different elements are perceived within the image. Then I have increased the particularity of compositional shapes so that their duplication is more conspicuous. This follows the narrative technique of repeating identical figures side-by-side, thereby presenting a spatial anomaly that is more logically read as temporal succession. These formal concepts are combined into a large painting called *Fragmented World*, which demonstrates a number of ways that time and sequence can be activated within an abstract composition.

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Chapter 3: Character

The work described in this chapter aims to integrate the narrative concept of “character” into non-figurative compositions. The previous chapters established the conditions to simulate actions between abstract shapes and then introduced a formal schema that induces the viewer to “follow” these actions around the surface. It is implicit in these chapters that shapes function like actors or protagonists in the composition. For this reason, I started considering how to imbue these shapes with a more substantive and individual presence by applying narrative concepts of “character”. A character is a figure within a narrative that either causes actions or leads us from one action to the next. By implication it is also a figure that has independent significance besides its appearance in the narrative matrix. A character would normally be represented by a figure in either human or anthropomorphic form, so my challenge is to approximate its effect by the use of abstract shapes and quantities.

I begin this chapter with a brief survey of the role characters play in narrative, and ask whether these might be adapted to non-figurative elements. I discuss the structural role of characters to perform actions that initiate change that in turn motivates plot movement. Against this change characters maintain a unique and stable identity that enforces continuity across different parts of the narrative. Characters also emerge as complex entities that possess un-expressed qualities that point to an existence beyond the frame of the narrative. This leads me to the concept of paradigm, and to consider a parallel between the role of character and the use of substitutable elements within the composition.

I have attempted to achieve the conditions of character in my artwork by heightening the individuation of elements, and incorporating stark formal and morphological contrasts into the composition. To this end, I began using montage techniques to combine pre-existing elements into new compositions. I first attempted this with a digital medium and then with paint, drawing on celebrated paintings from art history and my own back-catalogue for source material. This created a need to produce a greater variety of independent images to use as source material: a need that is fulfilled by making collages with coloured paper and film on a flatbed scanner. The collage process proves to be very quick and fertile, and from this another sense of character emerges. The collages start to arrange themselves according to a logic of their own, leading me to speculate about parallels with the evolution of artificial intelligence.
**Individualised actors**

“Character” poses obvious problems if the project is to avoid figurative signifiers. It forces me to question whether a character must be represented by a human-like figure—as would usually be the case—or whether the properties of character could be distilled into the formal qualities of an abstract shape. Narrative theory goes some way to casting actors and characters as structural components quite devoid of personality and human qualities. In *An Introduction to the Structural Theory of Narrative*, Roland Barthes describes them as performing an “elemental function” in the grammar of narrative, which he views as homologous to the sentence in language. 92 This structural view is affirmed by Mieke Bal when she states that “actors are agents that perform actions. They are not necessarily human”. 93 Seymour Chatman cites a long tradition of theorists, from Aristotle to the Structuralists, that regard actors by “what they do in a story, not what they are”. 94 This formulation suggests that actors exist to perform actions that motivate the narrative arc. Rick Altman suggests that the role of the actor is to be a “vector defining the space before us”, a figure that threads a variety of different objects and events into a coherent sequence by encountering them along its path. 95

Character can be thought of as a more complex quantity than an actor because it signifies in excess of its structural function. 96 According to Mieke Bal, characters are “individualised actors”: that is, actors with the addition of specific and unique traits that do not have an obvious role in the structure. 97 Yet Chatman suggests that a trait has a structural function because it is “always provocative of action; there can be no un-acted upon motive or yearnings.” 98 Therefore, the structural role may be to provide motivation for the actions and events that constitute the narrative. 99 Others argue that a character trait is often not manifest but is instead potential held in reserve. Barthes calls this a “diffuse concept” because it does not have a “distributional” consequence but remains an index to a quality not expressed in the narrative. 100 By this view, character traits are “truly semantic units” because they refer to properties located outside of the text or image, possessing properties in excess of its structural

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96. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 111.
role. Such qualities suggest that the character has a continuous existence beyond its appearance in the plot and, thereby, projects the time and space of the narrative outside of the telling or presentation. The character is, therefore, unbounded by the syntagmatic structure: it is a component that does not integrate with the surface but is able to move within and beyond it. In this way, it projects a much larger field than is circumscribed by the material boundaries to which the plot adheres.

Montage
I wanted to achieve a similar individuation of the abstract elements in my paintings, and to do this I tried using a montage technique. I felt that pictorial elements sourced from existing and unrelated images would possess more individuality and, as such, approach the “unique traits” of character. My initial experiments with montage constructed compositions from segments of my own pre-existing artworks, starting with a digital medium so that I could effortlessly cut and paste segments from JPEG images (Fig. 46). There was no program or logic to these first attempts, and the digital medium offered little material resistance to guide the composition. In addition, the abstract fragments carried no context to identify that they were

Figure 46. Digital Experiment with Montage, 2012.

imported from other images. Consequently, these montages were a haphazard jumble with little coherence between parts.

I tried the montage approach again using more recognisable source material, feeling that familiar images could be recognised even when presented in part, and that this would mitigate the fragmentation of the montaged composition. In an effort to create a more considered composition I also slowed myself down by working with paint. The painting was built from a montage of famous abstract artworks, including *Blaze* (1964) by Bridget Riley, *New York City* (1942) by Piet Mondrian and *17th Stage* (1964) by Kenneth Noland. In the resulting artwork—called *Mash-up*—the three independent images remain recognisable.
despite being broken up and combined into a new composition (Fig. 47). The Mondrian painting is clearly visible as the ground plane even though it is significantly obscured by overlaid objects. Four smaller shapes with segments of Noland’s composition surround the square fragment that carries Riley’s Blaze. They similarly appear quite intact and coherent despite being broken apart. This is perhaps because the segments are still in their original position, and so their contiguity remains as though the intact image is viewed through a series of holes. Little information is lost by the fragmentation of these images because the viewer can mentally fill the gaps to reassemble the complete picture. This may be partly attributable to the familiarity of the original artworks, but it is also because of the high redundancy of straight lines and repetitive patterns. The original images retain their identity despite being broken and transfigured by the composition.

**Paradigm**

The use of montage technique introduces a paradigmatic dimension to the compositions by suggesting the substitutability of image content. This offered a way for the abstract forms to approach certain qualities of character by asserting their independence, as well as a significance that is not exhausted by the composition. In the previous chapter I described syntagm as the way elements of a text or picture are related at the surface level to fit significant information into the allotted space. The concept of “paradigm” is related to this. It concerns the relation of the sign to elements that are absent from the surface level, and yet exert influence as a series of alternatives. Ferdinand de Saussure is credited with pioneering this as a concept of linguistics, but he used the term “associative relations” instead of paradigm. He states that associative relations function *in absentia* from the manifest text, as opposed to syntagmatic relations which function *in praesentia.*

According to Saussure, a paradigmatic term is understood by mentally comparing it to a potentially unlimited “associative series” of related terms not present on the surface but, by their absence, fix the significance of the term that is present.

*Mash-up* functions in a paradigmatic way because the relation of the montaged paintings to the picture plane is arbitrary and, therefore, suggests its substitutability. The elements that comprise *Mash-up* are not determined by a formal adherence to the limits of the picture plane. Instead, they are combined from external sources because of their implied significance.

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and to signify something new when brought into juxtaposition. The disparate montaged elements do not commit themselves to this new formal unity but continue to gesture towards an independent and external context. A paradigmatic relation to the picture makes these abstract elements begin to function like characters, in the sense that they are not bound by the compositional matrix and are, by implication, free to move within and around it.

The paradigmatic construction of *Mash-up* refers to a reality outside the picture plane: a reality in which the paintings of Riley, Mondrian and Noland exist in their entirety without interruption. The references that *Mash-up* point to might be accessed by a prior knowledge of the source material, however, the fact that it is a reference is also suggested by the evident incompleteness of the image fragments. This is heightened by the casual arrangement of the fragments within the pictorial space, as though it does not matter how many fragments of each image appear and where they are positioned, as long as the reference is intact. From this I was led to speculate that the illusion of a paradigmatic function could be created merely by the casual arrangement of specific forms.

