

**'LIQUID SPACE':  
A VISUAL INVESTIGATION OF THE  
SEA AS AN EMPIRICAL,  
EXPERIENTIAL AND  
METAPHORIC SPACE**

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June 2013

A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy of  
The Australian National University

I hereby declare that this thesis is fully my own original work

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. Allan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Artworks produced in this studio-based research (option D) involve exploration of the 'liquid space' of the sea, not just in its physical and sensual nature and the way the sea looks, but also with what the sea inspires. They explore the spatial dynamics of underwater terrains, convergences of inner and outer 'space', and question if and how the numinous and immaterial might be made manifest in the material. References to the traditional story of *Jonah and the Whale* operate as a contemporary metaphor for the sea as a site of death and renewal. Through the creation of series of paintings, works on paper and engraved glass overlays, the sea is examined as a synthesis of the complex and diverse on many fluidly interacting levels, including the empirical, experiential and metaphoric. As a poetic space with many levels of resonance, it becomes ground for exploring the creative process, the nature of being and processes of transformation and change within each.

Research questions include: What might a contemporary expression of the interaction of the physical and metaphysical self be like? How might a synthesis of abstraction and representation be created in the visual language of painting? How might concepts of unity be reconciled with rhythms of death and renewal, transformation and change? Does unity necessarily mean uniform?

A significant aspect of this research has been the generation of artworks on or through field trips to locations by the sea - Cape Leveque in North-east Australia, Heron Island Research Station on the Great Barrier Reef and South Bruny Island in Tasmania. In exploring the interface between abstraction and representation, unity and diversity, and the inner and outer worlds, I have discovered the sea rich ground for re-envisioning these seeming opposites as co-creative, relational and finally inseparable.

The 'Wave' structure of the Exegesis is more than usually organic in form. Conventional chapters are replaced by multiple and varied sections, each called a WAVE and written in changing 'voice'. Echoing the shifting rhythms of the sea, and in order to correspond more directly to the way practice-driven research creates meaning, the wave structure reflects the wider concerns of the research to synthesise the unexpected and diverse.

## Of ocean and sea

I sat down between the ocean and the sea and wept. It is possible on Bruny Island to do this, to sit high looking down on the narrow neck between the two islands and see ocean one side, channelled sea the other. Today is a clear day and I can see 'forever'. On the side of the ocean small waves crash into white circles just offshore or fold into lines of foam time after time on the brown sand. On the side of the sea with the mainland its far shore, smoke twirls up into the haze. Although both ocean and sea are calm, one is 'elemental', the other 'domestic'. Both are 'beautiful'. But the ocean is the one that takes my breath away and made me vow '*That's* what I want in my paintings!' That vastness. That endlessness. That power. Welling up inside the calm and released with every wave. I look again at the quieter sea. I am moved by both but 'broken' only by one. That one is the ocean. I sat down between the ocean and the sea and wept.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The initial catalyst for this research was a chance encounter at the Museum of Melbourne. Suddenly before me a floor-to-ceiling projection, almost holographic in effect, played out life on the newly discovered deep sea floor, revealing aspects of our existence that I had never dreamed existed. Strange white 'jellies' floated there. One in particular was triangular with slowly moving 'wings' and a slash of brilliant red cast down through it. In extraordinarily beautiful slow motion it flapped towards me and away. At that depth and darkness the pressure is so great all movement is necessarily slow. Time moved differently and was almost suspended. Tiny crustaceans, minute 'animals' and other unfamiliar forms sank, swam, rose and fed in the strange space before me. Their direction was up, down and every which way, but the sensation of the whole was 'float'. They seemed both 'there' and 'not there' at the same time. I realised the sea was a territory I did not well know, and I wanted to enter that unknown.

Indigenous Australian artists such as those from Yirrkala in the north-east have made ongoing reference to the seafaring nature of their culture, but despite this being a continent with a huge surrounding sea, focus otherwise in the Australian painting tradition has been largely on terrestrial space. Most early renditions of the sea have been coastal (Charles Conder's beach scenes, Eugene von Guerard's Tasmanian cliffs and coastlines) or could be classified as maritime, giving major focus to the ship. Phillip Wolfhagen and William Robertson are contemporary Australian painters who have at some time painted the sea, but their primary focus remains the land, and neither moved underwater. Elizabeth Coats has referenced water within a larger study of layering in the organic. The explosion of nature photography of the sea environment, including depths and habitats never before seen, combined with the ecological imperative of a possibly dying sea, has opened out new underwater dimensions in the contemporary imagination, and interest in water and the sea as a

pivot for creativity has increased even over the few years of my PhD research. Narelle Autio's underwater photographs exemplify something of this unfolding momentum, but the sea and its underwater domain remain relatively unexplored in contemporary Australian painting.

Artworks produced in this studio research involve exploration of the 'liquid space' of the sea, not just in its physical and sensual nature and the way the sea looks, but also with what the sea inspires. They will explore the spatial dynamics of underwater terrains, convergences of inner and outer 'space', and question if and how the numinous and immaterial might be made manifest in the material. References to the traditional story of Jonah and the whale operate as a contemporary metaphor for the sea as a site of death and renewal. Through the creation of series of paintings, works on paper and engraved glass overlays, the sea is examined as a synthesis of the complex and diverse on many fluidly interacting levels, including the empirical, experiential and metaphoric. As a poetic space with many levels of resonance, it becomes ground for exploring the creative process, the nature of being and processes of transformation and change within each.

Gaston Bachelard talks of a 'poetic reality', a quality that holds both materiality and metaphor within it, but is not understandable in these terms alone. He notes that 'the voices of water are hardly metaphoric at all; that the language of the waters is a direct poetic reality'. For Bachelard there must be a union of dream-producing and idea-forming activities for the creation of a poetic work and that through dreaming and imagination we perceive 'the flow of soul in the world.' For Bachelard the creative imagination is rooted in but not solely bound by materiality.<sup>1</sup>

In this research I examine the sea, my creative process and the paintings produced through this process in terms of 'the empirical, experiential and metaphoric'. By 'empirical' I mean direct experiences in nature, particularly on field trips, and the crucial role of materials and material processes in the creation of meaning through the act of painting. By 'metaphoric' I mean symbolic and conceptual resonances arising from physical, emotional, mental and intuitive association. By 'experiential' I mean some sort of direct encounter or engagement with both materiality and metaphor but ask whether there are further intangible qualities 'experienced' in the making (and the

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1. Gaston Bachelard. *Water and Dreams: an Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983.

viewing) of a work of art that are nevertheless part of the reality of the whole. I take Bachelard's 'poetic reality' as a useful concept through which to explore this elusive territory.

### **Research questions**

Questions concerning cycles of change and renewal within the sea, within life, and within the creative process emerge as key drivers in this research. How might such rhythms of change and renewal be rendered both through paintings of the sea and a creative re-examination of the traditional story of Jonah and the Whale?

Also central are questions relating to the unification of complexity and the synthesis of the diverse. The sea carries rich and diverse metaphoric resonance for the painter and holds within it enormous differences in physical nature and mood, yet separate elements flow like liquid into each other and it is hard to pinpoint dividing lines between them. Although constantly in transformation and flux, individual elements coalesce in our imagination as a whole.

Through the making of paintings and other artworks I explore how concepts of unity might be reconciled with rhythms of death and renewal, transformation and change. Does unity necessarily imply uniformity? How might painting achieve a synthesis of the diverse through an experiential and metaphoric immersion in the sea? How can painting represent the complexity of its own processes and of life?

The sea itself is a complex space. On the one hand it exists as an abstract body or field and on the other as a medium in which specific organisms live and are moved around. Integral to my investigations are issues concerning abstraction and figuration. I ask: Where does abstraction begin and end? What happens at the interface of abstraction and representation? Can they be viewed not as opposites, but as a continuum? Can something be represented without literally 'looking like'?

Oliver A.I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche have re-focused our attention on the biomorphic stream in Modernism and its emphasis on 'life' and the 'organic'.<sup>2</sup> In her book *Abstrakt*, Christine Buci-Glucksmann argues that the traditional opposition of geometric and organic languages is currently dissolving in favour of a culture that prioritises organic

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2. Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche. "Introduction : Biocentrism as a Constituent Element of Modernism " in *Biocentrism and Modernity*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011



flow.<sup>3</sup> In relation to this conceptual context I ask 'How might a synthesis of the organic and the geometric, the abstract and the real, be created in the visual language of painting?'

At present, the contemporary art conversation does not often include the metaphysical dimension. I have had considerable difficulty articulating my interest in the numinous within the scientifically derived "thesis" model required by academic convention. Indigenous and Eastern spirituality has been and is increasingly acceptable in the contemporary art context, but my interest is in the key features of all traditions that seek to understand the dimension of the sacred without the trappings of dogma: indigenous and Eastern (Hinduism, Buddhism, the Vedas, Sufism) alongside aspects of the Western tradition that include Christianity, the Greek and Roman Mysteries and the insights of Egypt out of which these grew. This theosophical inclusiveness, which I have been studying for many years, has several simple concepts at its core: everything is alive and has its own kind of consciousness, various planes of being are in constant interaction, and it is part of the nature of consciousness that it 'evolves' towards more and more inclusiveness of the whole. In this light I ask whether knowing the sea more might reveal new ways of understanding such inclusive 'aliveness' and of exploring the possibility that consciousness itself transforms and expands. Through this research in painting both the sea and a contemporary interpretation of Jonah and the Whale I explore the question: 'What might a contemporary expression of the interaction of the physical and metaphysical self be like?' Can the transcendent be seen as 'naturally' immanent? Can the numinous and the everyday be one?

Running through all these investigations are queries regarding how these concerns might best be articulated in material terms. Which paint, which paint handling, which use of colour and light and which compositional structuring best suits this visual representation of the 'liquid space' of the sea?

### ***Central argument***

On one level I assert that painting cannot be reduced to an "argument", but can more fruitfully be seen as a medley of interacting forces involving many layers and fields of consciousness, some subliminal, which operate in simultaneous and complex exchange.

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3. Christine Buci-Glucksmann. "From Abstraction to Abstracts" in *Abstrakt*. Salzburg, Paris: Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, 1999.

Nevertheless, if there is a central thread or 'argument' driving these investigations it might be that the life of a work of art is nebulous, ineffable and ultimately unnameable, and resides in the qualities and energies that flow through its materiality, form, conceptual frameworks and any feelings it evokes. These qualities and energies reside partly in aspects of nature that are known and partly in those that are not yet 'known' in scientific terms, which contributes to their elusiveness. They pulse in and out of form and formlessness, into and out of the 'ground of being' beyond the space and time represented in any particular painting. It is the dynamic action of this interplay that gives each work of art its particularity and uniqueness as well as its (more or less) intimation of timelessness. I explore the sea as a rich ground to investigate this interaction empirically, experientially and metaphorically, but would further argue that these in themselves are insufficient to understand both the nature of reality and the creative process at its heart. A 'poetic reality' beyond these three brings life into each of them and provides the means through which diversity is unified and multi-dimensional interplay operates: indeed, the poetic reality is that these are in fact false distinctions. The sea is particularly evocative and apt as an arena for understanding this interplay, evoking new ways of understanding the pictorial language of painting and how it can speak freshly about space, time and transformation(s) in terms that resonate with the contemporary imagination.

## ***Methodology***

### *Studio Practice*

This research through studio practice is conducted as a reflexive, speculative activity where the making of the artworks itself constitutes the research. Praxis poses, articulates and transforms aspects of the research questions in an ongoing manner, transforming them as well as being stimulated by them in a co-creative way. It is my belief that there has been insufficient attention paid in art writing of recent times to the multiplicity and range of forces involved in this creative process and by implication to the complexity of the manner in which studio practice-led research creates knowledge.

The multiple influences at play within this poetic space of process include those of nature and place, academic research in philosophy, psychology, science, cosmology and art theory, sacred writings from various traditions, personal life experiences, informal conversations with peers, the growth of nature photography and the work of other artists. Social, political and environmental factors, popular culture and my own ongoing professional activity are also part of the complex and shifting mix. My

methodology involves the interplay of all these forces in the making of several series of paintings, works on paper and engraved glass overlays.

I began with a series of paintings called *Sea Plunge* that explored the biblical story of Jonah and the whale through reduced abstract means and centralized vortex forms. A field trip to Cape Leveque in the far north-west of Australia, where the red earth meets the sea, generated a series of drawings called *Sea Days*, *Sea Nights*, a group of small paintings called *Wonders of the Sea* and the large three-panelled work *Tidal Drift*. These variously explored issues of abstraction and representation; the sea as a site of wonder, variety and play; the ebb and flow of tides and the fluidity of process. Another field trip to Heron Island Research Station in Queensland fed direct underwater experiences into the generation of the series *Seas on South Bruny Island* in Tasmania. I stayed there in a small cottage in relative isolation for six weeks exploring in particular the reflective light and multi-directional movement of the underwater sea that I had just experienced on Heron Island. On my return to Canberra I continued the *Seas* paintings in tandem with the ongoing watercolour series *Micky and the Whale*, with its theme of symbolic 'death' and renewal, and new work on paper with engraved glass overlays that organically combined elements of abstraction and figuration. *Micky and the Whale* was made into a simple animation with text. Finally, elements from all series were distilled and integrated in my final exhibition called *Sea*.

Direct experience of place through field trips to locations by the sea was of particular importance, but so too was wide reading to establish theoretical context, both interacting with material practice to generate the artworks made. Research through painting process involves multiple stimuli rather than a single originating model. I will discuss many of these as they emerge in the unfolding process, in order to indicate something of this complexity.

Contemporary Australian artists Eugene Carchesio and Roslynd Piggott, Thai artist Kamin Lertchaiprasert, Ethiopian/American artist Julie Mehretu, the nineteenth century Romantic artist Philipp Otto Runge and the early twentieth century artist Hilma af Klint whose work is only now coming to light, are among art practitioners examined in the light of my research. Feeding in sideways were two coursework essays on sea paintings by the Australian artists William Robinson and Phillip Wolfhagen, the latter also included directly in condensed form.

Of particular theoretical significance was my examination of the history of various visual renditions of the Jonah and the whale story through Early Roman and Medieval illuminated manuscripts, Renaissance, Reformation and contemporary portrayals; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's distinctions between complexity and confusion and between differentiation and integration; Jay Goulding's comparison of Merleau-Ponty and 'the Asian body'; Oliver A.I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche on Biomorphism in Modernism and its under-recognised emphasis on the organic and Lars Spuybroek's suggestion we return to something like the Greek Stoics understanding of *sympatheia* or 'cosmic sympathy'. This last amplified my understanding of Bachelard's 'poetic reality'. I started to see both individual art works and their final exhibition as an 'ecology of sympathetic relationship' and to understand the importance of re-envisioning our relationship to nature with ourselves as included in the relational whole rather than as separate agents of control. This fed my abstraction/figuration considerations and I began to purposively include not only recognisable sea life, but clear, if sparse, human reference too (by way of divers into the sea) so as to purposefully ground the abstraction and any intimations of the numinous firmly into the empirical and everyday. Fusing the material and immaterial into an inclusive space of perpetually changing emphasis and continually transforming flow.

### *Exegesis*

The Exegesis takes a somewhat organic form and has emerged from the process of writing as it has engaged with the unfolding process of painting. I have felt both pressure and freedom through the interactivity of these two different spheres, as I have tried to articulate the 'liquid space' of this complex process, seen *through a maker's eye*. I have sought to synthesise the poetic and the analytic and have not found this easy.

### *The Wave Structure*

In wanting to honour the principle of process-driven research, and to fully explore what new insights might be gained from a more accurate understanding of it, I conceived of a form for this Exegesis that corresponded to my evolving understanding of process more directly. The 'wave' structure of my Exegesis echoes the rhythms of the sea. Conventional chapters are replaced by multiple waves of writing, written in changing and various 'voice'. Some Waves centre on other artists, some on theory, some explore historical context and the wider sea. Many trace the linear unfolding of the

making of the work, but here too, the approach shifts, with some sections particularly reliant on pictorial means to convey meaning (the near 'photo essay' form of the trip to Cape Leveque) and others giving special attention to the personal or poetic. As in the sea, some waves are short, some long. Some are dense and packed with detail or other intensity, others are gentle, open and slow.

The Wave structure highlights the theme of unity in diversity that is one of the driving concerns of this research, but it also reflects and is an extension of the nature of my practice. Each written Wave relates to my investigation of the sea as embodying enormous range and mood but nevertheless registering as a whole. Correspondences might also be made with how 'composition' is built up in an individual painting or artworks arranged in an exhibition. Meaning is created through unexpected juxtapositions and contrasts that are not always rationally understood. The process of painting is very complex and involves much that cannot easily be articulated in conventional academic mode. I have sought to generate resonances between reasoning and intuition without privileging either and develop a structure that is reflexive, self-ordering and organic in a way that is closer to the poetic reality of the sea, equates more completely with the process of painting as I experience it, and reflects something of what contemporary science is beginning to understand of complex systems and their self-emergent ordering. Within open and flowing sections called *Sea Plunge*, *Sea Drift*, *Immersion*, *Cross-Currents* and *Riding the Wave*, you will find the ebb and flow of changing rhythms and tides.

# LIQUID

The title of my thesis includes the term 'liquid space', which refers to both the sea (liquid as a noun) and to metaphor or description (liquid as an adjective).

As a noun the Oxford Dictionary definition of liquid is as 'a material substance' in which its particles 'move freely over each other' so that its masses 'have no determinate shape'. A liquid is not solid or gaseous but fluid, watery, flowing or able to flow. Being soluble, when liquids are poured into each other they rapidly blend. Liquid can be hot, cold, tepid or in between. The movement of liquids can flood, pool, seep under the door, wear down stone, un-ravel the best-laid plans.

As an adjective, applications of the word liquid are many, ranging over the poetic, the practical, the heavenly and the mundane with equal ease. There is the liquid paper of correction fluid but also the 'liquid fire' of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (If it be land that ever burn'd with solid, as the Lake with liquid fire l. 229). There are the liquid graves of those lost at sea, the liquid eyes of those in grief or near tears, the liquid air of refrigeration and TV's liquid crystal display. Oil has been called liquid gold, but so too a shimmering setting sun. Liquid suggests molten, runny, permeable, convertible, in a process of mutability or change.

The sea is liquid on a vast scale.

The term 'liquid space' can be applied to the sea, the self, workings of the mind and the fluid interaction of the inner and outer worlds. It can reference the space of the individual canvas, the process of painting itself, or the shifting nature of meaning through changes in context or time. In quantum reality, time itself can be understood as liquid, moving forward and back and even sideways with equal ease.

I think of the sea as 'liquid space' because underwater everything is moving and space there seems unfixed. Over the vastness of the surface of the sea as well as in its depths enormous changes ranging from violent storms to glasslike calm generate all manner of physical, emotional and metaphoric shifts. Yet all merge easily in our imagination into the fluid space we call 'the sea'.

*Sea Plunge*

## WAVE: *Sea Plunge I*

My attraction to the story of *Jonah and the Whale* was as a story of transformation and renewal after crisis. It grew out of my research focus on the sea as a poetic space of infinite becoming, within which large and small cycles of death and renewal ebbed and flowed. The story of *Jonah and the Whale* pinpointed one such cycle, and became the impetus for a comparison of selected visual representations of the story across different cultures and painting traditions, revealing a fascinating ‘liquid space’ of fluctuating meaning and interpretation over time. Through their sharing of the Old Testament, Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions all have rich traditions of visual imagery portraying Jonah and the ‘big fish’ or whale. The researched images became context, counterpoint and inspiration for two contemporary renditions of this traditional theme: the development of two series of my own paintings: a set of seven (each 120 x154 cm) called *Sea Plunge* and another of seventy-five 20 x 20 cm watercolours for the creation of *Micky and the Whale*.

The story of *Jonah and the Whale* involves the prophet Jonah running away from his inner responsibilities and potential by boarding a ship heading as far away as possible in another direction.<sup>1</sup> A tumultuous storm develops, and Jonah is cast overboard as the probable cause. He is swallowed by a large fish (in later traditions a whale) and spends three days and three nights in its belly before being cast onto land at the directive of God. Further developments unfold for Jonah, but the episode in the whale as a representation of renewal after crisis was my focus. I wanted to explore the metaphoric potential of the ancient narrative and to understand and unpick its significance as a quintessential example of transformation and change that is still relevant today.

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1. The psychologist Abraham Maslow has developed a contemporary concept of ‘the Jonah complex’ which shifts emphasis from an Old Testament judgemental God to impetus from within the individual to fulfil identity and inner potential.



## *The Historical Sea*



*The prophet Jonah being thrown into the Sea.*  
Catacomb of Saint Peter and Saint Marcellino, Rome, Italy, (4th century?)

How quaint this early rendering of the story looks. Significance and felt response are key. Correct anatomy and proportion are not. Made underground in confined catacomb space when the fire of first faith needed to be kept secret, this Roman/Early Christian example highlighted the power of the awkwardly made but deeply felt. The fact that the figure throwing Jonah seems to be walking on water and Jonah appears to emerge from his chest raises the possibility of an early connection between Christ and Jonah.



Ravello Pulpit (ambo of Epistle), Duomo di Ravello, Italy, 12<sup>th</sup> C

On the Ravello pulpit the 'big fish' of the Old Testament has morphed from a surprised and friendly sea monster into two poised, soft green mosaic 'creatures'. The sophisticated and humorous have dovetailed into each other and created something simple and profound. On the left, from the standpoint of the speaker, Jonah disappears

into the 'whale', and on the right he re-emerges: the story in a nutshell. Succinct and abstracted, two large emblems of infinity sit below, forming black voids centralised in fields of white. These are contained by a patterned border but open endlessly into dark and condensed potentiality. These 'abstractions' made a profound effect on me, and I felt myself storing away something of the symbolic and visual simplicity in their treatment of the void, in a way that well might, after incubation, emerge in some way in my own work.

The link made (in New Testament Matthew) between Christ's three days in the tomb and Jonah's three days in the whale's belly is often repeated in Early Christian representations of the Jonah story, bringing into focus a belief in humanity's ability to renew or 'resurrect' from suffering into further life. Like Christ, Jonah becomes an icon of transformation and the defeat of death. Two peacocks, additional symbols of resurrection, frame a central portion of the Pulpit that could represent a door opening into a tomb.



*Yunis emerging from the belly of the fish. Qisas al-anbiya (Stories of the Prophets) (in manuscript N-1, 16th Century)*

The Persian illuminated manuscripts I looked at also concentrated on Jonah's renewal and triumphant emergence from the fish and highlighted the central importance of symbols in the Islamic and Sufi traditions. While their gorgeous colour attracted me, I was most struck by their intense intimacy, their spirit of devotion and their intent to

share the search for 'universal' wisdom in vivid symbolism and particularised detail.

As Laleh Bakhtiar has pointed out, symbolism is perhaps 'the most sacred of Sufi sciences' as it is through symbols that one is both awakened and transformed, and symbols 'reflect both Divine transcendence and Divine immanence; they refer to both the universal aspect of *creation* and the particular aspect of *tradition*'. Symbols are seen as 'realities contained within the nature of things' and are the means of both remembering and invoking the higher reality that we struggle to remember. Bakhtiar employs the metaphor of the sea:

Each time one forgets, and is pulled back into the sea of the unconscious psychic forces, one must struggle again to remember; and it is only through an understanding of the symbolic that one can do so.<sup>2</sup>



*Jonah and the fish.* Folio from a *Jami al-Tavarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), Western Iran. ca. 14th C. 319 x 481 cm. NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Independent painting or detached leaf.

In the Western Iranian manuscript (above), a black fish with hints of gold takes centre stage, spanning almost the entire width of the image, with Jonah sitting precariously on the edge of its mouth. His unusual paleness and nakedness represents the purity Jonah has found through his trial in the fish and his experience of darkness there: a stripping bare both within and without. An inscription on Jonah's arm links his entrance into the darkness of the whale's womb (or tomb) with the setting sun or else, (depending on translation), his emergence from darkness. It is three layers of darkness

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2. Laleh Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Expressions of the Mystic Quest* London: Thames and Hudson, 1976. 26

that Jonah enters: of the fish, of the sea, and of the spirit. He has accomplished the central aim of the Sufi 'to die before you die', so as to be transformed into fresh and new life. As the messenger of God, the angel Jibra'il (Gabriel) offers Jonah 'the gift' of a robe as recognition of his triumph. As Deirdre Jackson has noted in *Marvellous to Behold*<sup>3</sup>, redemption rather than retribution becomes the common approach to the story in Islamic art.

What particularly intrigued me in these manuscripts was the treatment and symbology of the sea. The sea in Islamic thought reflects the state of both the emotions and the soul. Hazrat Inayat Khan talks of emotions arising from the varying intensity and directional movement of the vibrational activity of basic existence. The 'mist' from such activity then forms 'clouds which we call emotions' which subsequently 'obscure the clear light of the soul':

It is the state of vibrations to which a man is tuned that accounts for his soul's note. The different degrees of these notes form a variety of pitch divided by the mystics into three distinct grades. First, the grade which produces power and intelligence and may be pictured as a calm sea. Secondly, the grade of moderate activity which keeps all things in motion and is a balance between power and weakness, which may be pictured as the sea in motion. Thirdly, the grade of intense activity which destroys everything and causes weakness and blindness; it may be pictured as a stormy sea.<sup>4</sup>

This way of looking at the relatedness of emotions and the soul and the possibility of one 'clouding' the other (whilst still being connected through the sea which encompassed both) invited me to consider not just these manuscripts and my own future portrayals of the story in this light, but also the process of painting itself, and to ask if at least certain emotions might sometimes 'cloud' intuitional flow.

The sea's overall 'mood' in the Iranian manuscript is somewhat elusive. While not choppy and certainly not stormy neither is it limpid or totally calm - it seems poised between the two extremes. The entire story is played out within the boundaries of this vivid field of blue sea and the angel enters it as a symbolic space in which sea and sky and heavenly and earthly realms become undifferentiated. In contrast, in *Qisas al-anbiya (Stories of the Prophets)* the sea is dark, and rather than being depicted by relatively even scalloped waves, it is rendered in thin dark lines swirling into circular

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3. Deirdre Jackson. *Marvellous to Behold: Miracles in Medieval Manuscripts*. London: British Library, 2007. 113-7

4. Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1996. 126-7

eddies, evoking a sea that is at least to some extent 'troubled'. It is suggestive more of danger that is now being exited and moved beyond. The blue sky remains 'above'.



Michelangelo. *The Sistine Ceiling. Jonah*, fresco, 1508-1512

The Renaissance saw the grounding of the divine into totally different physical and conceptual territory. In Michelangelo's rendition of the story the fish is dwarfed by a mighty Jonah who is in fact the largest and most centrally positioned figure on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Jonah looks up towards God and the divine with something like a combination of apprehension and longing. He nevertheless reflects the revolutionary zeitgeist of the times which made man central in the cosmos as 'the measure of all things'. This conceptual framework saw deep-seated equivalences between the physical and the divine, in part through revival of the ancient law of correspondences 'as above, so below'. This 'law' is believed to have originated in the *Hermetica (Book of Hermes)*, a text which was collated in the city of Alexandria in Greek, Latin and Coptic during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries CE but is a direct descendent of the philosophy of the Egyptians.<sup>5</sup> This synthesis of the Egyptian mystery tradition with classical Greek, Roman and Coptic (Early Christian) thought, flowing through to integrate with the power of what Christianity had by this time become, gives the Renaissance Jonah a very different feel. Man has grounded the divine in vigorous physicality. Jonah claims centre stage and most of the physical space. The fish is no longer prominent but ineffectually touches a thigh that would make any modern athlete proud. It is no

5. Timothy Freke, Peter Gandy. *The Hermetica: The lost wisdom of the pharaohs*. London: Paitkus, 1997

longer a central symbol or a threat, but rather is relegated to an attribute that identifies Jonah. The space the angels occupy is compressed and the sea is absent.



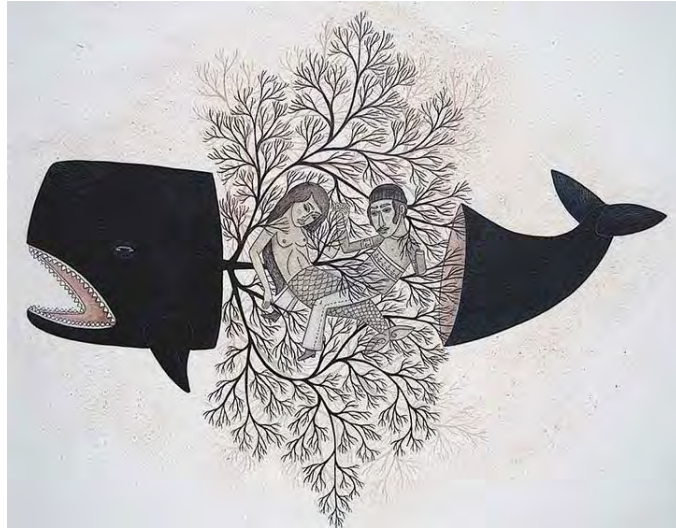
Johan Sadeler I Fecit, 1550-1600, Dirk Barendsz. *Jonah Swallowed by the Whale*. Engraving. The Illustrated Bartsch. 233 x 195 mm

This image represents another dramatic change. Yvonne Sherwood has outlined with precision and detail the influence of Luther, Calvin, John Hooper and others on the literary renditions of the Jonah story,<sup>6</sup> and there are striking equivalences in visual representation. Accent becomes punishment for the 'storm-tossed soul' that disobeys God. Monstrosity is linked to the individual soul and the 'lesson' becomes self-discipline. Calvin's concept of 'carrying in one's heart one's own executioner' is one aspect of this switch. The body of Jonah thrown from the ship becomes a metaphor for 'the ship of state' ridding itself of all its dissidents - all those who, like Jonah, 'rock the boat' in what has become a decidedly storm-tossed sea.

Yvonne Sherwood has characterised the position of Jonah in the twentieth and twenty first centuries as being in 'backwater and low tide'. The title of one of Frank Stella's works relates to the Jonah story but such narrative connection is unusual in the bulk of his abstract practice. I found most current references to Jonah on websites and other or more informal contexts than that of major painting traditions. Jonah is referred to in cartoons for instance, in humorous reference to being swallowed up in the business environment, or as the DC Comics figure Ultra Boy, (real name Jo Nah) of the planet

6. Yvonne Sherwood: *Biblical Text and its Afterlives, The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*. Cambridge: University Press, 2000. 32-42

Rimbor. This Jonah gained his powers when 'the Space Speedster he was flying was swallowed by an ultra-energy beast (a space whale), exposing him to radiation while inside.'<sup>7</sup>



Evan B Harris. *Whale & Innards*. 24" x 24" 2007 [www.evanbharris.com](http://www.evanbharris.com)

Evan B Harris's *Whale and Innards* was posted on a personalized selling website after being exhibited in a small San Francisco gallery. It exists in a somewhat amorphous zone between 'high art', design, popular culture and other aspects of the web. Exact categorization has become elusive, the whale roaming in a mutable territory of collective imagination and shifting social context. The accent is on experience inside the whale (*Whale and Innards*) in terms of male /female relationship and perhaps balance, but while the male is personalized as a self-portrait, the female is mythologized as a mermaid. The innards of the whale sprout into branching tree forms which hold the pair in some sense of fertile renewal. The expression on the whale is hard to define. It is not monster, but cut in two, and an instrument of growth.

I entered into a web conversation around the imaging of the whale and Jonah in contemporary times with fellow artist Peter Tyndall, who sent me the following image with the comment/ question:

If Jonah in the Whale is Tradition...?

What of the Whale in Jonah?

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7. *Ultra Boy (Jo Nah of the planet Rimbor)*. DC Comics teenage superhero created by Jerry Siegel and Curt Swann in 1962. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultra\\_Boy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ultra_Boy)



*Tradition Kills, Stop the Bloody Whaling, Greenpeace poster, ca. 2009*

What indeed of the whale in Jonah, in us all? The monster without has become the monster within, and linked in this image to contemporary environmental issues and in particular Japanese whaling. Blood drips from the little red whale/made-up mouth, which is set in the whitened face of the traditional geisha. The eyes however, pierce the mask, inviting us to question further and link the red and dripping letters *Tradition Kills* to the mouth that is similarly dripping from the blood of eaten whale. Jonah has become everyman and everywoman who eats the whale. This image resonates with wider significances in relation to the possibly dying ocean and the importance of re-envisioning nature as a place of mutual respect between all forms of life. This in turn highlighted an important aspect of my research into the sea as a complex living whole, and the wider context of my overall endeavour. I stored this emphasis away for use in some future way I could not yet envisage.



# WAVE: SEA PLUNGE II

Entering a PhD is like entering a whale

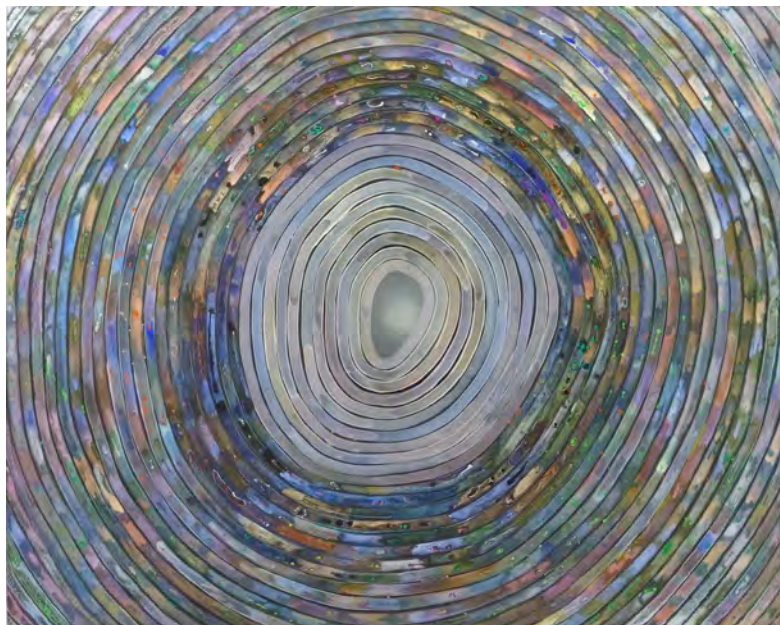
Vivienne Binns

The creation of the seven paintings for *Sea Plunge*, each 122.5 x 153 cm, involved merging the symbology of the sea and the Jonah and the whale story. The story of Jonah and the Whale became a metaphor for the sea. Both represented transformation and change within patterns or waves of becoming, generating a sense of endlessness. Each was, in its own way, a liquid space of transition. My aim was to enter the territory of the myth both emotionally and conceptually and to synthesise the material I had gathered from historical renditions with my own inner response. I wanted to create works suggestive of the sea, the interior of the whale, and the process of 'death' and renewal at the narrative core of the story of Jonah and the whale. Early working titles included *In the Belly of the Whale* and *In the Belly of the Sea*.

As I looked back over earlier historical imagery of the Jonah story and compared them to more recent depictions, I felt a certain lack of allusion to the magnificence of the sea's full rhythm. I wanted to 'ground' something of the eternal and numinous that I had found in the illuminated manuscripts and in the mosaics of the Ravello Cathedral into a contemporary form that felt alive and relevant now. I had begun the more specifically figurative *Micky and the Whale* works but these were small and not yet ready to be developed further. I wanted something else for these larger works.

I saw this series as an opportunity to examine notions of mortality and the void as a complex paradox of dark/light, empty/full, life/death resonances without being tied too particularly to a single narrative or to the literalness of an 'illustrated' story. I had been particularly impressed by the abstracted mosaics on the Ravello Cathedral pulpit and their dark symbolic voids representing infinity and believe these subliminally played into my decision to choose distilled abstraction as the form of these works. However, I wanted something less regular and more mobile, that combined organic and geometric

aspects of abstraction, and focused on the *experience within* the whale as well as on any outer or symbolic meaning. The use of sustained abstraction, focus on the experience of being inside the whale's body and emphasis on the void (both dark and light) as fertile womb bring significant new perspectives to the traditional narrative.



Micky Allan. *Sea Plunge I* 2009, acrylic and oil on linen, 122.5 x 153 cm

I wondered what physical structure I could use to embody this barely articulated multi-levelled intent, which at the beginning was not overt. Tension between intuition and idea is sometimes creative, releasing into flow, but sometimes works as conflict that blocks and disrupts. For me precise intent becomes diffused during the act of painting and only clearly emerges through the act of painting itself, which constantly adjusts and transforms the idea. I rarely paint from drawings or plans and it was only during the studio process of moving canvases and mixing paints that 'the intent formed' to make a series of concentric circles moving in towards a centre, as a form for metaphorically plunging into the belly of the whale. I found myself surprised by the form this took.

In a spirit of technical and structural experiment which I likened to dropping into the uncharted territory of the sea and simultaneously into uncharted territory in myself, I converged focus into the centre through the repeated use of concentric rings. This became the conceptual and physical structure that was to underpin the whole series. I chose a single large central motif as opposed to small forms in an immense and relatively undefined space to create experiential drama relevant both to the Jonah narrative and the initial desire driving this research to dive metaphorically into the until recently unphotographed and unknown depths of the sea. I pooled and spread

pearlescent blues and pinks and greens over a black ground in previously untried ways and dropped glitter into the wet curving strips as a way of giving life and activation to the journey.



Micky Allan. *Sea Plunge II* 2009, acrylic on linen, 122.5 x 153 cm

To make these paintings I laid them down on a waist-high table so that I could pool the acrylic into the circular strips without the marks or indeed the strips running down into each other as they dried: painted vertically on a wall they would have become a mass of drips. Starting at the outer edges of the work, I moved in towards the centre, but changed the corner from which I worked as the rhythmic mood took me. Directional motion had a certain haphazardness so that occasionally a circle had to end because there was suddenly no other end of the same circle to link up with. This became an organic process as I worked towards irregular rather than regular order, in some ways reminiscent of early modernist 'action' painting. With the painting flat and of a fair size I could not step back to make aesthetic judgements or otherwise assess my progress. To a large extent I had to guess what an action might finally look like and was forced to enter more haptic territory of touch and feel. 'Touch' replaced 'view' as central in the process.

It was a delicious sensation to drop glitter-laden paint into painted strips previously laid down, especially with colour already running in them. I chose greens and blues to allude to the sea. Everything was wet, like the sea. The two contrasting textures of paint and glittered paint resisted or dissolved into each other in seemingly random ways. The steady formal and conceptual movement of strips towards the centre gave

me structure, but when I dropped glitter out of the thin nozzle of its bottle in either lines or dashes or dots at various heights and rates and pressures of squeeze, I felt I could 'dance' with it over whole sections at once, criss-crossing the basic structure by moving my body to different positions around the table in changing rhythm and pace. The unfamiliar demands of the new material and technique challenged but delighted me. It was all quite fast. The challenge was to hold the creative tension between abandon and control. The delight included the pleasure of play (including the use of 'childish' glitter in 'serious' art, a boundary I love to cross). My method echoed the fluid and liquid nature of the sea, shifting within the consistent structure of its tides, but marrying aspects of both surface and depth.

In a sudden and unexpected gesture I twirled a light pearly mark into the blackness of the central void. It sat there with certainty, beauty and shine. Being flat on the table and wet I could not immediately put it up to consider its effect. The next day I painted over this section in black. The vitality of those central marks is still perceptible in shiny black within the matt black ground but the glow was completely gone. I felt this as a sting, and wondered if my decision had been intellectual fiddling used to cloud intuition and swerve away from representing hope in too obvious a way. Yet perhaps obliquely I had understood that I needed to go further into the 'dark' at this point, both within myself and for the sake of the series as a whole. Such decisions are the challenge of the creative life. In some ways the darkness at the centre of this work can be understood as the 'abyssal zone' of the lightless levels of the sea, with the flickers of glitter and pearlescence around it comparable to the flashes of phosphorescence emitted by tiny microbe 'animals' in the pressured dark.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the process of making a single work can be like a micro journey into and out of a whale. With *Sea Plunge III*, after having already built up several thick layers, I worked on it one night from scattered impulse, rushing when I was tired and had lost the delicate poise between abandon and control that had driven earlier works. I splattered paint all over and every which way until the whole thing looked a mess. The next day I painted shiny black all over. Through the use of oil rather than acrylic paint, its covering darkness became glossy and wet. Due to the physical lumpiness of my

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1. At this point personal life experiences also played their part. I had to move my entire life's work, including giant canvases I had nowhere else to store, from where I used to live in Victoria into my Canberra studio. It was intense work and the sanctuary of my painting space became full to a point that left me unsettled and almost claustrophobic - as if trapped in the belly of the whale. I had a health scare that later proved inconsequential but was disturbing at the time, and a long time friend, with whom I had my first exhibition over thirty years ago, was dying. (see *Wave: Death as a voyage of discovery*)

seemingly hapless splatters, the concentric circles merge and are often nearly lost. Yet hints of gold and green suggest algae or perhaps even glimpses of treasure in the gloom. Like Jonah, the painting had emerged from near ruin into new life. Its making reminded me that 'mistakes' can be purposeful in larger transformational perspective.



Micky Allan. *Sea Plunge III* 2009, acrylic and oil on linen, 122.5 x 153 cm

The whitish centre suggests either embryonic womb-fluid or the gelatinous material of a deep sea 'jelly' but could equally well suggest events in far space or galactic dust. I was attempting to express, in the physical form of painting, something of the correlation between such large and small forms of life that the new photography is now able technically to reveal, and to fuse this macro/micro ambiguity and convergence within a painting space that at least to some extent reflects the newly expanded space these photographs confirm is the actual physical space in which we live.