![Figure 48. Paddy Bedford, *Lightning Creek*, 2004. Earth pigments on composition board, 80 x 100cm. National Gallery of Victoria.](image)

I noted a similar dynamic in artworks that are noted for their abstract appearance, yet are known to represent stories and symbols. For instance, a casual arrangement in the work of Paddy Bedford seems to signal the independent significance of forms. *Lightning Creek* (2004) appears to be an abstract composition of shapes, such that it withstands comparison to
the geometric formalism of artists like Mondrian (Fig. 48). However Bedford’s paintings are not abstract but depictions of significant sites and features from his ancestral homeland. As such, the composition holds its objects in a relatively casual and slightly unbalanced way that undermines the formality of the composition and directs attention to the identity of the forms. Even though I do not immediately recognise the shapes or their significance, the way they are composed encourages me to speculate about other explanations for their inclusion and position, such as symbolic or narrative conventions. It makes me think that the objects are independently meaningful, and have been brought into the composition to bestow their meaning upon it.

Abstract and unrecognisable shapes are also invested with a sense of meaning in the work of Hilma af Klint. The colour, geometry and biomorphic forms in her paintings are thought to carry specific symbolic references. To this end, they present a series of separate objects in a

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purposefully arranged yet structurally loose array. These objects appear very specific, and are surrounded by enough space to recommend individual identification as a prerequisite to combined reading. In *The Ten Largest, No. 7, Adulthood, Group IV* (1907) the size of the objects seems to correspond to their significance (Fig. 49). The large yellow form appears most important judged by size. I also suspect it was placed first, because the other objects seem squeezed into the remaining spaces. This suggests they were added later in the process according to a diminishing priority. The purpose of the composition is to juxtapose significant forms and symbols to create a new meaning, ahead of any formal consideration.

The paintings of my peer Oscar Yanez evoke a similar paradigmatic sense yet do not allude to stories or symbols (Fig. 50). The expressionist gestures and hard-edge geometry in these paintings seem to attain significance from the manner of their arrangement. By the simple decision to use a white ground he suggests a paradigmatic reading for the objects within the
White invokes “blankness” and notionally subtracts those areas from the composition. This, in turn, suggests that the remaining objects are freely suspended in space, and constitutes them as mobile figures with an existence independent of the painting. The “figures” are specific marks and motifs that are characteristic of the oeuvre of other artists, such as Gerhard Richter, Albert Oehlen, Bridget Riley and Matthys Gerber. Yanez’s seemingly lackadaisical compositions align these diverse forms into a syntagm that emphasises their independent significance.

These examples suggest that the attributes of character can be approached by giving abstract elements a paradigmatic appearance. This stems from the use of a montage technique to compose new pictures from parts of old ones. Even though these parts had been combined into a new composition, I found they still pointed to their original context. This made them seem uncommitted to the composition, and therefore “substitutable”. In Mash-up I found a casual arrangement of the montaged parts heightened this effect by emphasising the significance of the parts over the formal composition. I compared this to the paintings of Paddy Bedford and Hilma af Klint, whose paintings feature apparently abstract forms that possess significance that is conferred upon the composition. Conversely, Oscar Yanez’s loose compositions add significance to otherwise meaningless elements by the act of inclusion, and by making that inclusion seem structurally arbitrary against a range of possible alternatives. Paradigmatic objects approach qualities of character because they imply a significance that is not exhausted by structural functions. They remain independent of the structure and project an existence that extends beyond the canvas.

**Marlow**

*Mash-up* used famous artworks to achieve a certain effect, but it also demonstrated that the familiarity of the image was less important than the formal properties of simplicity and redundancy. My next painting, then, used my own artworks as source material, not to elicit any recognition but because they possessed these formal properties. For this, I selected only two paintings on paper from 2011, both featuring repetitive patterns and simple shapes. The paintings also included dramatic points of focus that I thought would assist the clarity of the layered composition. The first painting features a red shape ‘embracing’ another shape that

seems to have peeled away from the stripy background (Fig. 51). In the next painting, a panel seems to pop out from the striped ground plane accentuated by “bursting” commentary lines (Fig. 52). I structured the new painting in a similar way to *Mash-up* by effectively layering the images on top of one another and puncturing them so that the layers underneath showed through. I hoped that the patterned field would maintain the continuity of each layer despite gaps and interruptions. I also hoped that the strong focal shapes would distribute attention across different parts of the picture plane to assist clarity.

![Figure 51. Untitled (Embrace), 2011. Acrylic on paper, 20cm x 30cm.](image1)

![Figure 52. Untitled (Burst), 2011. Acrylic on paper 20cm x 30cm](image2)

I started working on this canvas without preliminary drawings, painting directly onto a canvas primed with a pinkish ground. The first step was to map the position of 'holes' through which the layer underneath would be visible. To draw this window-like structure, I used a template made from a large rectangular piece of Coreflute from which I had cut six angular holes (Fig. 53). The template was slightly smaller than the canvas and so left a border around the edge. This created an important spatial ambiguity, for as the line drawing shows it is possible to perceive this as one large foreground shape, or as six separate shapes within a bordered field. As a result, the figure and ground structure seem to oscillate and, thereby, encourage selective foregrounding of one layer at a time.
A version of the “burst” composition was painted outside the edges of the traced template. This created the first image layer which now appeared as the ground plane (Fig. 54). The bands of colour extending from the top to bottom of this layer assert the continuity of this image despite interruptions. Next I painted the “embracing” composition inside the tracing, thereby, constituting the second image layer. At this point, I made a decision to put a third image layer into the composition. To do this I added seven small “windows” inside the large template shape. I painted yet another image into each of these spaces, featuring interlocking line-segments against a graded blue background. Each of these images is seen in fragments across large intervals, but they appear continuous because the redundancy of the design allows the viewer to mentally fill in the gaps. The window structure established at the beginning allowed me to hold three separate images in continual comparison without resolving them into a stable composite.
To avoid this appearing as a chaotic jumble, I had to carefully manage formal relationships between adjacent parts. The most important task was to clearly differentiate the image-layers while signalling their continuity across large gaps. This was partly taken care of by the source images, which almost contrasted enough from each other to signify a categorical difference between layers. I did have to alter the design of the original images in some cases, such as
replacing the stripes in the original *Embrace* image with a pattern of “head” shapes. These curved shapes now contrast with the linear stripes of the *Burst* image, thereby differentiating the separate layers. The use of bold black and white lines in the *Embrace* image also helps to distinguish it from the colourful shapes populating other layers. Each colour in the painting is carefully levered off its neighbours to ensure parallel layers do not optically blend and undermine the clarity of the layered structure. This made every decision contingent upon the surrounding parts of the composition.

The painting that results is named *Marlow*, after the protagonist from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* - a nod to the novels nested layers of narration (Fig. 55). It presents three separate and legible images simultaneously on the same plane. The initial impression of fragmentation serves to slow rather than deny the coherence of the composition. The viewer must look *into* the painting, weigh the sum of disparate parts and consider what is missing to make sense of what is present. With small effort, the composition eventually resolves into three images that can be focused on separately but not at the same time. This is aided by the distinct colour and style of each layer, which draws a vector between disparate fragments. The redundancy inherent in the design, meanwhile, allows the viewer to predict what is missing between fragments by logical deduction. *Marlow* only partially reveals its objects and, in this way, affords them a substantive existence beyond the canvas.

![Figure 56. *Untitled*, 2013. Scanner collage.](image1)

![Figure 57. *Untitled*, 2013. Scanner collage.](image2)
Scanner collages
Following Marlow, I began producing collages by digitally scanning arrangements of coloured paper and acetate. I initially turned to this as a way to generate new and unique images to be combined into montage compositions like Marlow. It offered a quick and easy method to capture spontaneous arrangements, experiment freely, and try many and diverse compositions. Not only could this produce unexpected arrangements, but it also presented the image as a unique event that could be recorded but not repeated. Despite the simplicity of the process, I found it began to constitute the images as substantive entities that approach the complexity of characters.

A range of colourful titles have been used to identify the scanner collages, but I do not wish the reader to be distracted by their possible significance. As digital images it was necessary to give each file a unique name, and due to the quantity of images I simply plucked words and phrases from my immediate environment and experience without deliberation. The titles are generally derived from the music, radio, or podcasts that were playing in the studio, or from the reading or conversations I was having at the time. The correspondence between the image and the title is not consciously significant, and I will not expand on them as the images are discussed.