Sea Jelly and Galactic swirl



Micky Allan. *Sea Plunge IV* 2009, acrylic on linen, 122.5 x 153 cm

*Sea Plunge IV* also presented new problems, involving many layers, but its making was a struggle that produced significant insights. The painting began strongly but its centre became uncertain. In contrast to the white spiral of *Sea Plunge II*, it completely lacked confidence and 'chi'. For days I minutely changed this or that on the outer edges of the work. Finally I realised I had to bring in completely new terms and risk ruining it completely. The initial conception needed to 'die' and be transformed. I had to let go of much that I liked, and risk.



Early centre portion of *Sea Plunge IV*

I dragged oil stick (oil paint in pure pigment form, able to be held in the hand) over the entire surface, unifying it with all-over texture and silver white pearlescence. This changed the tone and mood completely but the painting still did not quite 'work'. Again: time, incubation, waiting, act. I made adjustment after minute adjustment regarding how much the colour came through the milkiness or how much balance or imbalance

remained in the concentric rings. Each tiny mark changed the whole. I was repeatedly amazed at how much. I was searching for balance without rigidity and motion without disarray, but again, hesitancy took hold.

Finally I had a surprising moment. Within, I clearly heard the words 'Ask what the *painting* wants!' When I did, the process flowed, the painting finished and the painting 'worked'. I had switched from the struggle of mind and the fears and ambitions of the ego to a deeper place that involved surrender and the alert attention that is not a strain. *Sea Plunge IV* became a pivot in the series, and I am reminded of the shift for Jonah when, in the belly of the whale, he finally appealed to something larger than himself through prayer. I came to understand also how much the *process* of painting, every mark and every aspect of its layering, becomes *content* that is embedded in the work. This painting holds struggle within it, but also something of release.

For some death is a release, for others a discomfort more or less severe. On viewing *Sea Plunge IV*, one viewer who had had a 'near-death' experience became decidedly unsettled, uneasily revealing that the painting took him right back into the experience. For me personally there is something beautiful in this mauve painting, not least because I find some experiential truth in the symbology identifying violet and mauve as colours of transformation. Though there remains some sense of confinement, the movement of the vortex is simultaneously inwards and outwards, but 'rests' in the principle of transition and change.

Although conceptually I wanted to avoid obvious linear progression from dark to light in the series as a whole, I now found I wanted to paint something in white, the 'colour' that holds all colour within it. Is the void light or dark? This question was intriguing me.

As I continued moving into and through the belly of the whale, and in contrast to the sometimes precariously balanced ovals I had been working with, in *Sea Plunge V* I brought subtle sparkles and variations of mica silver and white paint on white ground into more clearly circular and balanced form. In discussing the relative symbolism of the circle and the oval Rudolf Arnheim refers to the oval as creating an enclosure that combines both the centric and the eccentric, and that 'compared with the circle, the oval plays with a loss of centric symmetry for an increase in tension'. While noting that in the Renaissance the circle represented 'cosmic perfection', he refers to Panofsky's analysis of the Mannerist phase of the Baroque as preference for the 'high-strung' ellipse. He suggests that the ellipse (the form I had to this point used) can be seen as

the interaction between two spheres of forces, and that it often presents in terms of duet or dialogue between either partners or antagonists, or, on a more abstract level, 'two centres of energy coping with each other'.<sup>2</sup>



Micky Allan. *Sea Plunge V* 2009, acrylic on linen, 122.5 x 153 cm

I had also been struck by Melville's chapter in *Moby Dick* called 'The Whiteness of the Whale', in which he recounts Ishmael's meditations on the nature of white ('It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me'). Melville suggests there is a tension inherent in the colour itself, not just in the contrasting associations we give it, that reflect both terror and the divine. The white arctic albatross, the polar bear and white shark are all made into 'the transcendent horrors that they are' by their ghastly whiteness. His various identifications of 'divineness' with 'a certain nameless terror' is made particularly clear when he writes:

...with whatever is sweet, and honourable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness that affrights in blood.<sup>3</sup>

What was the nature of the white void I had just painted? This white work was ultra thin in its single washed layer of paint, made all in one go as a single gestalt, with only miniscule reflective adjustments the next day. The circle is regular in comparison with the mobile ovals of the previous works. Its 'order' is irregular but balanced. It is still but holds vitality and suggests potential activity. If I imagined myself standing within it, it would feel particularly clear - certain, not laden with terror or fear.

2. Rudolph Arnheim. *The Power of the Centre: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*. Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1988

3. Herman Melville. *Moby Dick or The White Whale*. London, Panther. 1851 and 1968. 203.



The sense of paradox and ambiguity inherent in both black and white stayed with me. Helena Blavatsky, in discussing the cosmic dimensions of space, has talked of 'darkness as absolute light':<sup>4</sup> darkness can be so bright you can't see it. Cornelia Elbrecht examines the paradox of white and black and notes that in the process of becoming the centred Self, dualities are not erased. Rather, their oscillations become quicker, with shifts between them fluid and more easily managed instead of one category of experience being suppressed or denied. The Self itself is paradox.<sup>5</sup>



*Sea Plunge* installation, ANU School of Art painting department, 2009

In my examination of the nature of the void and of renewal processes through contact with it, I had come to the conclusion that the void can be either black or white, and each can effect renewal. The void can be seen as what might destroy us and in this context is often conceptualized as dark, yet darkness can also be seen as equivalent to the things we don't know or haven't experienced yet, or the seed of new birth. Whiteness can be 'pure' or 'terrible'. I came to understand the void as something of both darkness and light and that each could be a fertile gateway to renewal, with multiple resonances liquid and changing even within the one work. I hung the paintings so there was no obvious movement from dark to light in single linear progression and hoped that the whole remained as open and mysterious as the sea.

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4. Helena P. Blavatsky. *Space*. Santa Barbara, Concord Grove Press. 1979. 22.

5. Cornelia Elbrecht. *The Transformation Journey - The process of guided drawing - an initiatic art therapy*. Apollo Bay, Clearwen Retreat, 2005. 35-6. "We have little appropriate language for states of consciousness beyond duality".

## WAVE: *Death as a voyage of discovery*

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God.           As, in a theatre,  
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed<sup>1</sup>

Through the making of the paintings in *Sea Plunge* I was attempting to widen my understanding of mortality and what it might mean, especially in relation to notions of transformation and renewal. Our society has developed very narrow views of death and heavy artillery of avoidance. I am approaching the later stages of life and my own hopes and fears and experiences regarding death became part of this research, particularly in relation to *Sea Plunge* and *Micky and the Whale*. At one stage during the making of the paintings for *Sea Plunge*, when the process was not in a stream of flow, I heard an inner directive: 'Invent the music of death out of chaos'. The *music* of death. What could this mean?

I remembered my mother's death and the night I stayed in the hospital in a chair in her room during her last hours. She had suffered a severe stroke and even if she had lived, she would have been permanently disabled. At one point the room felt full of indefinable struggle, which I took to be mine, and went out into the garden for fresh air. When I returned, the room was 'clear' and I felt strongly that my mother had 'got through' something, that the pressure had also (but differently) been hers, and that now she would be fine. She died quietly the next morning. Then and for days following, there was something very beautiful in the air. I came to understand that death could involve not only struggle but the qualities of beauty and hope.

Once, on my way to the funeral of a friend who had died suddenly of asthma at a young age, I felt a prolonged and exquisite joy. 'How is it possible' I asked myself, 'to feel such *joy* on the way to a *funeral*?'

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1. T. S. Eliot. "Four Quartets, East Coker, III". In *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909 -1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962



With Sue Ford a week or so before she died

During the painting of *Sea Plunge* I had been able to visit another friend, who lived interstate, shortly before she died. A long-time fellow artist with whom I first exhibited in 1976, she asked me to sit with her at her computer to help her 'start' the last body of work that she had in fact been gathering the material for over many years. It was about the First Fleet and an ancestor of hers who had been on it, who may in fact have been the first white person to have shaken hands with an Aboriginal man. As we sat she began to pair an image of herself now with him then (stepping ashore at Botany Bay) and overlay text such as 'from my hospital bed now I speak to you', or some such phrase that rang with more poignancy than I recount here. 'We are both on voyages of discovery...' she put over another image.

Death as a voyage of discovery? Death as music ultimately giving form to chaos? Death as hope? Death as fear? Death as a liquid space of transition? Death as a mutable sea embracing all this and more? I absorbed these questions and let them feed into my ongoing process on a subliminal level.

At one stage I had watched the DVD *Solo*,<sup>2</sup> a documentary on the long journey of a man paddling from Australia to New Zealand in a kayak, crossing the sometimes dark, sometimes sparkling sea. In sight of triumph, with wife and press waiting on the visible shore, his canoe disappeared. How and why, after such an emotionally charged experience, recorded in such detailed sound and visual closeness at every point, did he die? Did he just slip into the sea? Was this his choice?

I had been reading T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, especially *The Dry Salvages*, for

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2. David Michôd and Jennifer Peedom. *Solo: The true story of Andrew McAuley's ill-fated attempt to kayak solo across the Tasman Sea*. Hopscotch Entertainment, 2008

understandings of the sea as timeless and 'terrible', and as evocative of 'the dark night of the soul' and the themes of 'death' and renewal present within it. At the same time I also read the original *Dark Night of the Soul*, a personal treatise by the Christian mystic St John of the Cross, which has become an iconic record of the spiritual life and of the role of crisis in generating transformation and change.<sup>3</sup>

In a paper given at the 2012 Adelaide Festival artists' symposium *Into Cosmos*, on a day dedicated to 'the eternal abyss and its influence on the imagination', and under the umbrella of a wider festival focus 'on faith, mystery, emotion and the abject', Barbara Creed's discussion of abjection and the abyss gave pertinent art theoretical context to my own experiences and other research investigations. Asking 'what is the abyss?' she outlined various understandings of the term:

It is a gulf, a chasm, a deep hole, a void. Some poets, painters and writers would tell us it is death itself. All societies have a concept of the abyss or the void - of that which terrifies but also fascinates. The 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Nietzsche famously said: when you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you.<sup>4</sup>

Creed noted a macro dimension through imaging the massive black hole that is the galactic centre of the Milky Way and where stars collapse and die, and asked a question I found of specific relevance to my research: 'What fills the void that religion leaves?' She referred to Julia Kristeva's belief that the role of the artist was to enter the abyss 'where meanings collapse' and 'where I am not', so as to stand in awareness of their own nothingness. For Kristeva, this encounter brings about renewal of our sense of self 'as whole and upright beings' and affirms the social bonds which create civilization and meaning. Experience in the abyss or void disturbs in order to reorder. In *Sea Plunge* I was exploring the sea as a site of death on many levels, and plunging into it in order to, in some small way, face my own mortality.

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3. Saint John of the Cross. *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Translated by Allison Peers Radford: Wilder Publications, 2005.

4. Barbara Creed, "The Elephant's Graveyard: Spectres of the abyss and the horror of the void". In *Into Cosmos*. Adelaide Festival Artists week, 2012.

*Sea Drift*

## *Wave:* SEA DAYS, SEA NIGHTS

In October 2009, for fourteen days, I went on a field trip to Cape Leveque, north of Broome, where the red earth meets the sea. The purpose was to gather visual and experiential source material. I planned to draw one image a day and one a night for each day and night I was there. At this stage I was longing to move from the belly of the whale into open and fresh air, splash in actual waves, and wallow in the 'aliveness' of an unfamiliar place. I had bought an underwater camera and was keen to see what this might reveal.

I made this section into a 'photo essay' because visual experiences were so central and dwarfed understanding through words. I placed photographic images of place next to drawings made that day to highlight comparison between the two. Short 'poetic' captions reveal process as a form of of travel, the intensity of the beauty of nature as a generative force and which specific techniques in material practicec arose out ofdirect experience of the sea.



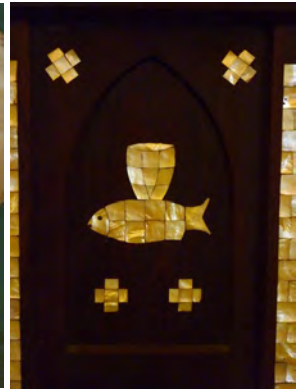
Through the air to the far North West (have trolley, will travel).



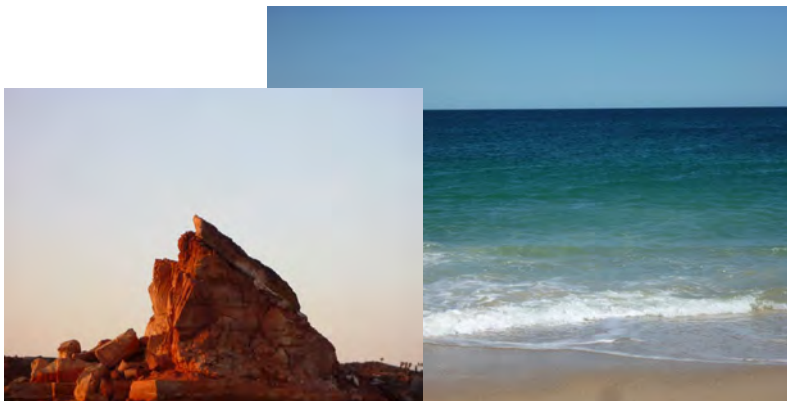
In Broome the scent of flowers, frangipani and dreams of the sea through a night frame.



Rough roads, red earth, a long dust ride to Cape Leveque.



Pearls on the way, by way of a small church.



At last, redder earth and the glistening sea.



Night beauty it is difficult to comprehend.

Mesmerized by the realism of the beauty I find myself in, I respond in three ways:



*Abstraction* (my mind is vacant. I respond only to 'atmosphere', energy. I cover rice paper with pearly paint, place it over semi-opaque film).

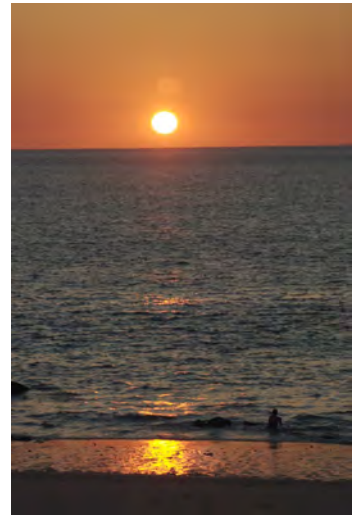
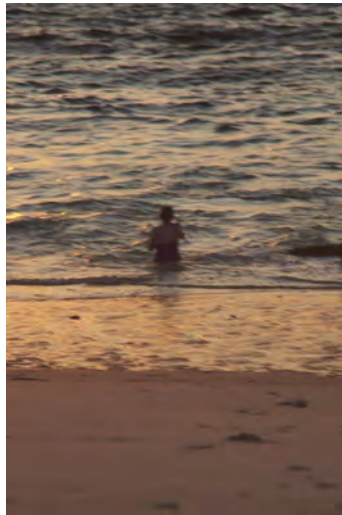
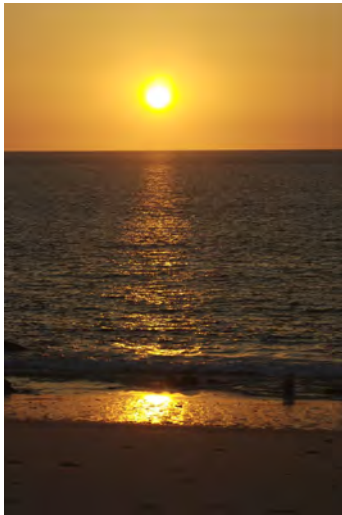


*Observation* (I want to see up close, but not lose location in the vast.)

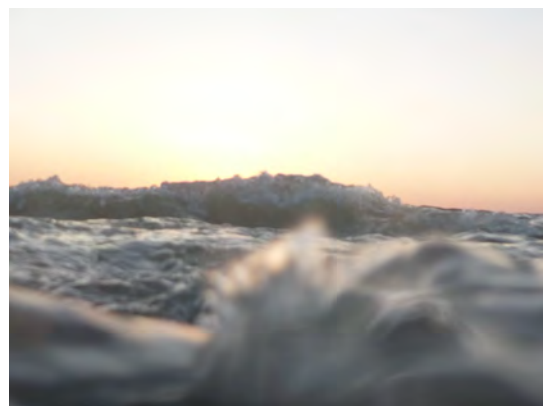
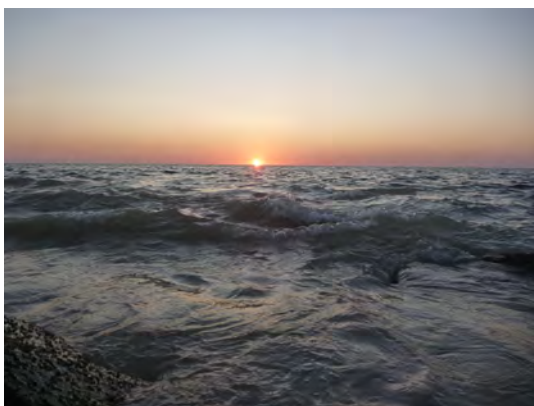


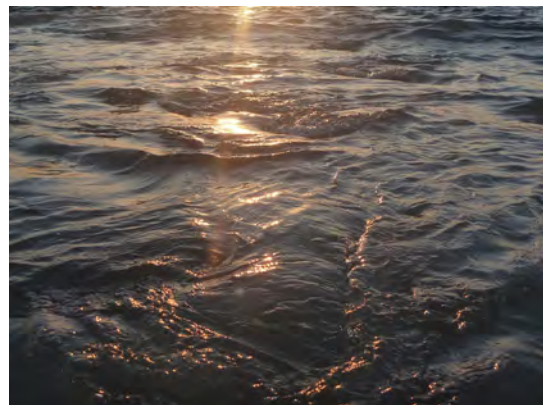
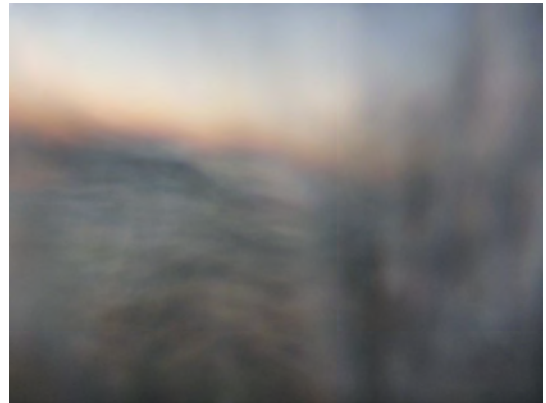
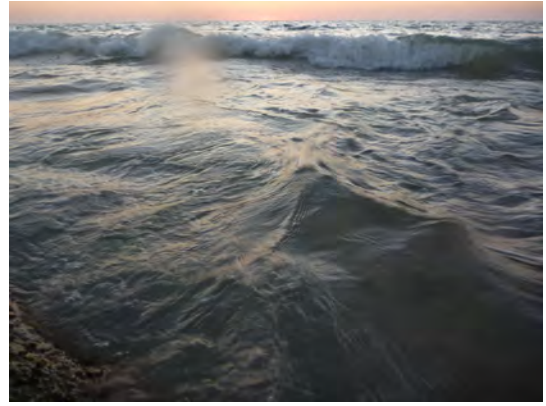
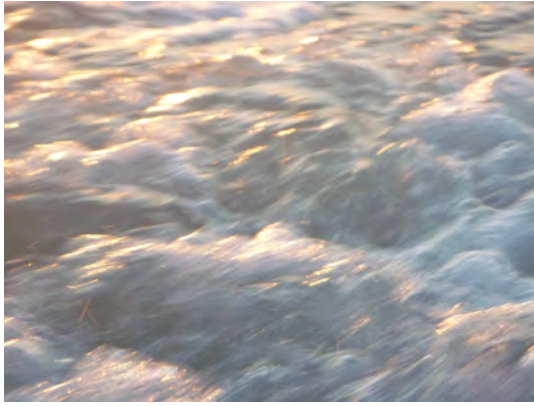


*The surreal* (I don't know how else to cope, what else to call it, how else to respond to the night sea. I *connect the unconnected* through unexpected juxtapositions and shifts of scale, with imagination the combining force.)