The scanner collages were made by arranging coloured pieces of paper and acetate on a flatbed scanner, and scanning them at high resolution. In the beginning I used paper offcuts and carelessly hacked pieces to construct the collage, but I found these too chaotic or suggestive of lyrical figuration (Figs. 56-57). After this I gradually built an inventory of collage pieces that were carefully measured and duplicated in a variety of colours and materials. This presented a library of different shapes that I could easily access and arrange like characters into new compositions. A certain modular logic was thereby introduced to the arrangements and, as a result, the compositions began to gravitate around a contiguous structure carried over from the “point and line” paintings from the last chapter. I also thought of the connections between shapes as analogous to narrative interactions between different characters. The variety of shapes meant I had to rely on the slightest formal correspondence to create bonds between different pieces.

A contiguous structure can be seen in Zombie Apocalypse. It is constructed from trapezoidal shapes that join to become a comma-like form (Fig. 58). I produced a number of variations of
this arrangement that, when seen in sequence, assert the mobility of the collage pieces. For instance, in *Zundie Apocalypse* it is clear that the same shapes have been rotated and shifted to produce a slightly different composition (Fig. 59). Another arrangement called *Tear a Hole* is the same as *Zombie Apocalypse* except that it is surrounded by a black ground, as though the context has changed while the figure remains the same (Fig. 60). A sense of time is implied where it is apparent that these two must have been made sequentially because the only difference is a dark layer in the background. The un-fixed movability of the collage pieces is most apparent when the images are viewed in sequence. It emphasises the compositions as a string of connections between discrete pieces of material rather than a stable Gestalt. This causes each image to dissolve into a series of independent parts rather than a self-enclosed unit.

**Collage**

Collage added a new technique to the mix although its logic was already implicit in the work, as the combination of independent and heterogeneous parts into implicitly temporary configurations. Other writers on the subject of collage acknowledge its propensity to undermine the unity and autonomy of the artwork. Clement Greenberg describes collage as a means for a picture to “acquire the self-evident self-sufficiency of architecture”, but he also calls it an “anti-illusionist form of representation.” 109 Here he could be suggesting the “iconicity” of collage material: that it is a sign that refers to the signified thing by mirroring its physical attributes. He adds to this by describing the “growing independence of the planar unit” in collage, which may refer to the emancipation of shape from performing a representational role, as well as the capability for collage material to represent itself within the picture while remaining fundamentally independent from it.110 For Rosalind Krauss, the collage explicitly activates semiotic properties by signalling a “condition of incompleteness or absence which secures for the sign its status as representation”.111 A collage-piece stuck to a surface is described as an “occultation” that represents the picture plane by making a part of it absent, wherein the piece becomes “a surface that is the image of eradicated surface”.112 In both of these accounts collage tends to point away from the concrete picture plane, either to contemplate the individual collage-piece outside of the pictorial context, or to visualise the picture without the collage-piece.

111. Rosalind Krauss. “In the name of Picasso” in *The Orginality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1985), 16.
Figure 58. *Zombie Apocalypse*, 2013. Scanner Collage, 108cm x 148cm.

Figure 59. *Zundie Apocalypse*, 2013. Scanner collage, 108cm x 148cm.

Figure 60. *Tear a Hole*, 2013. Scanner collage, 108cm x 148cm.

Collage materials are implicitly mobile and foreground organisational logic over the physical object. Briony Fer tells us that the Suprematist artists Lyubov Popova and Olga Rozanova...
approached collage as a way of negotiating pictorial space as much as a mode of working with materials. According to Fer, Popova “thought in terms of collage” even when working with paint (Fig. 61).\textsuperscript{113} Popova describes collage as the “organisation of elements” and an entirely different program to the Cubist dissection of planar space with which she had previously experimented.\textsuperscript{114} Rozanova signals the mobility of collage by the “clots of paste” that hold her cut paper and fabric compositions onto the support (Fig. 62). These are built into image sequences that emphasise “the heterogeneous elements of collage” over the unity of the composition.\textsuperscript{115} Collage is primarily concerned with the mobility of its materials, and their substitutability for other possibilities within a paradigmatic order.

Figure 61. Liubov Popova

*Painterly Architectonics*, 1917.
Oil on canvas 107 x 88 cm.
Krasnodar District Kovalenko Art Museum.

Figure 62. Olga Rosanova, *Universal War*, 1916.
Collage. 21 x 29 cm. Costakis Collection, Athens.

I began to view the cut-out pieces in my scanner collages as analogous to characters, in so far as they were mobile figures that were fully-formed before assembling within the image. They also constituted a paradigm: a range of individual units that can be substituted for one another at the surface level. Accordingly, they are differentiated by shape, colour, opacity and texture—in other words possessing unique traits. In each new image they were called upon to play different roles in which they maintained their individuation rather than merging into a Gestalt with other pieces. The photographic magnification provided by the scanner ensured that these

\textsuperscript{113} Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (Yale University Press, 1997), 19.
\textsuperscript{114} Fer, *Abstract Art*, 20.
\textsuperscript{115} Fer, *Abstract Art*, 25.
unique traits remained identifiable in the final image: not only the colour and shape but also the textures and blemishes that marked each piece as a unique material object. The same pieces reappear in different images and play new roles, and this further asserts the constancy of the collage pieces as objects with independence from the image. The unity of the picture plane is dissolved by deferring to a reality outside its boundaries, and this dissolution admits multiple possibilities beside the present arrangement.

**Self-organisation**

By incrementally varying these arrangements I was able to produce a large number of new compositions, and, as I surrendered to this process I found it led to unexpected outcomes. In *Ride* (Fig. 63) coloured strips act like mosaic tiles filling the pictorial field, whereas in the following variations the strips become like limbs. In *Get Behind Me* those limbs describe a diamond shape (Fig. 64), while in *Seventh Seal* they resemble an uppercase “N” (Fig. 65). A more complex structure then appeared which resembled a lemniscate (Fig. 66). A few iterations later *Spectrum08* presented a radical transformation in which only the tapered strips remain (Fig. 67). This was followed by a simple but significant spatial modification in *Vacuum09* (Fig. 68). The process beckoned to infinite possibilities for arrangement, and resulted in the production of over four hundred scanner collages.

The fertility of the scanner collage process caused unexpected patterns to emerge, as though the collage material was able to self-organise. The cut-out shapes increasingly aligned themselves according to an elusive logic, and it was unclear to who or what this logic belonged. I felt separated from this process partly because the sheer volume of images encouraged me to work without a design, and also because the obstreperous tools and materials imposed their own will on the arrangement. By cycling through a multitude of possible arrangements, governed only by the logic of progress and differentiation, compositions began to emerge that I felt quite unaccountable for. It felt as though I was observing a process without influencing it.
Figure 63. *Ride*, February 2013. Scanner collage, 108cm x 148cm.

Figure 64. *Get Behind Me*, 2013. Scanner collage, 108cm x 148cm

Figure 65. *Seventh Seal*, 2013. Scanner collage, 108cm x 148cm

Figure 66. *Hero of the War*, 2013. Scanner collage, 108cm x 148cm
Consequently, I started to posit an analogy between this process and the evolution of Artificial Intelligence (AI). At the time of making these works I was influenced by a podcast interview I had listened to with the philosopher David Chalmers. Chalmers was discussing the potential for artificial intelligence to self-evolve far beyond the range of our own intelligence. According to Chalmers, this would occur because of a serial process in which intelligent machines eventually have the capacity to build more intelligent machines than humans can, in turn creating more intelligent machines than themselves. As Chalmers put it: “repeat this process, repeat it again and you’ll have a rapid spiral to super-intelligence.”\(^\text{116}\)

This resonated with the collage process, for at its most basic level the process described by Chalmers involves the combination of simple inanimate parts into increasingly complicated arrangements that eventually result in a kind of sentience.