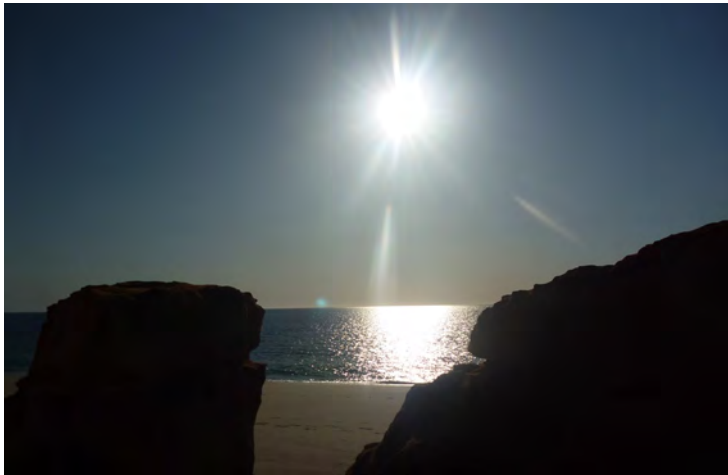


One evening I enter the sea differently, camera in hand.





I recall that the sea is metaphorically resonant with a wide range of human experiences, but cannot remember exactly what they are. All I can register is that everything is alive with numinous force.



The moon calmly invades, inviting simplicity.



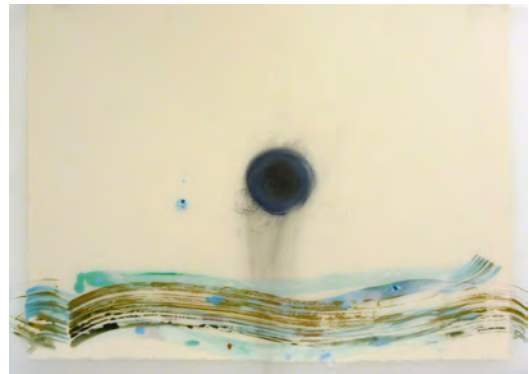
I experience a sense of surrender.



With both camera and pastel I move underwater. I highlight the strangeness and the beauty of the deep, the rays of light in the dark, the false eye of a passing fish.



Returning to Broome I draw the depth of the redness at the Cape and how, from the red rock between the bays, I could simultaneously see the sun and the moon glow over their respective seas.



I catch the last whale tour of the season and return home feeling quiet and particularly alive<sup>1</sup>.

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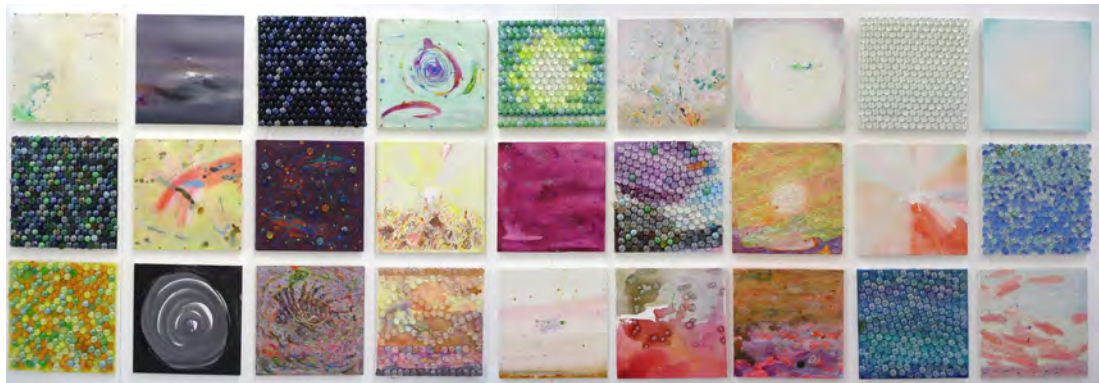
1. Some of the photos in 'Sea Days, Sea Nights' are by Steenus von Steensen

## WAVE: *Wonders of the sea*

Back in the studio, in a spurt of playful activity, I made *Wonders of the Sea*, a work consisting of twenty-eight small canvases, each 30 x 30 cm. Emphasis was on colour, celebration and delight. During their making I turned to the masses of colourful reproductions I had gathered from nature photography on television and in books on the sea. I remembered the brilliant colour of Persian illuminated manuscripts and was enthralled by Elisabeth Peyton's luscious and painterly small works. I merged all of these with my own recent direct experience of the sea.



Elisabeth Peyton *Flowers & Diaghilev* 2008. From the exhibition *Reading and Writing (for Patti Smith)* Peyton quoted writings from Shakespeare, Balzac and Stendhal in a medley of cross-referencing. Placed over visual imagery of the sea.



Micky Allan. *Wonders of the Sea* 27 works, mixed media, each 30 x 30 cm.

Materially, I experimented with watercolour canvas for the first time. Relatively new on the market, its fine texture encouraged watery sea-like effects not quite possible on conventional canvas and linen. Watercolour canvas can be stretched and so exhibited as a painting, avoiding the conventional framing of watercolours and all that this implies.

I immersed myself in the pleasure of paint and blurred boundaries between painting and drawing in extended ways. I tried various uses of drafting film and paper overlays, some catching the light like flashing fish. I stuck things down with coloured pins. I glued multi-coloured glass beads, some semi-transparent, to the surfaces of the paintings in rows - some regularly, some not. This generated complex reflective patterns and

interplay between the glass and the painted layer beneath, which was then obscured, revealed or reflected in the glass. Staring, a viewer might catch their own face as a tiny image repeated in each bead, and so be caught in a space that unexpectedly extended out from the picture plane to personally include them, only to disappear as they moved along. This gave a sense of worlds shifting within worlds. Occasionally a recognisable fish would swim into view or large and infinite spaces open out from a single small square.

When put together as a group, I placed one small dark canvas with a skeleton on it at the side as a crosscurrent, linking *Wonders* with ongoing concerns related to mortality and change. However the series as a whole remained fluid, with its form not yet set, reflecting underlying principles in the overall research.

I was exploring multiple aspects of the sea and various changing rhythms within it, but was it all becoming too complex? In this context it was helpful reading Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his ideas on the evolving self and the role of complexity, differentiation and integration within this process. Bringing together aspects of neurological science, physics and psychology in his examination of evolution and what he identifies as the flow experience, Csikszentmihalyi suggests that harmony (the ability to obtain energy through co-operation) is usually achieved by evolutionary changes involving an increase in an organ's complexity.<sup>1</sup> This involves an increase in both differentiation and integration. Differentiation refers to the degree to which a system (an organ such as a brain, an individual, a family, a corporation, a culture or humanity as a whole) consists of parts that differ in structure or function from one another, while integration refers to the extent to which the different parts communicate and enhance one another's goals. A system that is more differentiated and integrated than another is said to be more complex. Complexity, he emphasizes, must be distinguished from 'complicated':

For example, it is often thought to be synonymous with "complicated". But usually when we call something complicated we are reacting to its being hard to figure out, unpredictable, confusing. These are in fact traits of something that is differentiated but not well integrated - hence, that lack complexity. A complex system is not confusing, because its parts, no matter how diverse, are organically related to each other.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self; a psychology for the third millennium*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993. 155-157

2. Ibid. 157

Csikszentmihalyi argues that a person is more differentiated to the extent that he or she has different interests, abilities and goals, and is integrated in proportion to the harmony that exists between various goals, and between thought, feelings and action:

A person who is only differentiated might be a genius but is likely to suffer from inner conflicts. One who is only integrated might experience inner peace but is not likely to make a contribution to culture... A family that is only differentiated will be chaotic, and one that is only integrated will be smothering. Complexity, at any level of analysis, involves the optimal development of both differentiation and integration.<sup>3</sup>

Creating unity out of diverse elements in a way that is complex but not complicated is an ongoing challenge in the way I work, and was to become increasingly so during the progression of the PhD. Csikszentmihalyi's theorising of the notion of complexity became a useful guide. Unified may not necessarily mean uniform, but I needed to keep my eye out for organic connection and a sense of simplicity shining through any complexity I generated.

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3. Ibid. 157



## *WAVE: Invitation and Response*

Domenico de Clario, at the time Director of the Australian Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide, invited various artists (including myself) to contribute to an exhibition he was 'facilitating' called 'Painting (as one)' to be exhibited at the EAF in early 2010. He sent seven 'considerations' towards 'defining the nature of what we as painters do' to all prospective participating artists, inviting their response. De Clario is particularly interested in understanding the creative process and his thoughts were provocative, insightful and original in their attempt to tease out its multiple dynamics. They fed directly into my research into the complex interactive factors 'in the poetry of process'. The seven considerations were:

1. painting as a complex and difficult experiential path to negotiate; initially distinguished by an absence of sensual pleasure, a feeling of disorientation and perhaps by a sharp awareness of its limitations as a medium.
2. painting as the generator of great excitement for the painter because of its qualities of 'journey'; endless conversations with self regarding the condition of being a painter.
3. painting as failure, as the only viable language for exploring paradox, arising perhaps as one attempts to see something for the very first time, and having done so attempts (in vain) to see it again through the act of painting.
4. painting as the un/conscious, even careless attempt to bring various aspects of self together and introduce them to each other, perhaps for the first time; through this painting as the arena in which various aspects of self play themselves out, provoking missteps as reflexive new forms/truths are invented.
4. painting as nostalgia, as longing for a memory-self or painting as the means by which one constructs aspects of the world one cannot otherwise experience; painting as the reconstruction of one's virtual world, even if this process becomes a painful one.
6. painting as the process of an incessant formulating of in/significant questions, all the while knowing of the impossibility of arriving at coherent outcomes.
7. painting as the desire to reveal what hitherto only the painter has seen.

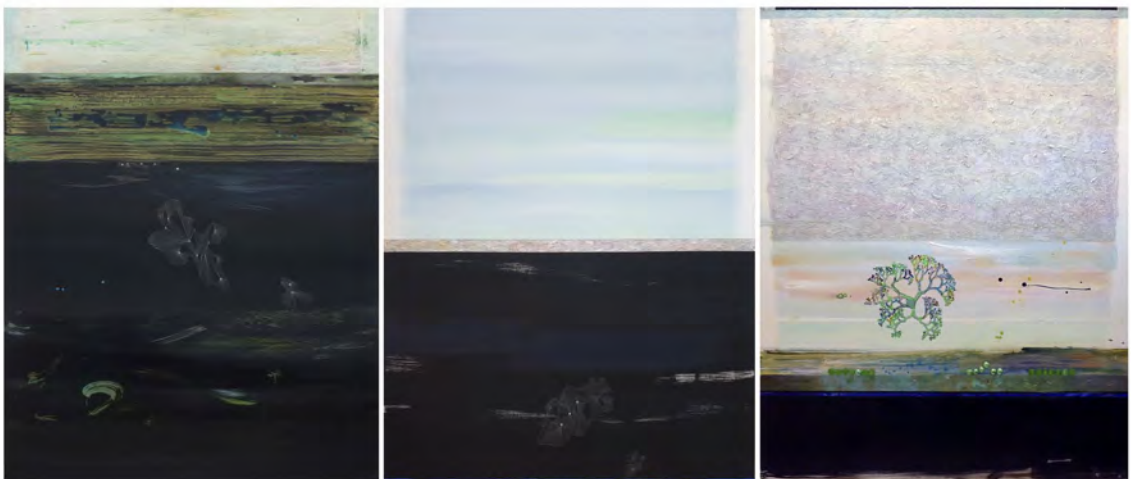
In response to Domenico de Clario's seven considerations regarding the painting process, I made the following statement to accompany my work *Tidal Drift* in the 2010 Adelaide Experimental art Foundation exhibition 'Painting (as one)':

### **Liquidity**

For me the process of painting is one in which order and disorder are continually touching and changing each other. Words I think of are: beauty, dialogue, challenge, rest: dialogue with incessantly changing possibilities, challenge in stepping into a void then having to choose, beauty in riding a wave when it does come, the feeling of rest when something 'just right' has miraculously appeared. Relentlessly ploughing through uncertainty and fear to catch the feeling of flow. Swimming in the 'inner weather' of deep sea and far space. Dragging something previously unknown out of this sea as a fragment of understanding of the world I hope to share.

Made early in the development of *Tidal Drift*, this statement helped guide both the process of its making and the larger research project. It was instrumental in shaping the inner direction of *Tidal Drift* and highlighted the two-way flow between language and material making in the creation of artworks.

## *W A V E: T i d a l D r i f t*



Micky Allan *Tidal Drift* 2010 acrylic, oil, silver pencil, glass beads on linen, 3 panels ea. 142.5 x 112 cm

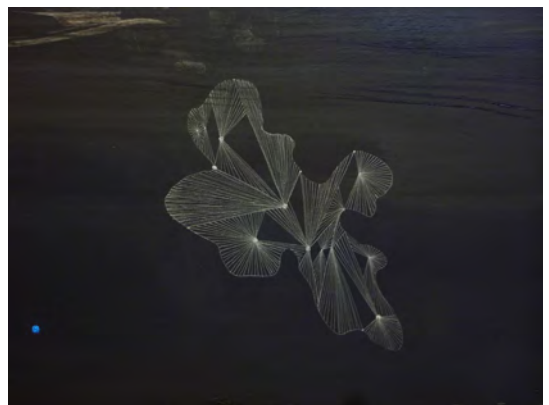
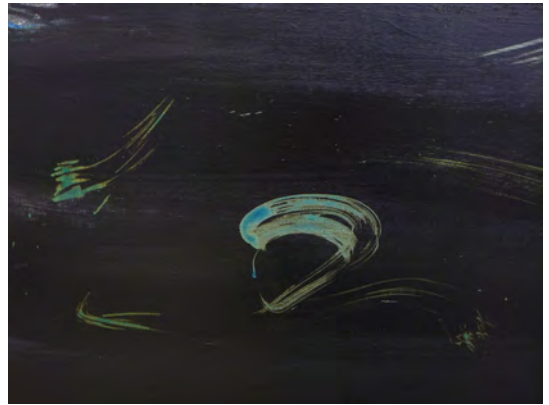
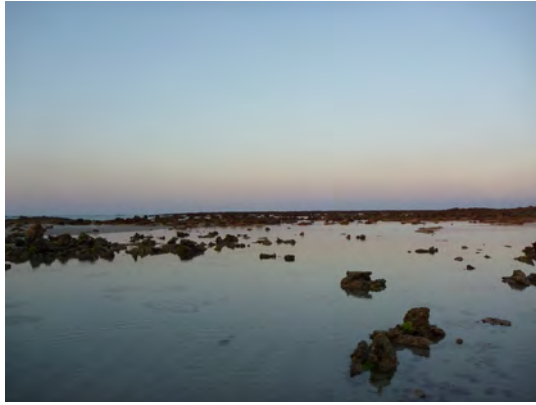
Besides articulating what is involved in the creative process itself and therefore how research through studio practice creates meaning, the three paintings that comprise *Tidal Drift* helped me integrate and then analyse my experiences at Cape Leveque and to notice how important (if often indirect) empirical engagement with place is. I subliminally took key discoveries made at Cape Leveque (that my unconscious response to intense experiences in nature was to abstract, to observe closely, and to include aspects of the surreal) and explored what happened when I played these out in combination on a larger scale.

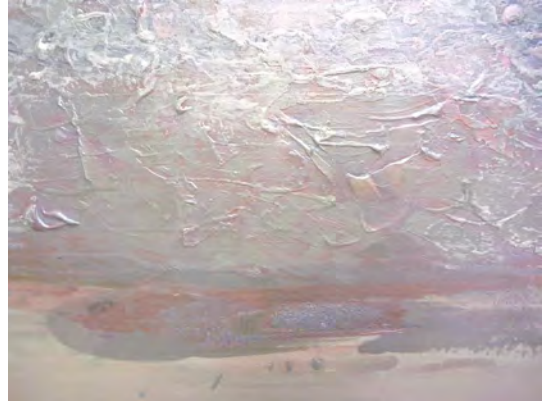
Made over a long summer, *Tidal Drift* went through many stages but was not a 'struggle' in the way *Sea Plunge* had been. I pondered questions relating to the order of the panels: changing their sequence completely altered the rhythm of the shifting tides across the three works. I played with ambiguities of sea and sky (was the sea dark and the sky light or vice versa?), and this too varied with changing panel order. I worked within strips created by masking tape over a vast sky space, then dissolved the sharp edges completely as unsubtle and harsh, then covered the whole area with thickened texture, reminding me of Pallasma's key appeal, in *The Eyes of the Skin*<sup>1</sup>, for a return to keener awareness of touch. I kept some strips firm, remembering Didier Maleuvre's comments on the nature of the horizon line as a power spot in many indigenous cultures. Yet finally, when I settled on the sea as being dark and so created the tide as receding rather than advancing over the three panels, a thin dark strip in the final panel represented the return of an incoming tide. Some may still see the dark areas as night sky rather than the sea, with forms that could equally well be galactic as micro-crystalline within them, and such ambiguity appealed to me. How much abstraction and how much specific reference to recognisable form also fluctuated in my considerations. Near the end I painted a very specific fractal to activate the particular (coral) and increase range from thinly painted abstracted space to detailed, recognisable and thickly textured form. Hints of the surreal were also present through unexpected juxtapositions, non-adherence to normal expectations of 'near' and 'far' and through a certain floating dream-like quality that infused the whole.

While fed by culture, conceptualisation and material process, transformed experiences of nature and specific place were again central and definitive. I only saw in retrospect how much *Tidal Drift* was influenced by my time at Cape Leveque and how much its forms, colours, atmosphere and even specific organic detailing grew out of my experience there. My last visit down to the sea was particularly generative: the dark wet rocks, slippery green seaweed, pink cliffs, low tide, the mood of melancholy and of having to leave. I felt in particularly close proximity to the expansive power of the sea and the sense of infinity this inspires - and that, although dark and wet, it was in fact dawn.

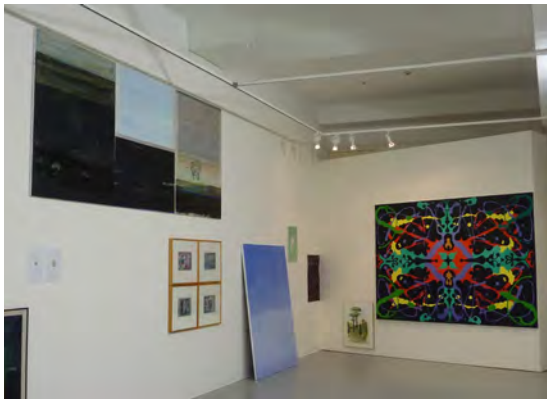
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1. Juhana Pallasma, *The Eyes of the Skin*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2005





Close correlations between elements in *Tidal Drift* and experiences on the last day at Cape Leveque and between *Tidal Drift* forms and galactic imagery. (previous page and above):



'Painting (as one)' installation. Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide 2010  
*Tidal Drift* at top left and far right

De Clario clearly opted for the principle of multiplicity in the hanging of this show, using all levels of the wall, parts of the floor and placing extremely contrasting visual languages in close proximity to each other. Yet the title included the words 'as one'. The space was challenging and exciting to be in and 'worked' in its own terms. It certainly fed into my own research considerations regarding unity and diversity, and I stored it away as cultural context and possible model.

*Immersion*

## Wave: SEA DEEP/SEA STRANGE:

### Heron Island Research Station and the poetry of process

When you were blind you touch things for their shape  
have faith in wordless knowledge

well i can tell you about the river  
or we could just get in

Bill Callahan<sup>1</sup>

From September 5 - 11, 2010 I went on a field trip to Heron Island Research Station on the Great Barrier Reef. Here I gathered source material and experiences of the sea towards the generation of new work to be made immediately afterward on South Bruny Island in Tasmania. On Heron Island I immersed myself in the sea in a way that would radically alter how I created 'sea space' in future paintings. My time there highlighted the relationship between photography and direct experience in my process. Importantly, it defined my understanding of the complex merging of material, metaphoric and poetical forces in the generation of new work.

At first I found it hard to drop the city away and fully enter the sparkle and magnificence of the sea. I became 'grey', like the weather of the first days there, taking time to acclimatise. On my way over on the catamaran from Gladstone I had seen the official 'sea' video with its honeyed voice and saturated colour and (admittedly) fascinating looking fish, but had found myself strangely resistant to this technologically mediated way of knowing. How would I portray this enormous detail, the swirling movement, the visual hover and dash of the creatures of the sea? It was all a bit overwhelming, the pull towards saturated representation so seductive and strong. How could painting respond? I went up on deck into the sea and spray and wind and taken photographs 'blind', in order to create a more vacant, 'abstract' space within.

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1. Bill Callahan. Lyrics from "From the rivers to the ocean" on the album *Woke on a Whaleheart*. Released by Drag City, 2007



At the Research Station touch tank a blue starfish and a soft sea cucumber gave way under my tentative finger in an almost alarming way. Touch built itself into my experience of the sea and its creatures and reminded me of the importance of touch in the painting process.

During my first venture snorkelling my underwater camera 'flooded' and was no longer usable in water. The experiential would need to take over completely as the generative research force for the paintings I plan. The role of the photographic visual record is no small thing and I was dismayed. I had not yet 'given over' to the energy of the island or the rhythm of the sea or the poetry of process. I was at odds with something I couldn't decipher and couldn't drop. I became aware that on some level I might be in a miniscule 'in the whale' sequence playing the role of destroying something old to make way for the new.