This idea was complimented by a short story I read by Greg Egan called *Crystal Nights* (2008). The story centres on a community of digital avatars called “Phites” created by humans as an experiment in artificial intelligence. The story charts their evolution from rudimentary binary code to sentient beings so intelligent they are able to rebel against their

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creators and manipulate the laws of physics. Egan describes the composition of the Phites, and their potential for self-organisation, as follows:

The basic units of biology here were “beads”, small spheres that possessed a handful of simple properties […] The beads in a Phite’s body could be rearranged with a minimum of fuss, enabling a kind of self-modification...

Underpinning the phites evolution is a continuous and exhaustive labour of repetition and variation, and I saw this as analogous to the process generating my scanner collages.

The 19th century artist Georgiana Houghton provided a different angle on the self-organising image (Fig. 69). Her watercolour paintings are a prescient form of abstract art built from dense networks of looping and whorling lines. They are a complex and purposeful series of artworks, yet they show no recognisable objects or accessible logic. According to Houghton, the alien appearance of these images is attributable to spirit guides controlling her hand while she was in a trance state. She describes each image as a coded message from an individual spiritual being, and since the drawing is the sole evidence of its existence it can be thought

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of as the earthly embodiment of that being. Alternatively, we could simply see the drawing as a generative process that continuously follows a line around the paper until a certain density is achieved. In either case the artist surrenders her agency to a propulsive and open-ended process, producing images that she cannot understand or account for. Houghton’s story of spirit guides is one way to account for the independent motivation of these drawings. I could also speculate—following Egan and Chalmers—that through an exhaustive labour of repetition and variation something akin to a rudimentary consciousness arises. Thus endowed with will and intent these abstract forms could plausibly be seen to act and make decisions that drive the narrative of the image, much as a conventional character.

The examples above offered an imaginative dimension that encouraged me to approach the collages as complex figures possessing an independent motivation. *Resemblance*, *Rash*, and *China* are three images that appeared both autogenic and character-like (Figs. 70-72). *Resemblance* calls to mind the modular format of the line-segment paintings discussed in chapter two, and the structural logic is fairly predictable and easy to follow (Fig. 70). It possesses a clearer distinction of figure and ground that is caused by the evident opposition of the collage elements to the white background. Therefore, the “figure” has a greater sense of independence, and it appears cramped as though its full scale resists the dimensions of the picture plane. A few iterations later, *Rash* presents a much more dense and complex arrangement (Fig. 71). Its structural logic is less transparent, yet there is a purposefulness to the composition that suggests a logic does exist. In a further variation called *China* a couple of nested triangular forms have appeared in the mix (Fig. 72). The effect of these triangles on the composition is quite simple and elegant, but defies the generative logic that initially governed the line-segment compositions. There are certain formal correspondences between straight edges and acute angles, but beside this the logic of the arrangement is hard to identify. The path described is lean but labyrinthine and culminates in a dark line-segment that seems to hang without purpose. Or perhaps it is a private purpose not understood by me: an interior eccentricity that could be viewed as something akin to personality. Certainly these compositions do not resemble personages in any conventional way, but they approach the density of character by appearing to possess motivation that extends beyond the pictured moment.
Figure 70. *Resemblance*, 2013. Scanner collage, 108cm x 148cm.

Figure 71. *Rash*, 2013. Scanner collage, 108cm x 148cm.

Figure 72. *China*, 2013. Scanner collage, 108cm x 148cm.
Conclusion

The experiments documented in this chapter suggest a number of ways that the conditions of character can be achieved without figurative signifiers. For instance, by amplifying unique traits I was able to bestow an individual identity on abstract elements that exceeds any structural function. The painting Marlow established a compositional structure that holds these individual elements in perpetual comparison rather than merging them into a single composite. This provides for a paradigmatic mode of composition, that allows elements to be selected and combined as though they possess symbolic significance, rather than just formal or aesthetic properties.

The scanner collages discussed in the second half of this chapter add another layer of complexity to the shape and colour content. The speed and fecundity of the process enabled the compositions to create a momentum of their own that reduced my agency. The collages seemed to organise themselves and evolve through multiple iterations as though possessed of their own will. This resulted in unexpected compositions that approach a kind of personification by their eccentricity and mystery. I could thus draw an analogy to artificial intelligence and spiritual beings that may seem far-fetched, yet provided an imaginative context to foreground the previously implicit treatment of shapes as wilful protagonists. The analogy gave me license to treat the abstract shapes as characters, even if they possess few, if any, of the conventional traits of characters. Viewing these elements as characters possessed of independent will allowed me to judge the compositions as an observer rather than creator, and this perspective foreshadows a separation between the content and the mode of presentation that is the focus of the next chapter.

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Chapter 4: Narration

This chapter addresses how choices of medium and mode of presentation can transform the abstract content of the artwork, relying on the concept of narration to frame this phenomenon. So far my research has considered how narrative attributes such as action, sequence and character might be performed by non-figurative elements within artworks. This has assisted me to develop the content of the work—the selection of elements and manner of organisation, as well as the conceptual and imaginative tools to think of them in narrative terms. However, the medium and manner of representation remained unsettled as I adopted a different approach for each new project.

The chapter begins with a search for the right mode and material to manifest the scanner collages. This highlights the problem of presentation because I am dealing with digital files that are essentially virtual objects, yet for the purposes of exhibition I must consider how to materialise them outside of my laptop. This is a challenge as the images offer little guidance to the most appropriate medium or method. Instead I am faced with a multitude of options that seem equally viable, but at the same time stand to alter the images in different ways. In addition, the volume of images presents me with a problem of selection, and the prospect of editing large amounts of material down to a few key images or elements. I soon realise this is a parallel to the narrative concepts of fabula and narration, and that my freedom to interpret and edit the images is an opportunity to impose a discourse.

When I begin to experiment with drawing and painting I find that even more basic variables are open to question: What kind of line and brush mark should I use? How should I fill the plane? Which elements should I include or erase, and at what point do I stop? By opening out these questions, and venturing a number of solutions in a range of media, I am able to observe the effect that different choices of media and presentation impart to the content.

Content and expression plane
The scanner collages began as source material, but they became interesting enough in their own right that I viewed them as independent artworks. The process produced hundreds of digital images, some that I wanted to manifest as real objects for the purpose of exhibition. This created a problem of presentation because the images did not suggest any particular method or medium with which to do this. The scanner collages were immaterial content for
which I had to find a form, and this resonated with a key characteristic of narrative, being that its is frequently divided into a “content plane” and an “expression plane”. The content of narrative is presented by theorists such as Bal and Chatman as a virtual material that exists in memory and imagination only until it is made manifest by expressing it as words or images. This virtual material is sometimes referred to as the story, but I prefer the more specific term fabula that is used by many theorists to describe the “raw material of a story”. Fabula accounts for the events and entities from which the narrative is constructed, rather than the order or style in which it is told or presented. As a virtual object the fabula is subject to limitless interpretation into a variety of voices and media without “fundamental damage” being wrought upon it. For example, the fabula of Pinocchio maintains the same characters and events, even when it is presented in a different medium, order, or style.

According to narrative theory the fabula functions as a mental object, and must be translated by the use of a medium to be communicated. This translation into a verbal or visual text can be called narration, which refers to the concrete expression of story content by an agent called the narrator. The fabula is essentially unaffected by this, because narration usually takes the form of a retrospective presentation of the happenings contained therein. However, the presentation is an opportunity for the narrator to alter the meaning by selectively editing, omitting, emphasising and embellishing the fabula content.

The act of telling in a verbal or written medium is usually implied here, however Mieke Bal points out that narration is a function of visual media as well, and is manifest by choices about the mode of visual presentation. She makes an example of Steven Spielberg’s film Schindler’s List, in which specific choices about the visual presentation “contributes to the narrator’s rhetoric”. For example, the use of black and white film stock is not an intrinsic feature of the story-content but a deliberate stylistic choice. It signals an intermediary controlling the manner of presentation, just as a verbal narrator inflects the tale with selection, vocal emphasis and pace.

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120. Seymour Chatman explains that “Every narrative is a structure with a content plane (called story) and an expression plane (called discourse)”. Chatman, Story and Discourse, 146.
123. “As Barthes says, narrative is “translatable without fundamental damage,” in a way that a lyric poem or a philosophical discourse is not.” White, Content of the Form, 1.
124. Chatman, Story and Discourse, 147.
125. Bal, Narratology, 41.
The above suggests that the narrator’s contribution to the fabula is primarily a certain *style*, and this is how I tended to approach the problem in the studio. This needs some qualification, because by ‘style’ I mean the manner in which an appearance is rendered rather than what it overtly depicts. The concept of style can carry negative connotations as it is often opposed to substance, and cast as unimportant surface detail or decoration. However, in *The Content of the Form* (1987) Hayden White cites Michel Foucault to argue that style is “a certain constant manner of utterance” that constitutes the content of a discourse as much as its overt referents. This is because the manner of utterance provides for the “simultaneous disclosure and concealment” of the content which, thereby, manipulates its meaning. In this way, the choice of visual style must also be viewed as content. It is a mode of presentation that does not have an intrinsic relationship to the content but interposes a discourse between it and the audience.

**Printing onto canvas**

In the beginning, the scanner collages were effectively virtual content that needed to be materialised for the purpose of exhibition in a gallery. I considered a number of methods to do this. My first instinct was to make paintings of them, but I soon decided that even the most faithfully painted copy would result in the loss of specific detail that would only impoverish the image. I also did not want to stray too far into the arena of screen-based media or projection, as this would sever the dialogue with the tradition of abstract painting. Instead, I explored digital printing options so that the image attributes of the physical object remained as close as possible to the original. This did not narrow my choices, for I found they could be printed onto various types of paper, canvas, adhesive vinyl or indeed any reasonably flat surface with the aid of a UV printer. Then there were choices about mounting, stretching or framing the resulting prints. I found that every option had its drawbacks and advantages, and this offered little to guide my choices.

As a compromise, I trialled printing one of the images onto canvas. I felt it necessary to paint into the print to justify using a support that is so intimately connected to the discipline of painting. *Riff* shows the image in its original digital form (Fig. 73), while *Riff (Version)* is a photograph of the printed canvas with paint and manipulations to its surface (Fig. 74). These

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manipulations included painting additional shapes into the composition, and also using solvent to erase parts of the print.

![Figure 73. *Riff*, 2013. Scanner collage (Digital Image).](image1)

![Figure 74. *Riff (version)*, 2013. Acrylic paint and Giclée print on canvas, 60cm x 40cm.](image2)

Painting into the print yielded some compelling results. For instance, in the painted version there is a persistent differentiation of the printed matter to the painted sections, making it evident that some of the shapes were added later. This functioned somewhat like the layering in *Marlow* (Fig. 55) by allowing the original image to remain notionally separate to the painted areas rather than forming an indivisible unity. Although this was a productive experiment I was ultimately unconvinced that the paint improved on the original image.

It soon occurred to me that presenting an unaltered digital print could be an interesting discursive strategy. I found a precedent in the work of Wade Guyton and works such as *Untitled* (2005, Fig. 75). This canvas resembles a formalist stripe painting and consequently evokes Modernist rhetoric about the flatness of the support. However, it is not a painting but a scanned and enlarged image of stripes that has been printed on canvas. These are not just stripes but a specific instance of stripes—a decorative design selected from the inside sleeve of a book jacket. 128 This alone contradicts the role that stripes are ascribed by the discourse of

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Modernist painting that they superficially resemble. For instead of articulating the fundamental flatness of the support these stripes betray an independent history that points away from the canvas. Stripes are a common subject in the history of abstract art, but by the use of medium and style of presentation, Guyton has added a peculiar inflection that significantly alters the discourse.

Figure 75. Wade Guyton, *Untitled*, 2005, Epson Ultrachrome inkjet on linen, 101.6 x 96.52.

Figure 76. *Heavy Images (Installation view)*, 2014.

Heavy Images

In the exhibition of mine called *Heavy Images* (2013) I decided on a particular method of printing as a way to emphasise a certain discourse about the images (Fig. 76).\(^{130}\) Rather than printing on canvas I decided these seven large-scale images would be printed with an inkjet printer onto photographic rag paper. I saw this as the most “objective” means of output, in so far that it presented the image with the least distortion caused by surface texture or printing resolution. The fine texture of the paper and high quality of the inkjet emphasised the physical particularity of the collage-materials in the image. In addition, the choice of substrate seemed to be the default for a photographic kind of image and served to reference a photographic discourse. By this, I mean it draws attention to its status as an image rather than object: a representation of something that exists at a distance from the physical surface of the work. This choice of media asserts that the collage compositions are a subject, and that the material manifestation is just one way to represent it.

The decision to reference photography was inspired by Danica Chappell’s 2012 exhibition *Light-Shadow* (Fig. 77).\(^{131}\) The exhibition presented a series of abstract compositions on photographic paper made by directly exposing materials to photographic emulsion in the darkroom.\(^{132}\) Although the method is very different to my own, the image content is quite similar, consisting of various shaped bits of material arranged on a flat surface (Fig. 78). There is an intriguing sense that the arrangement is tempered by some resistant friction, as though the artist must push against photography’s predisposition to realism in order to achieve these abstractions. Every configuration is manipulated with intense determination, and yet the impression is of a scene that is captured rather than constructed. This may partly be because the use of photographic paper signals photographic conventions; but also because the high-fidelity of the images captures dust, scratches and fugitive artefacts that assert the contingent particularity of the photographic subject. Chapell’s camera-less photographs look like representations of a reality, even though the forms are of an abstract vernacular. This is similar to the effect I sought in *Heavy Images*.

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86
Figure 77. Danica Chappell, Light-Shadow (Exhibition detail), 2012. VCA Student Gallery. Image credit: Paul Adair

Figure 78. Danica Chappell, Light-shadow (6 sec : 6.5 hrs : 105 sec + 25 sec), 2012. Unique chromogenic photograph.
Figure 79. *True But Not Alright to Say*, 2014. Scanner collage (digital image).

Figure 80. *Heavy Images* (Installation view featuring *Nothing Too Serious* and *Only the Desperate*), 2014. Giclée print and acetate on photographic rag, 112cm x 148cm each.

Figure 81. *Who Is This?* 2014. Scanner collages (digital image).

Figure 82. *Hot Coffee*, 2014. Scanner collages (digital image).
Choice

A major challenge of *Heavy Images* was to summarise a very large body of work by selecting only a few images. At the time of the exhibition I had over three hundred images to choose from. I judged some of these to be aesthetically accomplished compositions, such as *True But Not Alright To Say* (Fig. 79). However I found these “accomplished” compositions less interesting because they excised any relation external to themselves. Instead, I gravitated towards images that felt incomplete, unresolved, and not entirely satisfying. *Nothing Too Serious* fits this criteria by its simplicity: the composition seems too easily achieved, and begs justification by a more rigorous process that transcends the image (Fig. 80). *Only the Desperate* is the image of a cheap laser print of an earlier composition with coloured strips casually arranged on top of it (Fig. 80). The immediacy of the strips contrasts the degraded quality of the laser print, and points to a prior iteration of that image which is independent of the present arrangement. A similar configuration of point-and-line-segments creates a visual link with *Who is this?* and *Hot Coffee*, yet the compositional leaps between these images imply the existence of intervening stages not included in the exhibition (Figs. 81, 82). *Heavy Images* attempted to narrate a very large a body of content by applying principles that I learnt from my investigation of plot: selecting only a few key images that were viable as individual compositions and that also suggest a continuous sequence.