Not having a camera changes the way I see. Without something to 'lift and click' and hold between me and whatever I am paying attention to means I am freer to directly engage. Even registering that something is worth taking a photograph of can shift the focus from direct experience to 'will it make a good shot?' and in some ways truncate the experience. However, when later I was offered the hire of another underwater camera, I had no hesitation in taking up the offer. The role of the visual record is no small thing.

With the help of meditation and its capacity to open inner space and synchronise thought, feeling, physicality and a sense of timelessness, I gradually eased into the new situation. The outer weather simultaneously cleared. Underwater I was greeted by schools of blue fish, flowing past my face, scattering slightly to avoid me, but without destroying the unity and quietness of their grouping as a whole. It was eerie, magnificent. I noticed a heron on the beach: feet in the water, beak to the sky, body a conduit between.

In the mornings I went snorkelling, in the afternoon I read about contemporary science under the sunny beach sun. I was reading Lynne McTaggart's *The Field*, a compilation of a wide range of scientific ideas and research in biology and quantum physics suggesting a new paradigm in the way we think about ourselves and the world – that in our essence we exist as a unity in what amounted to an all-embracing 'liquid space' of quantum being:

At our most elemental, we are not a chemical reaction, but an energetic charge. Human beings and all living things are a coalescence of energy in a field of energy connected to every other thing in the world. This pulsating energy field is the central engine of our being and our consciousness, the alpha and omega of our existence.<sup>2</sup>

I noticed the abundance of references not just to seeing the world in terms of energy, but also to describing its workings in terms of the sea. The basic underpinning of the universe was seen as 'a heaving sea of energy'. Physicality and consciousness were described as co-existing and irreducibly interacting with references to the ocean and the sea as the most apt way to describe this. Living beings, including human beings, were packets of quantum energy constantly exchanging information within this inexhaustible energy sea. The quantum field was 'an ocean of microscopic vibrations in the space between things', including those between the stars. We literally resonated with our world.<sup>3</sup> The laser physicist Hal Puthoff likened the process of sub atomic particles fleetingly popping in and out of existence from the supposed void as 'akin to the spray given off from a thundering waterfall'. I glanced up at the waves in front of me, pounding against the rocks, and wondered: akin also to the spray of waves? Walter Schempp and Erwin Laszlo posited that short and long term memory reside not in our brains but in the quantum field, and that the brain is merely a retrieval and read-out mechanism for information in energy form.<sup>4</sup> Applying the dynamics of quantum processes to biology on a larger scale, Fritz-Albert Popp suggested that it is bio-photon emissions which drive the processes of the body and that humans exchange photons (or light) in ways that could relate to how schools of fish and flocks of birds create instantaneous communication.<sup>5</sup> All in all, fundamentally we existed as a unity, a relationship, and that all parts in this unity were continuously resonating with all others in an interdependent whole, perhaps even holographically reflecting each other. The ideas, the sand and the sun all seemed to merge. I looked out at the limitless sea.

I met up with the Station Manager, Tim Forster, who wondered (with interest) what I was actually doing. I took him some photographs of my work and 'artist' was no longer an abstract. Tim talked of how the air to him is 'liquid' because the sky is really the same as the sea, just water that is less dense. In a wonderful image he spoke of rain as dense water falling as thin strips within the lighter 'water' of air: dense and light

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2. Lynne McTaggart. *The Field: the Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe*. New York: Harper, 2008. xxiii

3. Ibid. xxvii

4. Ibid. 91

5. Ibid. 60

liquidity bleeding into each other. It is the same with ocean currents (cold as dense, warm as less dense) continually flowing into each other. All is moving, fluid, travelling, caused by the currents below and the winds above. Where the sea and sky meet there is no hard line but rather a gradual shift in density. On a humid day the air is wet, like a 'sea'. Echoing my reading he remarked that on a quantum level everything is fluid, another 'sea'. As we part, Forster mentioned Gary Zukov's *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* with affection and a note about how each chapter in it is called Chapter One. 'Scientist' is no longer an abstract.

I went farther out to sea to snorkel in deeper water, plunging from a boat. At the time I wrote of it:

Layering of the sea is fluid below me in merging strips: a bottom level of sand, a next level of massed seaweed and coral, above that a layer of fish, then another of fish crossing diagonally in a different direction, then above that, another passing shoal. Movement is continually changing pace as well as direction within the whole. When my head is down looking below the surface the current seems much faster and suddenly relentless. I am part of swirling patterns of movement and light in which I can find no familiar orientation. The water is deep and feels floorless. I know I can raise my hand to the boat if I wish, but the sea feels completely in charge. I become intrigued with how huge a difference it makes to both my sense of safety and of space to look along the surface of the water registering a 'normal' horizon line and sky compared to looking down through my snorkel mask into the swirling horizon-less sea below. Without familiar spatial orientations, the current is terrifying. With them, seeing some semblance of a horizon on which I 'know' the island must sit, I can quell the innate fear (of most coastal Australians?) of being swept out to sea in a rip, facing death. I become fascinated with the difference between above and below surface orientation. On a small scale I have glimpsed the power of the sea, and experienced first hand mightier aspects of its 'liquid space'.

Here, perched on this island which is in fact the tip of a coral reef, curled up in my bed at night with sea winds swirling in my room, exhausted from underwater ventures but with the sea still dripping in my veins, or turning in the hot sand and sun, am I absorbing the mental ideas I have engaged with differently? Awash with the closeness of the sea, do they penetrate my consciousness differently? Is reading in this physical, sensual, highly charged experiential atmosphere, altering the *way I know* the material I read? From there will it alter the *way I paint* when I reach Bruny Island? My sense is that it will. The kind of brushmarks, the kind of 'openness' and space, the kind of timelessness and/or time embodied in the work will in fact be different. My reading seems to seep into far more than just my brain. The facts themselves dissolve. Words, ideas, sensation and physical reality seem to blur and pulse as one, as if language and nature are in some strange way melting into each other within me.

Luce Irigaray, in the last words of her *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, talks of the merging of word and nature, *logos* and *cosmos* in a principle beyond conventional 'Christic' morality, yet taking account of renewed feminine spirit. She images a universe that involves flesh, word and spirit in and through something 'beyond':

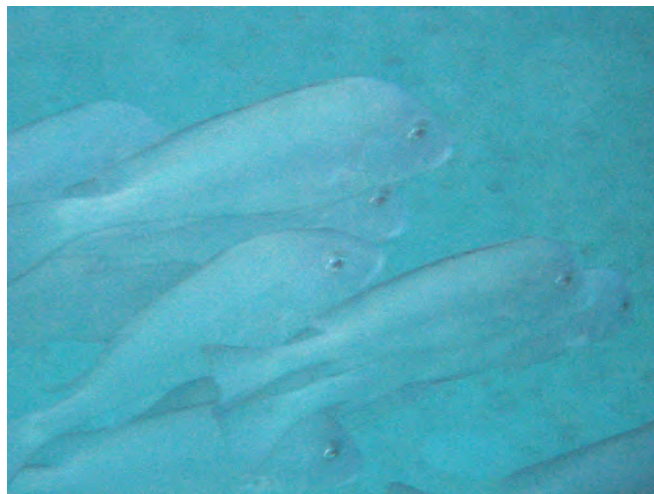
To "go beyond." Or decode the Christic symbol beyond any traditional morality. To read, in it, the fruit of the covenant between word and nature, between *logos* and *cosmos*. A marriage that has never been consummated and that the spirit, in Mary, would renew?

The spirit? Not this time, the product of the love between Father and son, but the universe already made flesh or capable of becoming flesh, and remaining in excess to the existing world.

Grace that speaks silently through and beyond the word?<sup>6</sup>

I felt ready to leave. I had gathered enough material and could go. The 'beyond' felt immanent, poetic and real. Yet one last key experience of the sea awaited me. It was the day I was to leave, and I had launched myself out of bed for one last snorkel:

The sea is very calm. I plunge in. Oh! Huge fish, white and luminous, are gathered below me in a group, sitting extremely still, silently hovering... Poise and float. Big silver/white fish with little black eyes, unbelievably still... I don't want to think... Poise and float. Big silver/white fish with little black eyes are close, unbelievably still. I recall someone on the island speaking of stunned mullet. Am I the stunned mullet or are they? I take photos but it doesn't intrude or halt the experience. This is a crescendo to my visit, but unbelievably quiet. I have swum with the fish! I did not need more *images*, but it is very special to have this *experience*. I have swum with a shoal of big white fish! The photos show nothing. I have absorbed the stillness and the quiet. I have felt at home in another realm. *Now* I can leave.



Sometimes a very specific moment of seeing seems to stand out and stand still and something of the substance of what I am seeing seems to penetrate me physically. Its 'aliveness' pierces me in a way that seems multi-dimensional and momentarily

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6. Irigaray, Luce. *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Translated by Gillian C Gill. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991

never ending. Time stands still and elongates at the same time. I *am* what I observe. I feel pierced by another realm. Something not just physical is exchanged, and time and memory do not dilute this. Or rather, these memories feel 'physical' in some indescribably amplified way. They are ones I never forget. Large silvery white fish had hung in the water before me, black eyes staring, light slowly catching the thin pearlescent strips of their blue, grey or pink edges as they turned. Such are the kinds of experiences that are most likely to surface, transformed, in future artwork.

On the boat back to the mainland, as land approached, I opened Bachelard's *Water and Dreams*:

...the *leap into the sea*, more than any other physical event... is the only, exact, reasonable image, the only image that can be experienced of a *leap into the unknown*. There are no other real leaps "into the unknown." A leap into the unknown is a leap into water.<sup>7</sup>

I stared out to sea. I wrote: On many levels I am in the process of being born into my next body of work.

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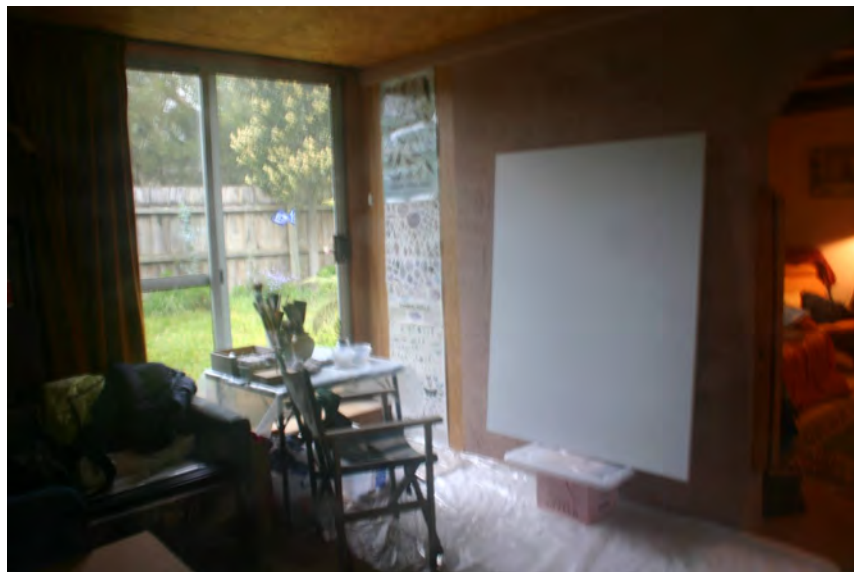
7. Bachelard, Gaston. *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Translated by Edith R. Farrell. Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983, 165

## **WAVE: the moment of risk**

The first few days on South Bruny I walked the island and sailed on the surrounding sea, grounding myself in place. I was to stay in a small cottage alone for six weeks. I had brought several large canvases with me and planned to see what solitude would bring.

I mulled over conceptual possibilities without making them explicit and stared at the multiple imagery of sea and sea life I had gathered at Heron Island Research Station and earlier. I began taking a photograph a day of the Tasmanian sea to further anchor into place and acquaint myself with the differences in the Tasmanian sea.

The cottage was hung with numerous op shop or other 'scenes'. I cleared a wall, placed plastic over the floor, moved tables and set out materials for both oil and acrylic paint. All possibilities needed to be at hand - the opaques and pearlescents, thick and thin consistencies, mica powder, gold leaf, glitter, large and small brushes, palette knives and various mediums. I didn't know where the materiality of my process might lead, and I wanted all options open for surprise.

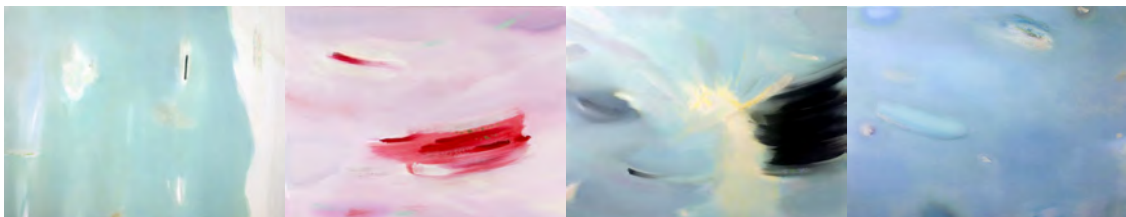


Finally I stood before the large white empty canvas with the 'moment of risk' and the leap into the unknown at hand. First I placed small areas of pale silver-white and

pearlescent blues in fast-drying acrylic at random over the surface as if they were flashing fish. Immediately the white canvas had 'died' to its initial state and was in the process of being transformed into another, the first of countless mini-deaths and renewal into new form that would occur as I proceeded. I then mixed oil paint into subtle blues and greens, and swept it over the rest of the surface with broad strokes and wide brush, moving this way and that around the smaller areas of acrylic, echoing the fluid motion and multi-directional underwater light of the sea. I wanted to stand in the stillness behind both the rhythm of the ocean and the rhythm of my response to it and 'see what I did'. My whole body moved as if to waves. Because of its texture and viscosity and the fact that it stays wet as you work, using oil paint allows subtle transitional blending of one colour into another as acrylic paint cannot, allowing me to highlight more accurately the liquid nature of the sea as I had recently experienced it. Leaving small areas of acrylic allowed me to later splash glitter or lay gold leaf into them, equating the sparkle of coral or fish. Whether working with acrylic or oil, each loading of the brush or turn of the wrist as the paint is applied, involves streams of miniscule 'moments of risk', and whether fast or slow in action, each is a suspension into the void that is not a void followed by abandonment into a choice.

I once watched a film showing Matisse painting in slow motion. Matisse's work is both considered and spontaneous, but one would think Matisse would work relatively quickly. The film revealed that an extraordinary number of potential possibilities were considered and hovered over before *each* mark was actually made, which suggested that a vast range of subliminal decision making is normal to the painting process. What intrigued me then and now are two questions: 'What drives the choice?' And 'What 'body' do I paint with?'

In my case, in the generation of *Seas*, the result was abstraction rather than 'view' and more simplicity than I expected.



## *W.A.V.E.* **When I paint, which 'body' do I paint with?**

Merleau-Ponty and the Asian Body

When I paint, which 'body' do I paint with?

In one essay among many in-depth examinations, Jay Goulding explores various intersections between concepts of the body in Asian philosophy and the idea of the body in Merleau-Ponty's work<sup>1</sup> He speaks of the ancient Chinese body navigating between three interwoven views: Confucianism's heavenly body (the perfect body of heavenly peace), Daoism's earthly body (the communicative body, a vast and infinite net in-between heaven and earth through which we engage with what Wu Kuang-ming calls 'net-thinking, or 'body-thinking') and Buddhism's body of the Void (the body of transformation, lying between Heaven (nothingness) and Earth (being)). The Asian body is not strictly the anatomical configuration of organs of the body of the West but a matrix of energy lines, and comparisons can be made between these and Merleau-Ponty's *chiasm* or *khora* and the crossings of experience between subject and object these 'embody'. Goulding suggests that if Merleau-Ponty's ideas are brought into a cosmological scheme, the body becomes 'a complex intersection of energy lines suspended between Heaven and Earth'. Like the Buddhist view, Merleau-Ponty's body is neither 'spiritual' nor 'material' nor 'mind' nor 'substance', but rests 'in-between': 'there is a body of the mind, a mind of the body, and a chiasm between them'. Wu suggests that the difference between Merleau-Ponty and Chinese body-thinking is the difference between 'argumentative self-critical clarification' and 'spontaneous praxis'.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Jay Goulding. "Merleau-Ponty and the Asian Body". In *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*. Edited by Jin Y. Park and Gereon Kopf. New York: Lexington Books, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009

2. Ibid. 248



He then 'insists' that after Merleau-Ponty has exposed the flesh of the world he should '*forget* all about it ...as in Chuang Tzu's cool self-loss and roaming nonchalance in the world'.<sup>3</sup>

In painting *Seas*, I sought to move with the *ki* energy of Daoism, which is after all 'the way of water'. Could I bring *ki* into the moistness of the paint and the movements of my body as I drew its wetness across and around and down and up again across the 'body' of my canvas? When I feel closest to *ki*, I feel less '*in-between*' as *in* the paint, *in* the action, *in* the shapes and marks I form and *in* the feelings and significances these evoke. I feel in the energy of each of these as they indivisibly interpenetrate and merge.

Or if I am 'in-between' I at least feel in an energy that could one day be named more specifically. On the discovery of the Higg's Boson, Geoffery Taylor, who led the Australian contribution to CERN, remarked that now they were 'looking beyond to all sorts of things...whether there are additional forces of nature from additional symmetries'.<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that when I paint, I am painting with and in these as yet unnamed 'additional forces of nature' and drawing on multitudes of 'additional symmetries' that are not yet scientifically known. *Ki* might then be seen to consist of light spectrums or electricities or forces or radiations we do not yet have the consciousness to comprehend, but which we all use all the time without knowing, in various combinations and degrees.

Scientifically, we do not even know exactly what light is. Yet I paint with it, not as describing or revealing something, but as light itself. When I come closest to Chuang Tsu's 'cool self-loss' and 'roaming nonchalance' and the 'spontaneous praxis' that Wu advises Merleau-Ponty to consider, light becomes my 'body', forming itself into new form through me. Colour becomes my sea.

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3. Ibid. 248

4. ABC News website, posted July 4, 2012. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/?WT.svl=news>.

## □□□□: ABSTRACTION/FIGURATION

In *Discrepant Abstraction*, Kobena Mercer has clarified the extensive range of approach and intention edited out by Clement Greenberg in particular in the early days of abstraction at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Greenberg promoted and concentrated on abstraction as form alone, free of significances beyond the formal elements themselves. Out went recognition of the influence of psychology, Eastern philosophy, philosophical developments such as surrealist exploration of inner worlds, any hint of the transcendental, plus any subsequent cross-cultural developments of the abstracting impulse. In this simplification to 'pure' form, made devoid of the conceptual and representational symbology that was in fact informing the artists making the work, Greenbergian formalism became a straightjacket and is presently undergoing re-evaluation. I place my own work in the context of this re-evaluation. There is more to form than formalism. Doris von Drathen has recently argued for a re-assessment of taking aesthetic categories as the major criteria for classifying art, suggesting that broad categories such as 'minimalism' are insufficient to comprehend 'the near ungraspable' experience of a face to face encounter with a work of art, which is both a threshold and 'a metaphysical event'.<sup>2</sup> In *Vortex of Silence* she wrote about contemporary abstract artists such as Shirazeh Houshiary (in a chapter called 'Universal breath'), through visiting their studio and noting the particularized materiality of their process and including the wider ranges of the artist's thought. Didier Maleuvre<sup>3</sup> has also called for a widening of the parameters of discussion in suggesting that art be engaged with as an 'encounter' with many more levels of resonance than the narrowness of Greenberg's formalist focus.

Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche have been among those rethinking our relationship with what we have thought of since the Enlightenment as 'the natural'. They point out multiple biomorphic streams in early twentieth century Modernism which have been under-privileged in favour of a narrow and more strictly formalist lense and an accent on culture rather than nature. In their *Introduction: Biocentrism*

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1. Kobena Mercer (ed.) *Discrepant Abstraction*. London, Massachusetts, 2006

2. Doris von Drathen. *Vortex of Silence: Proposition for an art criticism beyond aesthetic categories*. Milan, Edizione Charta, 2004

3. Dider Maleuvre. *The Religion of Reality: inquiry into the self, art, and transcendence*, Catholic University of America Press, 2006

as a *Constituent Element of Modernism*<sup>4</sup> they point out strong connections between organicism and Modernist art, and the continuation of strong and vitalizing connections with Romanticism that were intuitive, idealistic, holistic and nature-centric. They argue that a 'Biomorphic Modernism' existed in early to mid-twentieth-century art as a broad-based trend that included many artists and theorists (Hans Arp, Arthur Dove, Antonio Gaudi, Paul Klee, Joan Miro, Georgia O'Keefe, Yves Tanguy, Alfred Barr and Herbert Read to name only a very few) in a way that was far more widespread and pervasive than has previously been given credit. In paintings it was characterized by the portrayal of fluid organic shapes such as 'evocative swells, curves and arabesques', and seen by the artists to 'figure the conceptions of "life", "origins" and "nature"'. As precursor to currently evolving concerns some also questioned the distinction between organic and inorganic in an evaluation that all matter was animate with at least potential life.