The prints I chose to exhibit in *Heavy Images* were hung with tabs made from colourful cut out shapes. This developed from a purely practical decision to hang the pictures using clear tabs of acetate, as a cost effective alternative to having them framed. After attaching these tabs to a couple of the prints I realised they were the same material, and roughly the same size, as the collage material from which the pictures were composed. For all practical purposes the collage shapes could perform the same function as the clear tabs, so I used them instead. I found that they added a specific inflection and interpretation to the images. In contrast to clear acetate the colourful tabs were highly visible, drawing attention to their lode-bearing function to complement the exhibition title. They also present the actual subject of the images alongside its representation, making visible the transformations imposed by the representational process.
Monochromes

*Heavy Images* included a collaboration with the artist John Nixon, and this provided an opportunity to observe the effect of subjective choice and interpretation upon the abstract subject matter (Fig. 83.) Nixon and I each produced a composition by arranging the same group of coloured squares on the scanner bed. These coloured squares came from a catalogue that Nixon produced for his 1994 exhibition of Monochromes at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space.\(^{133}\) Nixon’s composition on the right presents a cluster that seems to be ordered by size, with the smallest at the front and largest at the back to visibly fit each piece in the picture. My composition on the left was produced by placing and removing squares as the scan progressed. The grey lines that cut across the image result from opening the scanner hood to move the squares around during the scanning process. Again, the result is ordered from the smallest piece to the largest, but in a linear movement from the bottom to the top of the picture. In both compositions there is evident concern that every piece is represented within the limited frame, but in my case each shape is aggressively cropped. The squares

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have been arbitrarily spliced by the action of placing and removing pieces in sequence as the scanning head moves across the platen. In these examples the constituent elements are more-or-less identical but the mode of arrangement is different. Nixon’s composition strikes at a poised balancing of pictorial weights around a centrifugal axis, whereas mine emphasises a temporal sequence at the expense of compositional balance and the integrity of the constituent pieces. The formal differences between the compositions signal different priorities and values, and these are brought to bear on the subject by the way it is narrated.

**Socio-economics**

The works in *Heavy Images* were all of the same medium and technique, but this belied the promiscuous experimentation with material and presentation that led up to the exhibition. I tried almost every mode of printing available, including printing in colour and in black and white, and with different sizes and types of paper. I felt very constrained by the cost of the giclée prints displayed in *Heavy Images*, because at $330 each I could not afford to experiment much with the material. On the other hand, cheap A4 laser-prints gave me the freedom to try all kinds of approaches, including chopping the images up and folding them into origami-like sculptures. I became so interested in this sculptural possibility that some of the original compositions were created with the intention of folding them into three-dimensional objects. This can be seen in *Texmex* which features tabs at the edges of the shapes that suggest it can be folded to produce a shallow relief. In its flat state these tabs are a compelling feature of the image because they speak of an unrealised potential. Conversely, when the image is folded into a shallow relief as recommended it still doggedly points to the flat configuration because of the gaps rent in the image (Figs. 84, 85). Either way it feels incomplete and so refers to an alternate state and the sequence of actions necessary to get there.

The preceding section details only some of my attempts to materialise the scanner collages with digital printing media. I experimented with a wide range of techniques because initially I saw no necessary or inevitable way to do it. Ultimately this process did not reveal a “correct” manner to present the scanner collages, instead it demonstrated that choices of media and style can emphasise different meanings and ideas about the content. This in turn makes explicit a lack of correspondence between the ostensible content and the mode of presentation.
Pen and Paper

*Heavy Images* emphasised a distance between the abstract content of the image and the physical surface of the artwork, and I wanted to find ways to do this with different media and technique. I began exploring possibilities with a series of black pen drawings on A4 paper. These drawings replicate the arrangements of the scanner collages by tracing around the same pieces of cut-out paper and film (Fig. 86). This only captured the outlines, leaving the shapes empty and, therefore, open. I was aware that the unique texture of the collage material was important in signalling the individual specificity of the shapes. To approximate this with drawing I decided to fill the empty outlines with unique patterns. I established the outline of the shapes with a pencil, and then with black pen drew a repetitive pattern that terminated at
the edges of the plane. When the pencil lines were erased, the change of pattern provided the only definition between different shapes. This afforded each shape a unique identifying feature and, because the patterns are abruptly cut off at the border, suggested that each shape could be a fragment from a larger body.

The choice of pattern was more or less arbitrary, governed only by a principle of difference: enough to signal a boundary between one field of pattern and another. I used a variety of patterns, including ragged lines, straight lines, half-tone dots and polka dots. I found that the specific style could signal certain associations such as fingerprints, cracks, seventies design, and cartoons. This demonstrated, in principle, that the use of pattern and texture could impart certain symbolic associations to the individual shapes, although I did not actively pursue that outcome. I was more conscious of the arbitrary relation of the pattern to the underlying structure, which allowed the surface to remain parallel to the shapes rather than forming an indivisible unity.
I started drawing shallow extrusions from these shapes, indicating a three-dimensional presence to mimic the collage quality of the scanner images (Fig. 87). In the scanner images it is inherently evident that the shapes are cut-out pieces of material that are independent of the surface, but in the drawings the shapes appeared as inert divisions of space. To approximate the collage effect I embellished the outlines with an extrusion to create an impression that the shape is held forward of the surface. It also transformed the outlines into perspectival planes that face away from the viewer, suggesting that alternative viewpoints could be taken on the composition. (Fig. 88).
Study for the Miller Portrait

I was eager to translate these ideas into paintings, but aware that the different propensities of the medium required different strategies. Paint offered a much broader palette of colours, textures, and effects, and this demanded that a greater number of decisions be made. I started to explore this on a small canvas by tracing around templates with a pencil in much the same way as the pen and ink drawings. At this point I considered filling the shapes with different patterns, but soon decided against it: the patterns were effective at extending the range of contrasts offered by black and white, but without this limitation the patterns could appear too ornamental (Fig. 104). At the same time limiting the painting to two colours felt conspicuous in its economy and provided insufficient reason to use the medium in the first place. I tried substituting patterns with a variety of painterly marks and textures that seemed more “native” to the medium. However, I found this undermined the clarity of the structure and effectively obscured the content (Fig. 89).

To retain the fidelity of the structure I decided to use flat colours and sharp lines to define the shapes. This resulted in two versions of a composition that I called Study for the Miller Portrait (Figs. 90, 91). The underlying drawing was made with the same contiguous arrangement of shaped templates as before. These shapes were then filled with solid paint, using different hues to substitute the textural variety of the collages. At first I left the ground as a single coloured plane underneath, that in theory would mimic the blank ground of the scanner, and against which the collage material could assert its mobility and independence. In the painting I found this gave too much emphasis to the opposition of foreground and background, leaving the arrangement of shapes looking like an inert figure. To counter this I decided to paint each enclosed section of the ground plane a different hue. The colour of each section echoes the colour of the adjacent shape as if they are connected pieces. As a result, the figure and ground structure is less pronounced, and the configuration of shapes maintains its continuity as a sequence that unfolds across the segmented picture plane instead of being read as a single form.

Figure 89  Untitled, 2015. Acrylic paint on canvas board, 30cm x 40cm.
I thought the composition was successful but I was unconvinced by the way it was painted, so I decided to make a second version of this work. The outlines of the shapes in the first painting had been cut in with a brush, and this gave the image a wobbly and fuzzy quality that I felt undermined the composition (Figs. 90, 92). I made another version using a more rigid technique simply to observe the difference it made. In the new version I used masking tape to give the shapes very sharp definition. The visual difference is quite subtle but does seem to transform the meaning of the image (Figs. 91, 93). The painterly imprecision of the
first version gives the composition a sense of whimsical invention. Whereas the second version renders the odd constellation of shapes with precision, as though a model exists against which its accuracy is measured. This suggests it is the observed representation of a fact that exists independently of the painting.

**Jealous Paintings**

In the next body of work, called *Jealous Paintings*, the same basic construction of shapes was repeated over twelve canvases. This allowed me to observe how variations of technique and style might change the possible meaning of the composition. Here I began to synthesise many of the concepts that I had experimented with over the course of the research. This included the use of transformative interactions discussed in the first chapter; and amplifying the unique identity of shapes, as in the third. I also employed patterns, textures and graphic mark-making to inflect different parts of the image with emphasis and meaning.

*The Jealous Painting* (Fig. 94) was the first of this series. Like *The Miller Portrait*, it features a contiguous arrangement of extruded shapes and a ground-plane divided into different hues. In contrast to *Miller*, the shapes are significantly larger in proportion to the picture plane and this forces them to overlap. In these overlapping areas the shapes change colour: the curvy red form on the right becomes blue-grey as it crosses the angular green one—as though subtractive synthesis is occurring. The yellow form at the top right becomes a light turquoise as it crosses the blue triangle, as would occur in additive synthesis. The intermingling of subtractive and additive modes of synthesis could not occur in nature, highlighting that the effect is constructed by artistic conceit and not caused by process. This fiction is complemented by comical squiggly lines that appear near the midriff of the blue triangle, seeming to emanate from the yellow form as if to indicate some kind of exertion.