In her catalogue essay "Abstraction to Abstracts", Christine Buci-Glucksmann argues that in present-day abstraction, not only is the traditional opposition of geometric and organic languages dissolving, but also that we are entering 'a world where we are moving from a culture of objects to a culture of flows'.<sup>5</sup> In a culture of flows, much rides on motion itself, and on the relationship between the forces and energies employed. This became very relevant in relation to my experiments in rendering the multi-directional movements of sea space and the focus on motion in *Seas*.

My own research sits within the stream of this re-framing of the early history of abstraction in which a more sympathetic and symbiotic relationship between abstraction and representation, the organic and the geometric, and 'nature' and 'culture' generally are being forged. Aware of the inherently dichotomous nature of the sea in that it can be seen on the one hand as a substance, body and abstract 'field', and on the other as a vital medium for the transport of particularized organic life, I found myself questioning the degree of literalness I wanted to engage with (in relation to the portrayal of specific fish for instance) and the degree to which simplification and 'full' abstraction might create the unity out of multiplicity I sought. Or would full abstraction 'leave too much behind?' Did the less material and tangible (read less literal) mean the greater luminosity of colour and the greater livingness of light? Was Greenberg or at least modernist abstraction haunting me in a way it never had before? Was abstraction more 'serious', more able to embody the numinous after all?

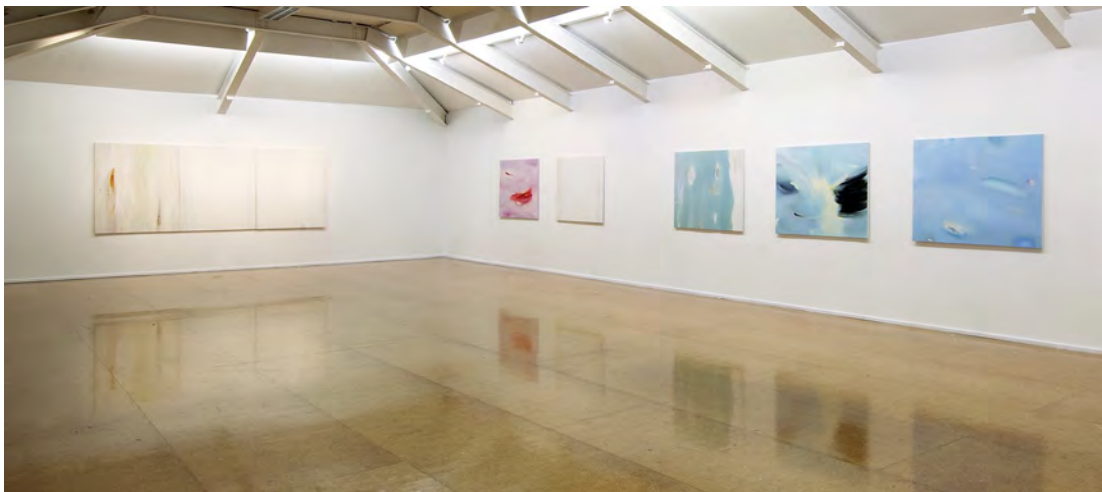
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4. Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche. "Introduction : Biocentrism as a Constituent Element of Modernism " in *Biocentrism and Modernity*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011

5. Christine Buci-Glucksmann. "From Abstraction to Abstracts" in *Abstrakt*. Salzburg, Paris: Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, 1999

## WAVE: Seas

The series *Seas* was begun on South Bruny Island in Tasmania immediately after the time spent on Heron Island. The paintings were consolidated and extended back in Canberra and shown in an exhibition called *Spacious* (alongside the watercolour series *Micky and the Whale*) at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space in 2011 before being re-configured as part of my final PhD exhibition.



Micky Allan. *Spacious*. Installation view, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 2011

In Tasmania I experienced the sea in many new moods and weathers. I went on a six hour boat trip to the remote rare bird rock Pedra Bianca (as part of the inaugural South Bruny Bird Festival) and so underwent rough seas in a small boat, out on the Southern Sea towards Antarctica, and near where the continental shelf drops away and new imagery of the deep sea floor is being gathered by CSIRO marine research.<sup>1</sup> Such empirical experiences merged with those of Heron Island and fed directly or indirectly into the generation of *Seas*.

1. I visited the CSIRO in Hobart and they provided me with more excellent imagery of the creatures of the sea.

The solitude of staying alone in a small cottage on South Bruny Island for six weeks helped me make what I believe was a great leap forward in my practice-led research, allowing me to break through to new distillation and simplicity in the work. The process was not easy, and I set up two ways of working that were at times in conflict. One was abstract, the other more overtly representational: one more sweeping with large and open brushwork and the other more detailed, often 'drawn' with oil stick. Each approach yielded technical innovation, and the fact of both highlighted choices I would later need to make in relation to the integration of complexity. While the making of *Seas* facilitated insight into the key role of materials and the processes, issues concerning abstraction and figuration also emerged.

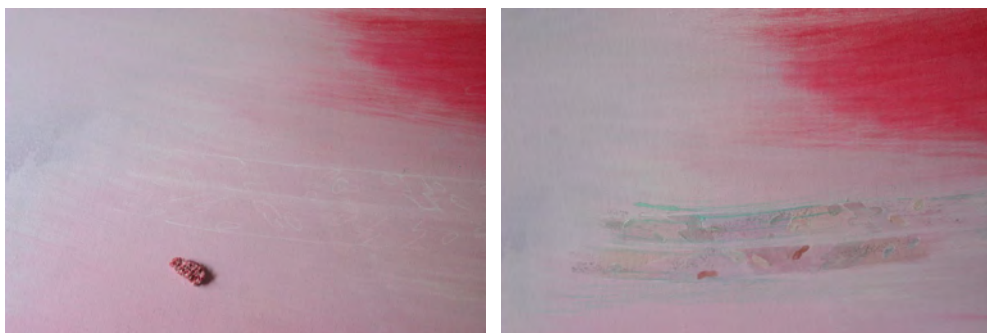
## PINK AND RED SEA



Micky Allan *Pink and Red Sea*, 2011 acrylic, oil and gold leaf on linen, 112 x 142.5 cm

Looking at the internal dynamics of *Pink and Red Sea* I notice that drama and subtlety are both present. Compositional tempo is both slow and fast yet unfixable in either state. With its increase in dramatic multi-directional movement and confident simplification *Pink and Red Sea* was a large step away from the above/below compartmentalisation of the panels of *Tidal Drift*, set with regulating 'horizon line' divisions between them. In these first *Seas* paintings, motion, colour and gesture moved centre stage carrying with it a sense of release.

This degree of abstraction was also a new development. Here the colour of coral and the drama of light play within the Heron Island Reef merge with the shapes and moods of the Tasmanian sea. This and later *Seas* were usually made in two main sessions close to each other in time, both relatively and gestural, with various later additions added in slower time and with a different kind of care and subtle attention. Both kinds of attention were pared down and simplified. The drama of light and colour play from Heron Island merged with the drifting shapes and movements in the Tasmanian sea, both to some extent 'abstractions' of physical experience.



Left: the influence of coral colour on a small scale. Right: later stage subtle detailing

In *Pink and Red Sea* I was able to fluidly draw on the innate body knowledge of materials and processes built into the body from experience over time. Without needing to become thought, the body *knows* which paint will do what, what brush will behave which way, or what degree of liquidity will cause the paint to spread or cluster, pool or disperse. Here the pink/red is acrylic, for speed and dash, but as a later last mark, I placed across it several deep red brushstrokes in oil paint, because certain oil paint reds have depth and translucency at once in a way acrylic paint cannot. However, the pinkness of the acrylic red beneath added complexity to the final dynamic between the two. The silvery pinks and greys, drawn partly from the shells on the beach near my back door and partly from the movements of water over coral I had seen up North, blended into each other through the particular faculties of oil paint to create smooth transitions, while the addition of reflective mica paint to the colour mix gave a subtle, almost indecipherable, but extremely important gleam.

The act of painting involves a kind of poise: when I paint I am both 'there' and 'not there'. In describing the state of being that the physical practice of Chi Gong is designed to develop, my Chi Gong teacher Fei Wang, likening it to the practice of art, once described it thus: one is 'both there and not there'. He was indicating that movements could be made with a concentration on the meditational aspects – the smooth flow from one movement to the other without conscious thought – or they could be made with focus on the physicality involved, which brought a kind of vitality and rigor and even tension into the movements. We all made the particular movement we were making (was it the one called The Fish?), with attention to one state, then with attention to the other, to refine understanding of the difference – how they might disrupt each other and what they might individually bring. The aim was eventually to bring the two together so they became a single state of flow. As with Chi Gong, so with the making of a painting: the comparison is apt.<sup>2</sup>

Fei Wang used another image relevant to understanding the painting process: one of water. If we walk through water too fast, it is hard to do, even though we can, as there is the resistance of opposing force. If we walk through it too slowly we will fall over. We must move in the way that is right for our particular body so there is some resistance, some speed but 'not too hard, not too soft'. There needs to be *smoothness* between the movements, flow rather than rapid change of direction, because if changes of direction are too rapid, we can't *feel it in the body*. While overt *thinking* about the

2. Fei Wang, Chi Gong class, August 6, 2012

movement tends to disrupt its smoothness, awareness is still key and needs to be *felt in the body* or an essential link is lost.

These distinctions are very relevant to the painting process as I further investigated its complexities. When I worked on those first *Seas* paintings on Bruny Island I seemed to move from one kind of attention to the other – specific and technical (I need to mix more paint) to analysis and overview (that bit doesn't work), to subjective intuitional flow in which I surrendered to the studio dance which involves them all. When all really flows, such changes of direction and intent are smooth and poise between 'there' and 'not there' is kept.

What drives the choice? What causes subtle shifts in focus and intent, both practically and in wider direction? My process involves a complex mix of body thinking, memory, experience of place, stimulation through the contextualising research of others – and also meditation. *Pink and Red Sea* sprang directly out of a meditation on the fieriness of the heart. Emerging out of that meditational space to paint, the colours for instance came a surprise to me. Meditation for me clears a space and creates a vastness into which I can unfold with a sense of freedom. Yet my intents are many-levelled, faceted from many planes, continually shifting. My deepest intent is probably to make manifest the kind of energy I can sometimes access in meditation so that others can see and feel it. I see this energy as a luminous 'aliveness' that is inherent in everything - meditation just helps to notice it. Sometimes emotional intent (ambition, I want to impress) blocks conceptual intent or conceptual intent intellectualises or otherwise reframes soul intent. When all levels of intents are aligned, everything flows and is in fact 'easy'. Emotional intent gives drive, colour, vitality, or stops you in your tracks so you can realign. Mental intent clarifies, give form, organise, arrange – or lead astray. Soul intent gives purpose. Spirit intent just is: aliveness, Life, in an intensity it is hard to live. All these levels of consciousness are in flux in the act of painting as in life, feeding each other in a perpetual motion that is liquidly interactive in all directions, in constant mutual feedback and exchange. What makes my heart sing, as well as sometimes despair, is the multi-dimensional process of this unfolding.



## GREEN SEA



Micky Allan *Green Sea* 2011, acrylic and oil on linen, 112 x 142.5 cm

In *Green Sea* motion is also in and from all directions at once, not just up and down or back into the picture plane. Like galactic space, sea space moves out in all directions simultaneously. Above, below and 'at an angle' exist 'at once'. *Green Sea* follows the logic of elastic rather than static space, ebbing and swelling as vantage points change. Tempo varies and it is its changing rate that reveals the hidden structure in the work. Compositional dynamic arises through a sense of emergent self-ordering rather than any fixed plan, contributing to fresh ways of viewing time and space as mobile, interacting and expanding.

As species, we seem to be entering another phase in our understanding of our place in the larger cosmos. Until the truly extraordinary advances in recent astronomy, we did not talk much of what lay further than our solar system, let alone past our universe. Our concept of size has been totally transformed: galaxies have become clusters of galaxies and there are now superstructures beyond these. We exist in far larger physical space than we realised and arguably in a correspondingly far larger 'space' of consciousness. We can hardly imagine now the vastness. In a modest way *Green Sea* attempts to embody something of the openness, expansiveness and sense of freedom these new cosmological understandings and dimensions evoke.



Left: A humbled mortal breaks through to the archetypal powers of the above  
(The Spiritual Pilgrim. 16th Century German Woodcut)

Right: William Robinson: *Creation night, Beechmont*, 1988 oil on canvas, 143.5 x 193 cm

In the 16th century woodcut represented here, humanity and the larger cosmos are seen as separate spheres with a border that needs breaking through to see 'above'. In comparison, William Robinson's *Creation Night*, reflects a newer perspective in that as the figure looks into the cosmos, the self is reflected. *Green Sea*, like other of the *Sea* paintings, speak indirectly of a cosmos in which the self and 'out there' are a continuous field, each composed of forces and energy flows (some known, some unknown) that pulse in and out of manifestation from an elusive ground of being that cannot in the end be separated, even as it cannot be named.

Hidden but radiating out at the centre of this *Green Sea* is a white and gold seahorse, put there initially by photographic projection, but then floated into immateriality through the process of painting. Where does abstraction begin and end? Where does representation begin and end? In this painting the dividing line disappears and the two supposed opposites literally merge. In *Green Sea I* improvised with the projected image and used it to spring off from rather than to 'represent' detail and visual likeness. The seahorse merged into the wider gestural and blending movements I had begun to foster. I thought of these simpler more abstract works as the 'creamy/dreamys', indicating something of their immersive abstract nature in both technique and mood. Here it is not abstraction *or* representation, not even as two sides to the same coin, but rather abstraction and representation as part of the same continuum, naturally oscillating, dissolving into each other as one looks, just as they dissolved into each other as I painted them. The paint is very thin and fluid and the forces involved become more like energy flows in an expanding field. In part through the ideas of theorists such as Buci-Glucksmann, in part through my own experience of the sea and in part

through material practice, I came to understand 'likeness' as more symbiotic and relational, moving into the territory of forces and energy flows and clusters of tension and release rather than literal verisimilitude.

## LIGHT BLUE AND WHITE SEA



Micky Allan. *Light Blue Sea* and *White Sea* 2011, acrylic, oil on linen, each 112 x 142.5 cm

'Abstract' qualities inherent in the nature of certain materials and the way they are used became extremely important. I experimented with iridescent mica-based paints to bring out the range of their effect on colour and light. In *Blue Sea* the blue is built up of several layers of blue to give richness from beneath, but I also mixed iridescent white into the opaque paint and blended this into the blue in varying degrees as I painted, creating a glow coming from within the blue in a slightly varying visual pulse. This effect is subtle but very important. As the light travels through the pigment towards the white (or other coloured) canvas base and back again towards the surface it hits the mica. Mica's high natural reflective qualities scatter the light within the paint and out from it in many directions. It creates patterns that 'interfere' with the normal play of light and intensify and amplify it. Metaphorically this could be seen as a luminous 'ground' giving birth to very physical 'representation' of itself. When used more thickly in palette knife slabs, the light catches edges to an extra degree when mica is present. In *White Sea* the iridescent paint is used more thinly and directly than in the layering of *Light Blue Sea*. There are hints of peach and gold but the whole is mainly silvery mica white in varying thickness of area and line. This created varying reflectivity and

degrees of refraction that shift as one passes by, setting up light plays of exceptional mobility and intensifying in a very special way the fluid qualities of the sea I sought to portray.

In both these paintings, light and shadow are not used to model specific tonal gradations to reveal outer form. Rather pigment is freed into a wider play of light in a larger world. The mica paint helps to explore the paradox that matter can be read as light, and that a painting can approach being experienced as light itself and not just a representation of it. The mica helps embody luminosity and radiance and the more immaterial and intangible elements of experience. Likewise colour comes closer to being comprehended as colour itself: part empirical substance, part metaphoric and symbolic carrier of 'the sea', but part also of the 'poetic reality' of colour as a power in itself.



Glitter dropped into paint



Perlescent mica paint drawn over gold leaf

The use of glitter adds to this exploration of the wider plays of light and colour. Its sparkle is of a unique kind. Sometimes the glitter was dropped into other paint, sometimes it was spread out with a palette knife over the substance of other paint to scatter and thin its effect over a larger area and sometimes it was dropped as a narrow line directly from the nozzle of the container. Either way, glitter pulls increased light into itself then sends it out intensified, so that light travels further into the viewer's space than is the norm. This merged the irreverence and fun of childhood associated with glitter with more 'serious' concerns, complicating metaphoric resonance in a way that delighted me.

*Blue Sea* is much quieter than earlier *Seas* and more actively engaged in 'silence' and slow time. Blending is subtler and gestures less sweeping. Taking care in detail brings another kind of energy into the work and here there are strips of detailed patterning and touches of gold leaf attached with a three-hour size. Gold leaf historically references

preciousness and value and metaphorically associates with care. Taking care over time builds time into the work, slower touches here creating slower time.

To bring enough contrast and activation to the overall space became its challenge. Even in a still painting, the sense that the forces in it might at some stage or somehow transform needs to be there. The challenge in this painting was to maintain sufficient tension to bring life, or the whole feel too flat, or have some areas (such as the gold) stand out too much. Within the more detailed areas opaque paint was drawn over the gold leaf to integrate it into the 'sea', and small palette knife slashes of pearlescent paint created contrasts of thickness and texture. Nevertheless, even after being exhibited in *Spacious, Blue Sea* felt too even and somehow flat. Further experimentation was needed. It was risky. I had to get ready inside. One day I felt ready to add another small pearly slab or two and suddenly I knew I would not touch the painting again. The right balance between activity and calm had been struck, and sufficiently different kinds of time and tempo were now built into the whole. Small adjustments, especially after the initial impulse, can as easily ruin as make a work. Overall meaning can be completely altered in a flash, and not necessarily in the way one wants. Those last touches at last activated the whole, revealing how intimately material process is involved in the creation of meaning.

It is arguable that the term 'painted energy', as discussed by Luke Taylor in relation to the work of John Mawurndjul, is relevant to mention here. Taylor examines Mawurndjul's work in relation to the concept of 'shining paint' as an expression of ancestral energy, (which he likens to the *bir'yun* in Yolnu art that Howard Morphy has talked about), which holds within it the need for no part of the painted surface to be 'dead', or the vibration or shimmer of livingness in each stroke vacates the work.<sup>3</sup> In discussing his own process, the artist William Robinson has remarked how each viewer scans a painting, sees where the paint is thick, where thin et cetera, and if there are patches of uncertainty, if there are 'dead' spots un-harmonised into the whole, they will always pick it up, subliminally if not consciously. It is vital that 'life' is present in the paint at every point.<sup>4</sup>

Just as water is a medium in which things live, paint can also be seen as a medium in which things live. In *Blue Sea* 'abstract' coagulations of more specific form appear

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3. Luke Taylor. "Painted Energy: John Mawurndjul and the Negotiation of Aesthetics" in Claus Volkenandt and Christian Kaufmann (eds.) *Between Indigenous Australia and Europe: John Mawurndjul: Art Histories in Context*. Reimer: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2009

4. Lou Klepac (ed.) *William Robertson. Paintings 1987-2000*. Sydney: Beagle Press, 2001

and disappear out of and back into the wider sea. They could be fish, they could be clusters of some sort of matter in far space, or they could be clouds in between these two, linking them in some sort of macro/micro way. These forms were entirely imagined whereas those in *White Sea* sprung from the use of projection and include more obvious suggestions of fish. Even though representation is used as metaphor (for organic life, for mobility) literal reference is clearly there. Nevertheless both these paintings are 'about' the same thing: the continuing appearance and disappearance of the immaterial into the material and back again. The reference to specific fish is not so literal as to disrupt this being the case.

The abstraction/representation debate in fact a gigantic red herring. If I looked at *Blue Sea* and *White Sea*, both seemed to be able to manifest the *qualities* I sought. One had recognisable reference to fish and the other did not, but they both register gentleness and buoyancy. One sits in floating blue light, the other white, but it is the lightness of the light that counts, and the feeling that brings. In both I aimed for a softness that nevertheless felt powerful. It was not style or categorisation as abstract or figurative that mattered, but qualities, energy flows, shifting fluid force. Abstraction and representation had flowed into each other, and through the materials chosen, spaces created and the way light and colour were used, each proved equally able to manifest the kind of content and degree of 'poetry' I sought.

Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wunsche's re-evaluation of early Modernist abstraction as more bio-centric and concerned with the immaterial than a purely formalist interpretation had suggested helped me 'place' my own endeavours. My investigations had revealed abstraction and figuration as part of the same continuum with difference between them more a matter of emphasis than innate. In some senses one could argue that abstraction is representation from 'very close' or 'very far away'. To 'represent' something need not necessarily mean to literally 'look like'. Indeed, much of experience does not have a visible physical form that it can 'look like'. What seemed to happen at the interface of abstraction and representation was fluid exchange and merged boundaries. Nevertheless, at this point I was left wondering if I might want more overt reference to the literal to 'ground' whatever I could muster of the numinous into the recognisable physical reality of the everyday world, as a philosophical point I wanted to make about their natural linkage. Were there elements of the surreal for instance, emerging as it had as part of my 'natural' response to outer nature at Cape

Leveque, that might need to be taken account of (perhaps in 'abstracted' simplified form) in any evolving whole? Perhaps abstraction did indeed leave too much behind.

Technically innovative, *Seas* created a breakthrough dynamic for me. These paintings hold within them knowledge of both minimal and gestural abstraction but are not quite a pure form of either. They arise out of specific place, but do not stay there. On the one hand they are 'seascapes of consciousness' rather than 'seascapes of place' but that is not quite it either. While embracing both these, they open to the possibility of something even more spreading and inclusive – the creation of spaces that feel beyond the borders of visible space. Although light in colour, to make them felt like soundings into the deep. Within a sense of timelessness and the vast, more specific forms appear and disappear, 'die' and reform, embodying qualities and riding on energy flows that felt to me more about nature itself than one place in it.

## **WAVE:** Micky and the Whale

Like Agnes Martin, I see painting as a process of living, unfolding as a person.

Like Eugene Carchesio, I wish to create a personal universe, but really, as he has said 'I just want to make energy.'

Like Hilma af Klint, I want to listen to intuition and what I call 'upstairs', although I do not 'hear' with her explicitness.

Like Blake, I want to make the inner worlds alive in the outer.

But as Micky, I also want quirkiness and play.



Micky Allan. *Micky and the Whale*, seventy-five works on paper on stretched canvas (watercolour, acrylic, collage, colour pencil, film, glass beads) 2004-11. Installation, Canberra Contemporary Art space, 2011



When I returned from Bruny Island and continued to evolve the *Seas* paintings, the series of small watercolours exploring my own version of the Jonah story magnetised my attention once more. The impetus behind *Sea Plunge* and the research into historical visual imagery of the Jonah story re-emphasised itself as an essential undercurrent to the whole endeavour. I worked on *Seas* and *Micky and the Whale* in tandem, exhibiting them together in the exhibition *Spacious* at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space in 2011. The *Seas* paintings were large, mostly abstract and relatively formal explorations of the sea as continually emerging and dying away. Its 'characters' were small areas of texture appearing out of and merging back into thinner paint and more generalised space. In contrast the small watercolours of *Micky and the Whale* (seventy-five, each 20 x 20 cm) spoke through storytelling and myth. Both series explored the sea in terms of oscillation between the immaterial and the material but in *Micky and the Whale* there was variety of media in unexpected ways and complex interactions of abstraction and figuration.

The works are small and numerous. Although placed in regular configuration during *Spacious*, final ordering was un-fixed so as to allow new formulations in the future. Meaning does not unfold in straight linear fashion but is fluid and changing depending on which way the eye falls. Nevertheless there is a story here - a small collaged figure plunges into the sea, is chased by a whale, is within the whale, becomes a skeleton, is cast out, is in the sky, rides a galaxy, attempts balance, is chased again, finds rest, becomes lost, again escapes. An albatross swings by. Death is here, plus signs of infinity: colour and darkness both.

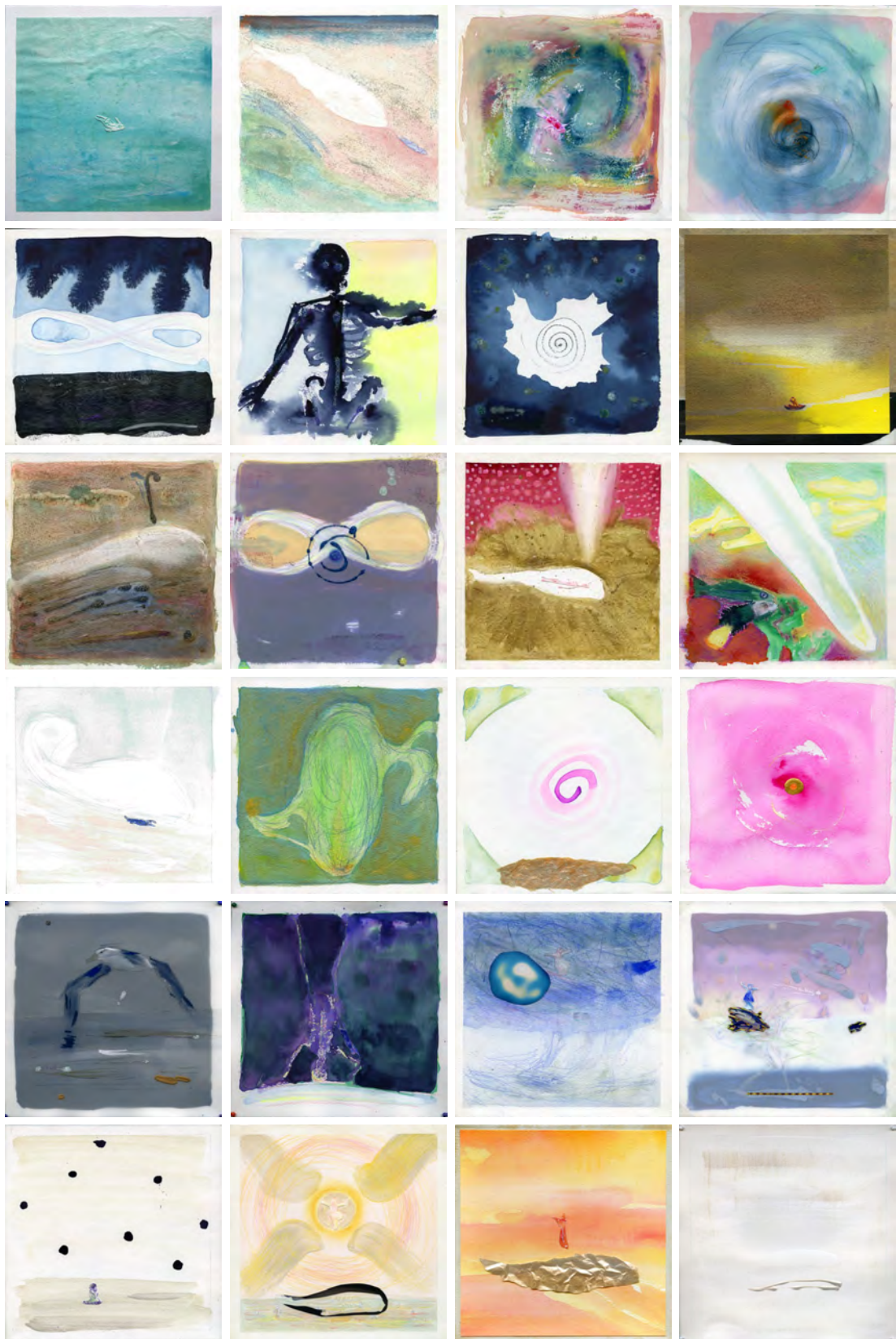
Symbolic death and renewal processes have a wide and deep history - Mercea Eliade's *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* details many<sup>1</sup>: there are numerous myths in the South-East Asia region in which spiritual heroes are delivered by whales. An indigenous Australian elder recently outlined seven states of being as progressive stages of growth in his culture and spoke of the importance of communication with whales swimming offshore (he was referring to the Botany Bay area) and of merging with them, either metaphorically or by actually riding them<sup>2</sup>. In the New Zealand film *The Whale Rider*<sup>3</sup>, which was based on a true

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1. Mircea Eliade. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York: Harper and Row, 1959

2. Dennis Foley interviewed by Lorena Allam. *A Living Harbour*. ABC Radio National, Hindsight, 20/6/2010

3. *Whale Rider*, DVD directed by Nicky Caro, based on the novel by Witi Ihimaera, South Pacific Pictures, Apollomedea, Pandora Film, 2002



Micky Allan *Micky and the Whale* 2009-2011, watercolour, mixed media, 24 of 75 works, ea 20x20 cm

story, when there was no male willing or able to embrace the challenges, a daughter rode the whale and became the first female in Maori history to do so. The film ends with her standing triumphant on the back of the whale as they plunge together through the waves. Herman Melville, in the chapter in *Moby Dick* titled 'The Honour and Glory of Whaling', exclaims: 'Perseus, St George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnu! There's a member roll for you! What club like the whaleman's can head off like that?'<sup>4</sup> - Jonah is linked to a wide and grand tradition in stories of human development and the evolution of consciousness.

*Micky and the Whale* explored new perspectives to the old transformation story. The heroic is made intimate and ordinary. Despite a serious undercurrent, the tone is intimate, personal, humorous and often fun. The bizarreness at the base of the Jonah story remains, but the motion of crisis and renewal becomes repetitive rather than a single grand episode, echoing what happens naturally in both the creative process and in everyday life, even as both these reflect the larger rhythms of nature and the cosmos.<sup>5</sup>

Unusually, the protagonist is female. The series asks 'what is the experience of being inside the whale like?' - a more contemporary perspective. While often decorative, it aims also for gravitas. There is joy and adventure as well as fear and occasional courage - arguably a wider range of reaction and mood than in the original story, possibly because of the extended timeframe in which the finding of balance takes place. Importantly, the protagonist seeks to swim with the whale rather than to slay it or see it as a monster, as is the case in various historical examples. The whale and the figure synthesise and merge as a new cycle begins, and we are left with a sense of expansion and endless cycles of becoming rather than stasis or a fixed new state. There is however some link to traditional representations. In particular I think of the colour in the Persian illuminated manuscripts I looked at earlier, and of sea symbology in Islamic thought, outlined by Hazrat Inayat Khan as ranging through 'calm', 'in motion' and 'stormy' in the journey to 'uncloud' the soul.

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4. Herman Melville. *Moby Dick or The White Whale*. London, Panther, 1851 and 1968

5. Paul J. Steinhardt and Neil Turok. *Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang*. New York: Doubleday, a division of Random House, 2007. The authors outline the case for there being repeated cycles of expansion and contraction in the universe comparable with the cycles of sunrise and sunset and the seasons, only operating as the rise and fall of universes. This posits a cyclic universe as opposed to the inflationary multiverse currently the focus of much research, including that at the Hadron Collider at CERN.

The wide variety of materials and stylistic approach does much to create this multiplicity of mood, experience, and metaphoric resonance in the series, as it seeks to find a unity that is not based on uniformity. One consistent and uniting thread however, is the use of watercolour, a medium whose qualities include lightness, fluidity and speed of application. In an essay on Eugene Carchesio, Micheal Snelling calls it a 'slightly rebellious' medium. Watercolour has uncertainty, transparency, and more than usually fades. It has its own kind of death and renewal. As Carchesio himself says:

It represents that transience. You can see through it. It will fade in time quicker than oil painting, and that's great. It will go. It's got to go. We've all got to go.<sup>6</sup>

Micky and the Whale is explorative technically, particularly in the creation of space through unusual layering and unexpected connections between different media. In the individual works in this series there are physically several layers. This layering includes the use of semi-opaque drafting film, collage, mechanically produced stickers and glass beads placed over painted surfaces. It is a range similar to that of *Wonders of the Sea* but primarily placed on watercolour paper that is then pinned or otherwise attached to small canvases. This creates another kind of layering, with the informal and transient given the relative pomp of being set out from the wall, thus transforming the traditional connotations of framed watercolour works. All this invites play between surface and depth, the opaque and the transparent, what is hidden and what revealed. Glitter sparkles and remains on top, reflecting out. Texture of thick and thin paint or layers of one colour peeking out behind another create movement towards or away from the viewer. Semi-opaque film placed over painted paper is sometimes attached with pins at the top so air circulates between them. This creates a depth in which there are intimations of forms before they quite become formal, suggesting something pre-formal, below the level of actualisation. Obliquely they evoke the act of manifestation: form changing into formlessness and back again - a theme which has emerged as central in this research into processes of transformation and change.

Abstract and figurative works happily sit side by side. There is the specific use of figuration through the collaged figure of the main protagonist and more or less identifiable representations of the whale, the sea, and its mirror cosmos in the sky, yet many works are completely abstract. Movement slides between abstraction and figuration with complete ease, any question of either/or dissolving into irrelevance.

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6. Michael Snelling. *Someone's Universe: The Art of Eugene Carchesio*. Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2008

Abstraction and representation become part of the same gestalt, united by the physical touch of the maker's mark. The importance of touch as a unifying agent cannot be over appreciated.

I worked with Steenus von Steensen to make a small DVD, with words and touches of animation. For instance the first image had the collaged figure slowly drop from top to bottom of the frame with the words 'Down, down, she plunged, towards the bottom of the sea' slowly moving across. Without words the narrative of repeated movement into and out of the whale, and of gradual change, was never clear and the overall motion remained somewhat chaotic. The digital presentation introduced simplification and clarification, helping me in the larger search to reconcile rhythms of transformation and change with those of unity and a harmonised whole.

Victoria Lynn, visual arts curator and co-convener for the 2012 Adelaide Festival Symposium *Into Cosmos*, spoke there of many contemporary issues that resonate with my own concerns. The broad themes of the Festival – 'faith, emotion, mystery, universe' – were taken as a starting point. Lynn presented two images, one of the world in motion and one of the world as a whole: the desire to reduce the world to a single image and the desire to offer myriad viewpoints oscillated within us. In what she saw as a crossroads moment in our culture, Lynn called on artists to be mediators and give voice to the 'nebulous experiences of the worlds that elude reason'. Lynn spoke of how the interpretation of contemporary art was now returning to 'the question of the spirit of things and belonging in an open world' and to examining both 'the presentness of utopia' and 'living with faith without certainties'.<sup>7</sup> The symposium raised many issues around these concerns, including the possibility of 'abyssal thinking in many directions' so as not to regard 'heaven above and abyss below' as the only possibility. In *Micky and the Whale* I asked why not combine 'abyssal thinking' with 'celestial thinking', keep 'in many directions' and see what happens in the mix?

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7. Victoria Lynn introducing the *Into Cosmos* artist's week symposium at the Adelaide Festival of Arts, 2012. [http://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/2012/visual\\_arts/artists\\_week\\_into\\_cosmos?event=2012-into-cosmos](http://www.adelaidefestival.com.au/2012/visual_arts/artists_week_into_cosmos?event=2012-into-cosmos)

## **WAVE: Incubation (floundering in the whale)**

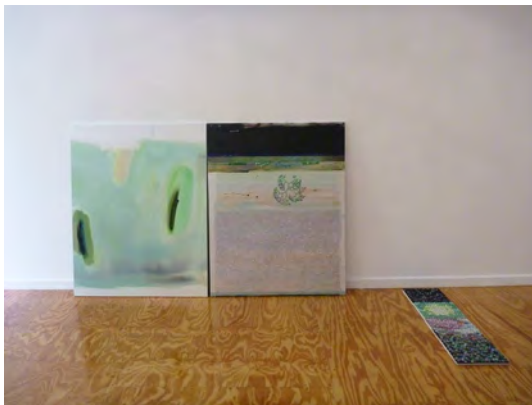


Julia Ciccarone *No resistance any more* 2007, oil on linen, 137 x 198 cm

To my surprise, in 2012, just when I thought I was ready to bring everything together and flourish, I entered a period of prolonged struggle. I became confused with how I might synthesize both the paintings I had produced and the written material for the Exegesis. Later I would see this time as one of most fruitful incubation but at the time it felt like ‘floundering in the whale’. Curiously, my creative process was echoing *Micky and the Whale*.

I set all my work out in a gallery space and worked with various combinations and permutations and ways of combining and distilling the work. *Micky and the Whale* could perhaps be placed at the bottom left of each work as a ‘label’? Maybe it would be better as a projection. Perhaps the paintings worked well combined into larger works, perhaps they were better single, allowing slow time to consider each separately. Maybe I should include works from all stages of the process so far; perhaps the main work was not yet done. I felt I needed more colour and light to bring in a sense of expansion and release, but this could not be forced. I ‘knew’ engraved glass overlay work would bring something of the ethereal to figuration should I want to accent this, and more figuration should this be needed to balance the abstraction, but the right size and shape of possible glass works and their paper underlays eluded me. Perhaps the small *Wonders of the Sea* paintings could be put in long high strips beside the panelled paintings, or hang individually matched to a single painting, or form small organic clusters around them. The *Wonders of the Sea* paintings brought

colour and (through those with glass beads) reflectivity and gleam, but somehow all the arrangements I tried looked too angular, too disparate, or far too aware of their own design. The dominant atmosphere was of hard edges and geometry rather than fluidity and flow.



Trial combinations 2012

I could not see how I could bring cohesion to the complexity I had embraced. I was certain that more needed to be done to complete the gestalt of the physical, experiential and metaphoric whole I was attempting to integrate, but convincing synthesis and organic 'poetry' eluded me. I remembered Csikszentmihalyi's distinction between complexity and confusion, and that complex need not mean confused. I remembered that unity did not necessarily mean uniformity. Nevertheless, despite much exciting

potential, the way forward was not clear.

There was parallel difficulty in the writing of my Exegesis. I struggled to synthesise the poetic and the analytic and the range of writing styles I had embraced in a way not dissimilar to how I engage with range in my studio. Working with diverse elements on many levels simultaneously is the way I, as an artist, tend to absorb knowledge and (finally) intuit direction. Synthesis of the unexpected and diverse has always been an important underlying concept, but the doctoral research was stretching the parameters of this approach into new and much expanded territory. I had immersed myself in physical, emotional and mental 'seas', but I could not easily understand what to let 'die' or how to transform what remained into new life.



*Cross = Currents*

## **WAVE:** Kamin Lertchaiprasert's *Sitting*



Kamin Lertchaiprasert, *Sitting* 2004-2006, 365 statues, papier mâché (circulated Thai bank notes)  
Sydney Biennale 2013 (Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney)

Coming across the small figures of Kamin Lertchaiprasert's *Sitting* at the 2013 Biennale exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney was a shock: their quiriness, their vulnerability (both in terms of personal feeling and fragility of materials) their sheer abundance and my own genuine pleasure in their unexpectedly moving aesthetic all drew me in. Their 'beauty' was irregular rather than regular, arising from the combination of rough finish and exquisite care in their making and the poise with which a large range of feelings were held in strange equilibrium. One figure had a broken heart with wings flying from its head. Another referenced a pietà or at least a mother mourning a sick or dead child. Another evoked questioning and perhaps even fear through the representation of a skeleton. A fourth had a large 'empty' space in the heart area, making a complex play on notions of 'emptiness'.



Kamin Lertchaiprasert, *Sitting* 2004-2006, details

Kamin Lertchaiprasert's practice seeks to understand what it means to look for meaning and wisdom in the contemporary world. Each figure is made from shredded Thai bank notes, a comment on materialism. A practicing Buddhist, he has covered small papier-mâché figures of himself and his friends with sayings that modestly put forward a 'wisdom' he has found during the time of making that particular figure. One saying states "The state of emptiness, both inside and outside, creates unity".

In Lertchaiprasert's portrayal of a long process of endeavour, not always smooth, I found resonances with *Micky and the Whale* in particular, but also with my wider research into the sea as a site of the evolving self. *Sitting* reflects aspects of the traditional search for meaning in the unfolding processes of life, but seeks to find contemporary language for its expression. 'Life' and 'death' are symbolically understood as part of the same continuum, reflecting the many deaths and renewals of an ongoing life as it seeks to understand the complexity of spiritual growth. The results are intimate and moving. *Sitting* provided strong contemporary context for my own concerns and indicated a growing place in the contemporary art environment for idiosyncratic personal 'quests', in which feeling and thought are merged and intellect and intuition are not at odds.