All the paintings in this series are based on variations of the same set of shapes. These shapes are irregular and defy easy description, but by repeating the shapes over these twelve paintings I hoped to imbue them with a unique identity that transcended their role in each individual composition. When variations do occur against this backdrop of repetition they have a more dramatic impact because they interrupt an expected pattern. The exhibition, in which the paintings were exhibited in sequence, provided an opportunity to compare and observe the effect that each variation had on the possible meaning of the image.

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Figure 94. *The Jealous Painting*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas board, 50cm x 60cm.

Figure 95. *A Jealous Painting*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas board, 50cm x 60cm.

Figure 96. *Jealous Painting (schema)*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas board, 50cm x 60cm.

Figure 97. *Jealous Painting (X-Ray)*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas board, 50 cm x 60cm.
For instance *A Jealous Painting* (Fig. 95) features very solid and bright colours which makes the composition appear joyful yet stable. The dark colours and spidery lines of *Jealous Painting (Schema)* (Fig. 96) create a more eccentric and unstable feeling. It also seems transparent, as though we are looking behind a solid facade into the internal workings of the forms. *Jealous Painting (X-Ray)* (Fig. 97) continues that theme by combining solid planes with a section of brushstrokes that resemble internal organs, as though the intersection of two shapes produces an x-ray effect. Each painting appears like a different episode in a continuous story about these shapes.

**History Paintings**

The next challenge was to combine these ideas into larger paintings. I started work on a canvas measuring 120cm x 156cm, and again began with a drawing traced from a variety of shaped templates. As with *Jealous Paintings* I attempted to amplify the significance of certain shapes by repeating them, but I did this across different areas of the one painting rather than across multiple canvases. This resulted in a complex drawing that I attempted to clarify as separate sections. These sections were delineated by a channel that enforced a space around certain clusters of shapes. This channel was then emphasised by the addition of a dashed line. The dashed line references a common graphic convention to indicate where an image or document is to be cutout or folded. I wanted this to suggest the horizontal compartmentalisation of the image, as well as the possibility of removing and substituting those elements for others. This idea refers back to the three-dimensional experiments with the scanner collages, in which the appearance of tabs signalled the possibility of cutting into and rearranging the image (Figs. 84, 85). The finished painting was exhibited at the Gippsland Art Gallery as *The Death of Archbishop Sharpe* (Fig. 98), so named because its tumbling structure resembled the painting of the same name by John Opie R.A. (Fig. 26).\(^{135}\)

Despite exhibiting the painting I remained uncomfortable with its resolution. In particular, I felt it was too busy and the use of dotted lines too blatant. So when I received the painting back I started working into it again. I began by digitally altering a photograph of the painting, using the “quick selection” tool in Adobe Photoshop to isolate segments of the image and then superimpose new colours over the top (Fig. 99). The imprecision of the tool made me select several contiguous shapes at once, and this led to the creation of composite forms. I liked this because it reduced the number of forms and colours and consequently simplified the whole composition. The odd new forms it created maintained vestigial traces of the underlying shapes and configurations, making it possible to mentally unpick the original composition. In this way it juxtaposed past and present iterations, and gestured to the accumulation of painted layers over time. I reworked the canvas based on the digital mock-up and exhibited it again as *The Bigshot* in my exhibition *History Paintings* at Sarah Scout Gallery (Fig. 100).  

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http://www.sarahscoutpresents.com/web/bryan-spier/
On one hand the title of this exhibition is a provocative allusion to the History Painting genre (provocative because it indicates a genre that ought to be diametrically opposed to the abstract paintings therein), on the other it evokes history as a passage of time marked by cumulative actions. The title is also a reference to the ‘history’ tab in Adobe Photoshop, which displays the actions taken in the construction of the image as separate layers, and by selecting one of these layers the user is able to recover past states. *The Bigshot* suggested a similar possibility in painting, whereby historical layers could be accessed by allowing glimpses of the layers beneath the surface in which alternative possibilities were trialled and
abandoned. This is apparent in the crude unification of multiple shapes, and also in the underlying textures and ridges that betray covered-over lines and forms.

Figure 101. Tomma Abts, *Tebbe*, 2001. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 48cm x 38cm.

**Tebbe and Victory Boogie Woogie**

In the work of Tomma Abts underlying surface textures similarly betray the build-up of the painting over time. This is evident in *Tebbe* (2001), a tight abstract composition that is criss-crossed by slightly raised ridges of paint (Fig. 101). These ridges indicate forms that lie underneath the surface layer of paint, and it is significant that they lead off from visible forms rather than match or echo them. This is because they are not exactly the evidence of underpainting or the erasure of mistakes, but rather reveal a scaffolding from which the final composition has evolved. Laura Hauptman describes Abts paintings as “the synthesis of many layers of compositions”, as though the final surface layer emerges as the necessary outcome of a series of formal negotiations.  

By this I take him to mean that it subtly reveals the stages of composition as they have progressed over time, and offers glimpses of prior iterations in addition to the ostensibly finished image. In Abts’ work there is a sense that the composition is accumulated by logical

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deduction, and that the final layer of paint is offered as the resolution and synthesis of all the previous layers combined. *The Bigshot* similarly hints at underlying layers of composition, however, its layers do not synthesise but remain in juxtaposition. It affords only a provisional poise, as though it has been paused but not committed to the present configuration.

*The Bigshot*’s perpetually unsettled state is perhaps closer in spirit to Mondrian’s *Victory Boogie Woogie* (Fig. 102). Mondrian left this painting in what we presume to be an unfinished state because he was working on it when he died from pneumonia. I found that the geometric poise that appears in reproduction evaporated when I was in the presence of *Victory Boogie Woogie* at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, and instead it was revealed to be a visceral object riven by history and doubt. There is much evidence of underlying pencil lines, and overpainting betrayed by the subtle ridges and slivers of contrasting colour at the edges of the painted squares. This is not unusual in Mondrian’s oeuvre, but more pronounced in *Victory Boogie Woogie* because the job of erasing or minimising these details is unfinished. This layering functions quite differently to that in Tomma Abts work, for instead of presenting a linear synthesis of decisions *Boogie Woogie* offers a series of discrete elements that are subject to potentially endless revision and rearrangement, either by painting over them or literally moving those that are represented by a piece of tape.

![Figure 102. Piet Mondrian, *Victory Boogie Woogie*, 1942.](image)

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The instability of the composition is most strikingly illustrated by these bits of coloured tape that are stuck to the surface of the painting (Fig. 103). It is known that Mondrian used tape to trial the placement of elements before committing them with paint, and so the presence of tape imparts a provisional quality to the composition. The tape is also not as chemically stable as the paint, and so it has discoloured substantially over time and will presumably continue to do so, consequently transforming every colour relationship. Besides the temporality of these elements they provide evidence of the exhaustive experimentation that took place upon the canvas, telling us there was no rigid plan or inevitable logic that Mondrian was working towards. The “narrative” of Victory Boogie Woogie has been arrested mid-way, leaving us with rare insight into its history while its intended resolution is perpetually open to speculation.

Flashbacks and Forking Paths

I wanted to build on the insights provided by *The Bigshot* and *Victory Boogie Woogie*, so I embarked on a large painting that deliberately adopted erasure and re-working as its process. As before, I started by tracing templates onto canvas. Rather than “composing” the shapes at this stage I continued drawing new shapes until I had a very dense and chaotic tangle of overlapping and intersecting lines. The next step was to assert some order by editing and summarising the tangle to reveal a handful of composite forms. I then painted into the resulting planes with a variety of black and white patterns and textures, and defined the outlines by transparent glazes that follow the sequence of the colour spectrum (Fig. 104). Despite going to some trouble to paint these elements, they were always intended as underpainting that would soon be covered over.

Figure 104. *Flashbacks and Forking Paths*, work in progress (upside down).

Figure 105. *Flashbacks and Forking Paths*, (digital sketch).

I then took a photograph of this stage of the composition into Photoshop to rehearse possibilities for the next stage (Fig. 105). This was done in a similar fashion to *The Bigshot*, with the selection tool creating haphazard and unexpected passages across different shapes. When I was happy with the rehearsal I set about faithfully transcribing these digital
alterations on to the canvas. Yet halfway through, I again decided that the composition was still too busy, and that the green form in the centre was too dominant (Fig. 106). In response, I photographed the new iteration of the painting and trialled more variations in Photoshop. Eventually I settled on a version in which the green central form was replaced with a dark burgundy colour, and the forms and colour scheme simplified even further (Fig. 107). By simplifying the elements and knocking back the central focal point, my eye was able to rove more freely around the canvas. The yellow forms around the centre attract attention by their chromatic brightness, yet their propeller-like configuration initiates a centrifugal spin that directs the eye away from the centre to investigate the periphery.

I applied these alterations to the canvas and called the painting *Flashbacks and Forking Paths* – an overt acknowledgement of the narrative concepts I was drawing upon (Fig. 108). It presents a number of strange geometric forms that are drawn into a sequence by paths that lead around the surface. The sharply defined fields of solid colour function as redactions as much as shapes by conspicuously covering underlying detail. This occlusive surface is occasionally perforated by vestigial forms and glimpses of different textures, opacities, and
types of mark that point to the erased past of the composition. *Flashbacks* is an achievement of editing. It summarises a long and jagged journey in painting as a single image of formal poise.

Figure 108. *Flashbacks and Forking Paths*, 2015. Acrylic on canvas, 120cm x 148cm.
Conclusion

In the preceding pages I have considered how the mode of presentation—the medium, style, and selection—can be used to mediate content that is otherwise concerned with formal relationships of shape and colour and, in so doing, alter its meaning. This acknowledges a split between the content of the artwork and its surface, and invites a compelling parallel to the narrative concepts of fabula and narration by separating the artwork into content and expression planes. The digital scanner collages first asserted this because of my need to present them in material form: for as there was no inevitable or correct way to do this, I was forced to accept the different appearance that my choices imposed upon the image. However, I soon realised this difference of appearance equated to a discursive interpretation of the content by imposing certain emphasis, disclosure and concealment.

The subsequent experiments with printing, drawing and painting make deliberate use of style, medium and editing to offer different interpretations of the shape and colour content. For instance, the exhibition *Heavy Images* used a photographic style of glossy print to complicate the discourse of abstraction. This is because it emphasises that the “abstract” of the images is a subject that has been realistically represented. *Jealous Paintings* offered a different angle on this, by presenting the same basic content painted with a variety of different styles and approaches. It demonstrated that certain readings could be imposed upon the shape and colour elements by rendering them with different types of line, mark-making and pattern. *The Bigshot* and *Flashbacks and Forking Paths* applied a variety of different approaches to the painting of single canvases. These works hold multiple alternative resolutions in juxtaposition, and suggest that the composition results from arbitrarily pausing a dynamic process rather than reaching a logical endpoint. None of the experiments discussed here recommend one mode of presentation as the most appropriate. Instead they suggest that a diversity of appearance most enhances the narrativity of the images. This makes it conspicuous that a choice exists about the manner of appearance, while the interaction of shapes is cast as inherent content. It is as though the artworks exist to convey an event from a factual or fictional reality -analogous to a fabula- that is necessarily translated by the use of a medium, which becomes a form of narration.

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A conclusion

This exegesis charts a series of experiments in which abstract compositions are generated using principles derived from narrative structure. This uncommon union of concepts confronts a conventional view that narrative and purely abstract art are incompatible. The research challenges this view by producing artworks that demonstrate the use of narrative principles whilst remaining within an abstract vernacular. To do this I first had to understand the essential components that make narrative function, which has required me to examine narrative theory and examples of narrative artworks. I then adapted the narrative principles I gathered to compositions of abstract shape and colour. This has resulted in a diverse body of work that uses narrative concepts to arrange abstract shape and colour content, and that also refracts principles of abstract art through a narrative lens.

Narrative structure has primarily been explicated by narrative theorists such as Mieke Bal and Seymour Chatman. Their analysis allowed me to break narrative down to a certain model of essential form and function, and that made it adaptable to my abstract studio experiments. For instance the narrative concept of 'action' becomes a contingent arrangement that creates contact between separate objects, while 'plot' is represented as a form that constitutes multiple elements into a teleological sequence. 'Characters' emerge as elements with unique traits that are continuously identifiable despite the vicissitudes of the plot, serving to link disparate events and settings. Another important concept is the division of narrative into a content plane and an expression plane. Through this, the events and entities described by the narrative are treated as content that is quite separate from the mode of presentation. The presentation is called 'narration', the stage at which content is adapted to the limitations of a medium. All of these narrative functions are concerned with editing and ordering content: motivating connections, summarising passages, and pointing to external elements that inform the present configuration.

When I adapted this knowledge to abstract shapes and colours in the studio it yielded many compelling results. I found that contingent and unbalanced arrangements of shapes could be read as actions, and that it was possible to indicate motion by repeating shapes along a trajectory. This developed into a contiguous formal arrangement that bestowed meaning on individual shapes by placing them within a syntagmatic and teleological order. I also learned that paths and directional cues could control the viewer's movement around the picture, and
that incomplete forms and predicable patterns create an expectation about how a sequence continues without explicitly showing it. In these examples, the narrative concepts of action, sequence, and plot serve to catalyse the arrangement of shapes, and offer a syntagmatic context that gives shapes and interactions greater purpose within the composition.

In addition to providing the shapes and colours with purpose, these narrative devices were able to suggest a significance that transcended the composition. My experiments with montage were intended to approximate the unique traits of a character, yet I also found that they gestured towards a content located beyond the frame: as though the content within the frame was selected from a paradigm of alternative choices. The paintings *Mash-up* and *Marlow* demonstrated that this effect could be created by a certain casual manner of arrangement, suggesting potential to project a paradigm where it did not actually exist. A series of collage works followed in which bits of coloured paper and acetate were arranged on a flatbed scanner. The scanner-collages were quick and prolific, and as they progressed I started to feel I was not in control. Consequently, I could view the resulting compositions as self-evolving and independent entities rather than objects of my own creation. These arrangements of shapes on a surface are implied to have an existence and significance that extends beyond the frame.

The scanner collages heralded a different perspective on the abstract content. They afforded me an observer’s point of view, and allowed me to act as a narrator that translates existing content by reordering, emphasising, embellishing, and omitting details. This perspective arose from my decision to print the scanner collages, believing this to be the most accurate and objective way to materialise the digital images. However I found that different techniques and media offered different interpretations on the image content. The works in *Heavy Images* tried to open up this space for interpretation by using a medium that is associated with realism rather than abstraction. The artworks evoke a discourse of self-referential abstraction that conforms to the limits of the support, yet that discourse is complicated by photographic media that presents the abstract compositions as a subject that has no intrinsic relationship to the medium or support. After this, I produced a series of drawings and paintings that used different types of painterly application, pattern, and mark-making to impose diverse meanings upon the same basic configurations of shapes. Then, the inherent occluding and layering properties of paint became an editing tool in *The Bigshot* and *Flashbacks and Forking Paths*. Multiple versions of these compositions were trialled on the canvas before
being covered over with new coats of paint, and this selective concealment and disclosure offered a narrated history of the compositions as they evolved over time. In all of the above examples, narrative afforded a different perspective on the image content, enabling me to edit and embellish the content as a narrator.

I have found that the application of narrative concepts has a practical impact on the creation of abstract compositions. It provides a logic that motivates the placement and interaction of abstract elements, the conventions to project those elements beyond the frame, and tools to edit them down again to accommodate the limits of the medium. The resulting artworks display a diversity of appearance and approaches, but rather than appearing inconsistent this highlights the persistence of a certain content. Each work is based on a gathering and interaction of different planar shapes, and this is framed as the subject of the artwork. As such, it is independent of the artwork, functioning as an object of imagination rather than a feature of the physical surface. By treating these abstract elements as a subject, they remain malleable and can be presented and manipulated according to narrative conventions. In this way, narrative is incorporated into my abstract artworks without allusions to literature, verisimilitude or conventional story content. Narrative provides a framework for the interaction of shapes and colours, and allows them to exist in an expanded context that admits past, future, and alternate possibilities.
Bibliography

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Further reading:


Tate Gallery, 1980.