## WAVE: PHILIP WOLFHAGEN AND THE THICKNESS OF THE SEA



Philip Wolfhagen *Surface Tension No. #3* 1998, oil and beeswax on canvas, 214 x 316 cm

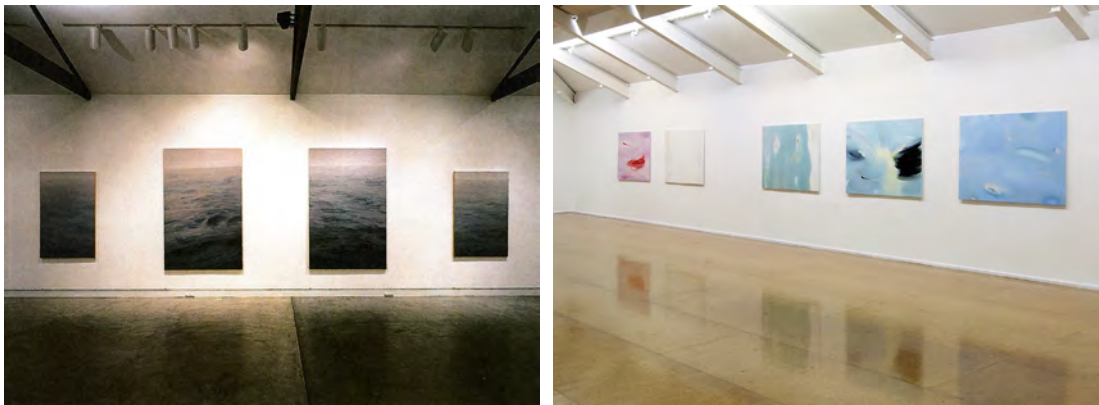
What happens when I look at Wolfhagen's work is very complex. He has turned Tasmanian sunny and serene inside out, tugging out the depth and giving thickness of meaning through creating a disquiet that strangely maintains glow.

During my stay in Tasmania I thought of Philip Wolfhagen's paintings often and could see how grounded his work was in the weather, forms and feel of what I could see around me. I was on South Bruny, he was inland and north, but something 'Tasmanian' and 'traditional' established an imaginative link. Weather played a big part in this: grey and nearly turbulent much of the time, sunny and deceptively 'plain' the next, yet even on a sunny day something of grey seemed to slip into the mix.

Wolfhagen usually works with landscape but *Surface Tension*, painted in 1998, was a body of work on the sea, and it is these paintings I will look at and compare with my own series *Seas*. Both series portray the sea and were made (or begun) in Tasmania,

but both are finally 'seascapes of consciousness' and the nature of being rather than 'seascapes of place'.

I could also see how Wolfhagen could cite his influences as including Constable, Colin McCahan and early Australian colonial painters. He is not searching for entirely new ways of understanding our relationship to the land, and in this case the sea, but chooses instead to embrace the past without mythologising it. Scale, severity of composition and choice and an innate understanding of minimalist abstraction bring his work clearly into the contemporary domain. 'When I'm painting, I need to be confident enough about my subject matter to be able to concentrate on the paint handling. Subject matter then ceases to matter and I can devote my attention to interpretation and to expressing the feel of the place',<sup>1</sup> 'Paint handling', 'interpretation', 'feel': these are contemporary concerns, but what I find intriguing about Wolfhagen's work is the degree to which something that at first sight seems so 'conventional' has been transformed into an experience so relevant to this moment now.



Left: Philip Wolfhagen *Surface Tension*, Installation view, Sherman Galleries 1998

Right: Micky Allan *Spacious*, Installation view, Canberra Contemporary Art Space 2011

David Hansen has noted<sup>2</sup> that Wolfhagen finds the initial decisions concerning a painting's scale and shape to be among the most important and the most difficult. I too believe they are crucial, particularly in relation to the sense of space such factors help establish. *Surface Tension No 3*'s thin verticality accommodates a horizon line and small strip of sky above a large area of waves becoming smaller and smaller and lighter and lighter as they recede into the distance. This classic aerial perspective is however confounded by the fact that as the viewer looks steeply up into the distance through it they are inexplicably suspended above the waves simultaneously looking

1 Peter Timms, "Gatecrashing the Sublime," *Artlink* Vol 28 Issue 2 (June 2008).12

2 David Hansen, "O Earth, Return! Philip Wolfhagen's Tasmanian Pastorales", *Art and Australia* 42 (2004).

down. Wolfhagen's sea is a rendering of the sea's surface, but the surface is broken and from yet another perspective we are plunged below into imaginative territory that is not explained but hovers in, around and under the surface waves: a deeper territory of mind and experience. This play with perspective and surface on the material level does much towards the creation of the existential tension that emanates from within the work and contributes to the resonance of the title *Surface Tension*.

The paint of Wolfhagen's sea is physically thick. It is in fact a shock how thick it is, especially for a sea, but it is more liquid and sloshy than it looks, unusually so for paint this thick. Beeswax is mixed with the paint and laid on with a palette knife in broad, fast strokes before the beeswax sets - the movement of making needs to be swift and sure-footed. The palette knife makes little ridges everywhere, some catching the light, some smoothed down to be almost flat. The beeswax is thick and transparent at the same time, which is strange. Some of it is scraped back later so there are shifts of thick and thin and so a sense of longer time passing. Sometimes these small edges are flattened into the dense slippery surface and stay visible but only as a trace. This way the surface and the substance beneath it are solid and liquid at the same time, another tension extending beyond the surface.

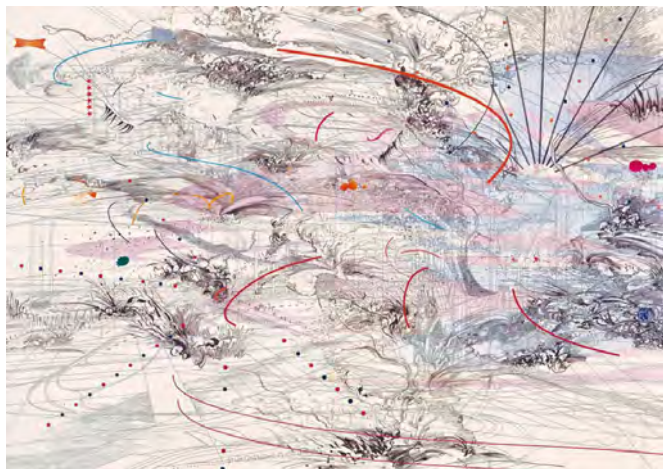
The *Seas* paintings from the exhibition *Spacious* were influenced as much by my just having been swimming underwater at Heron Island among coral reefs and moving dappled light as by the presence of the cold Tasmanian sea. Their space is underwater and there is no trace of a horizon line. Initially planned as vertical, turning them horizontal gave 'room' to simultaneously move sideways, diagonally, and up and down, catching multi-directional movement of 'fish' and light. There is no naturally receding perspective. In different but complimentary ways Wolfhagen and I both play with changing perspectives within the one work, but in *Seas* the experiential mood is more open, colourful, spacious and light. The tone is less of tension and more of release. As a viewer I might note: 'His vibrancy is more like a cello, hers like a violin.'

Wolfhagen's *Surface Tension No 3* is not solid in a single meaning and reflects a state of consciousness that speaks of transformation and freedom not just bleakness and loss. The work conveys a way of being in the world that is rich with love and power and a sense, finally, of hope. A link between us is the search for a beauty that is neither sentimental nor glamorous. It is the complexity inherent in its beauty that gives Wolfhagen's seas their 'thickness', a 'thickness' that is also inherent in the sea.

*Wave: Julie Mehretu: Chaotic Balance and the flow of change*



Julie Mehretu *Stadia I* 2004, ink and acrylic on canvas, 274.3 x 365.8 cm



Julie Mehretu *Immanence* 2004, ink and acrylic on canvas, 183 x 244 cm

At first glance the works of Julie Mehretu may seem to have nothing to do with my concerns. Their 'content' relates to the city - its advertising, graffiti, traffic, crowding and rush. Yet their focus on flows of force, rhythms of change and shifts in tempo could be linked to various Sea paintings. In motion are satellite trails, airplane trajectories, narratives of wars and geographical events rather than shoals of fish, the action of light, although water and air currents are sometimes in the mix. I am reminded of Christine Buci-Glucksmann's argument that we are now embracing 'a world where we are moving from a culture of objects to a culture of flows'. Mehretu's images reflect

such a world in motion *par excellence*. Changing relationships of forces and energies become key, and here we see those that build and those that destroy in swirling flux. Mass sports stadiums or other architectural frameworks might map initial structure, into which marks are placed as 'characters'. These become social agents in a process of forming and reforming the evolving social fabric as they change or are changed by it.

In her article 'Julie Mehretu: Found Rumbling of the Divine',<sup>1</sup> Heidi Zuckerman-Jacobson links Mehretu's formal and intellectual concerns with those of Wassily Kandinsky, citing the artist's interest in Kandinsky's 1920 essay "The Great Utopia" and in his belief that art must manifest 'soul' to affect the viewer. This quality of 'soul' is elicited through forces of balance in color and in composition and must be reflected in equivalent integrity in the artist.<sup>2</sup> Connection to Kandinsky is palpable in *Stadia I* (above). Other historical influences in Mehretu's work include modernist abstraction as a given, but also the dynamism of the Futurists and the mark-making of Chinese calligraphy. Her Ethiopian background (with its colorful Orthodox Christian Church, passionate willingness to fight for independence in the face of colonialism, and continual undercurrents of war and tribal disorder), combined with the idealism of the Realists, play their part in this complex invitation to effect social change. Mehretu has called herself 'a private utopian fighter', and a visionary idealism is at the heart of her exposure of destruction and decay.

This is certainly not Renaissance perspectival space, though elements of such a view might tantalisingly suggest themselves, only to be layered over with streaming lines evoking modern migration or digital 'noise'. Many commentators on Mehretu's work speak of the dizziness or confusion in the spaces she creates, but I see rather a spontaneous order arising out of seeming chaos. As in paintings such as *Green Sea*, motion is constant and multi-directional, but there is something strangely, almost paradoxically, steady at the core, holding everything together as a flourishing whole.

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1 Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, 'Julie Mehretu: Found Rumbblings of the Divine' *Parkett* 76-2006, 26-31

2 Ibid, 30

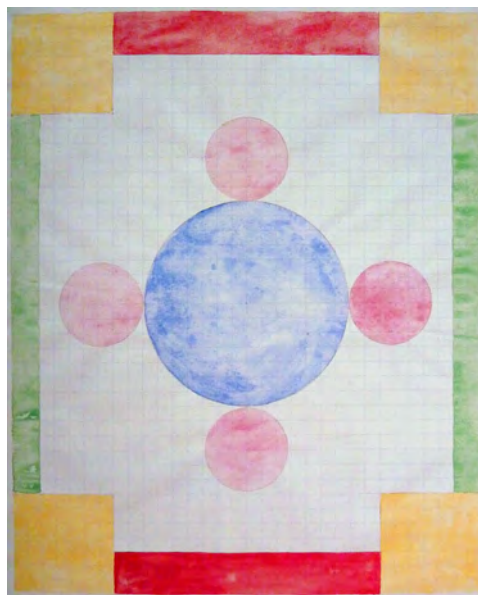


## WAVE: SOMEONE'S UNIVERSE: EUGENE CARCHESIO

It is not anyone's universe, or everyone's universe; it is someone's universe  
Michael Snelling<sup>1</sup>

What inspires me in the Brisbane based artist Eugene Carchesio's work is his idiosyncratic combination of abstraction and figuration, his interest in blending the emotive and the conceptual into something incorporating each but suggestive of something further and his fearlessness in working with the energies of gentleness and hope. He is eclectic in his openness to various spiritual traditions while forging a highly personal journey that seems to ask 'How can the spiritual be experienced and portrayed in a meaningful contemporary way?' Humour and intellect swim together in the same sea.

Engaging with a single sheet from Carchesio's *187 works for the People's Republic of Spiritual Revolution*, I wonder when in the spectrum of the whole time the works took (1975-90) he painted the particular one I am looking at now. Instantaneously I realise this matters little if at all and the point I am leading myself to is realisation of the beauty and persistence of teasing out the nuances of this theme over fifteen years.



Eugene Carchesio. *187 works for the People's Republic of Spiritual Revolution* (detail) 1975-90  
watercolour, pencil, collage, ink, pressed leaves 168 sheets ranging from 15 x 9 cm to 22.6 x 17 cm

1. Michael Snelling, "Someone's Universe," In *Someone's Universe: The Art of Eugene Carchesio*. Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2008

Before me I see a modest sheet of graph paper buckling where watercolour has been applied, especially at the edges where wet and dry have met. Within the coloured areas the paint has pooled unpredictably, creating shapes and densities that cannot be totally foreseen at the time of applying the paint. From my own work I know the thrill and the challenge of this unpredictability. The colour is transparent to the paper below and I can see the grounding mathematical grid everywhere. Tension and resolution are poised not just between wet and dry but also between presence and absence of form. The 'empty' space of the untouched page seems to recede endlessly or hover around the central forms in some indefinable way. Balance is superb. Playing as it does on the symbolism of the circle within the square, or the grounding of heaven in earth, I think of the blue central sphere as the earth seen from outer space, the illusionistic openings of baroque ceilings to the sky, and the certainty of certain Indian tantric drawings of 'everything'. The colour is a strange blend of delicacy and strength, fragility and definiteness, but without the extra intensity of the red in the bottom rectangle the balance might have been too even, the regularity too set and the whole almost too wan to embody a life force useful in a 'work' relevant to whatever might be meant by the 'Spiritual Revolution' of the title. Everything about this painting gives me an extraordinary sense of completeness. That its means are so intimate and modest only increases my admiration. As Michele Helmrich has remarked 'Fragility on a small scale is almost an ethical issue in Carchesio's work.'

Carchesio's work often suggests to me that it has been generated from a space of great concentrated attentiveness that is pitched to an inner place of order and focus, out of which he allows intuition and play to unfold like a dream, seamlessly and without the kind of effort that restrains.

Michael Snelling has referred to Carchesio's unflinching, even utopian, optimism and the range of spiritual belief systems from which he draws - Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic and others. As I look now at the small coloured birds in the series *The birth of saints* from 2007, I am reminded of the Sufi classic *Conference of the Birds* with its black and white drawing of a Hoopoe Bird that looks for all the world like one of Carchesio's birds in *The birth of saints*.



Left: Eugene Carchesio *The birth of saints* 2007, one of seven watercolours each 30 x 21 cm

Right: Cover of contemporary version of Farid al-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*. Retold by Alexis York Lumbard with illustrations by Demi. Wisdom Tales 2012.

The Hoopoe bird is the leader of all the other birds who set off to find the *Simurg* but drop off one by one due to varying excuses symbolic of all the excuses humans give for avoiding the spiritual path towards their own soul or spirit. *Conference of the Birds* is funny, insightful and brilliantly written. It was apparently the foundation of another classic, *The Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy and companions travel and grow through trial and difficulty only to find that the wizard (or Simurg) is in fact a mirror in which they see themselves, and that they are themselves the 'authority' they seek, because they themselves embody the divine. Each of Carchesio's exquisite little birds is so colourfully fragile and vulnerable, and through them there is such tender identification with the process of 'looking for the 'Simurg'', that I cannot help but respond to their quaintness and humour with empathy and love. Softly written in pencil on each of the seven sheets of paper is the hand-written title *The birth of saints* so we are made well aware there is more dimension to these little birds than meets the eye. It is a body of work that I identify with through my own journey in relation to the Whale and my pleasure in colour in *Wonders of the Sea*.

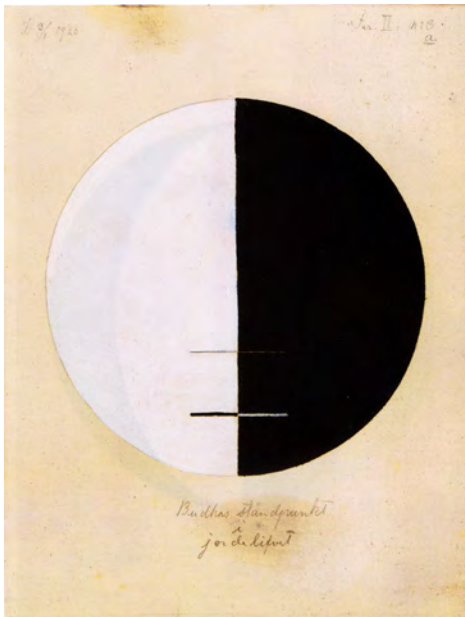
## WAVE: *Runge's Morning*



Phillip Otto Runge: *The Great Morning* (detail) 1809-10, oil on canvas

Phillipp Otto Runge's *Morning* opens me out into an inner sea. I find this work extremely moving. Time and place are very specific, but simultaneously spread into a feeling of nowhere, no place. In real time, a baby might move any second: here this baby is very still. There is a sense that something extraordinary is happening. Although wide awake, this baby is very still. One might almost say transfixed. The open arms and the riveted eyes are critical in the creation of whatever is happening. Exactly what is being 'seen'? Seeing is also with the open body. Gender could be either or both. The pink of the sky and the growing plants and the golden light and the body's flesh and the inner seeing are all in some way *in sympathy*: there is a sense that plants, humans, whatever is in space or air or molecule is 'living in' each other. 'As above, so below' becomes real: heaven and earth combine. But direction is not just from above down. Light falls from above but the eyes send force upwards as much as they receive, and the baby's open arms direct flow out towards the viewer and back into the open field behind as well as upwards. The atmosphere is transformative and hushed. Something in me is changed by looking at it, such is its radiance and silent power, crossing the centuries *in sympathy*. This painting reminds me that the numinous can be transported through the figurative quite as easily as through the abstract, and that in the end all one need ask is 'Does it radiate?'

Wave: Hilma af Klint: *Time Expressions of Eternity*



Left: Hilma af Klint *Buddha's Standpoint in Earthly Life, Series II, No 3a*. 1920, 37 x 28 cm  
Right: *The Swan, Group IX/SUW. The SUW/UW Series*. 1914-15, 151 x 152 cm



Hilma af Klint: *A Pioneer of Abstraction* installation, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2013  
*The Ten Largest (Childhood, Youth, Adulthood, Old Age) Group IV* 1907

What I particularly admire in the life and work of Hilma af Klint is her wilfulness: the will to give such space and physical authority to inner conviction rather than the art currencies of her time and to demonstrate so forcefully a blending of spiritual and personal will and the power that the marriage of these two could bring. I am encouraged by her originality and daring; she began the abstractions of her 1906 *Commission for the Temple* paintings even before Cubism, let alone Kandinsky, Mondrian and Kupka's movements into abstraction. She began working in extensive and ongoing series, often monumental in size, itself unusual and pre-cursive. Every artist is unique, but Hilma's life and work rings with an unusually intense flavour of uniqueness. Not least in this is her remarkable process and detailed documentation of it, revealing complex interplay between different planes of consciousness and including intimate and changing relationship to 'higher beings'. In a period noted for manifestos and personal declaration<sup>1</sup>, af Klint stipulated that her esoteric work not be seen for twenty years in case its content and method of production be misunderstood. As an artist it is interesting to ponder on what such a decision might actually have been like on a personal level. Af Klint was painting 'for the future' and knew it. It is only now, not twenty but seventy years after her death that the large 2013 exhibition at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (and touring) treats her process with respect through in-depth catalogue essays and puts her forward not just as a pioneer of abstraction, though this is central, but also as a pioneer in the evolution of a contemporary pictorial language for the interaction of the physical and metaphysical self.

In early 1999 I was in Copenhagen visiting my Danish husband's family when an exhibition of af Klint's work was on show at the Växjö Konsthall, so we crossed the bridge into Sweden to see it. I found af Klint's paintings exceptionally confident and powerful. Many of them were huge. These paintings etched themselves into me in the strangest of ways, most difficult to describe. I felt invited into detail, but overall the feeling was oceanic. The works were simultaneously delicate and powerful, but most of all *unusual*. They were surprisingly tactile on a material level, almost as much of a surprise as to see an original Mondrian. Up close the geometry was very hand-made. No ruler or masking tape here! Diagrammatic or textural, gestural or contained, working in fine line or area, the tremor of the hand was always clear. Here was robust physicality, complex metaphoric resonance, and a further elusive quality that was palpable but hard to name, uniting everything: Bachelard's 'poetic

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<sup>1</sup> *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction* edited by Iris Müller-Westermann with Jo Widoff. Moderna Museet, Stockholm: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013. 15

reality' *par excellence*. Standing among these paintings, I felt as I sometimes do beside the sea: my jaw drops and I am filled with a sense of awe. Af Klint's paintings embodied a kind of consciousness and strange atmosphere that merged the rational and the mysterious in a way that was completely unfamiliar to me. Gurli Lindén has suggested that to be subjected to Hilma af Klint's paintings is to be 'led into parts of oneself that have not yet been clarified.'<sup>2</sup> That was exactly how it felt. I was reminded however of William Blake, not in terms of 'looking like', but rather as similarly creating an idiosyncratic personal cosmology that tackled complex aspects of the nature of existence with sophistication and aplomb.

Af Klint was aware of the spiritual dimension of consciousness and believed a higher consciousness was speaking through her. She knew of the work of Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant and was a member of the Theosophical Society in Stockholm. Like the early theosophists<sup>3</sup>, af Klint moved away from aspects of the Spiritualism of the times towards uncovering inner worlds in a more rational fashion, as the science of our nature. In 1908 (and 1920) she met Rudolf Steiner who admired her work but questioned the principle of mediumship and later in life she abandoned aspects of her highly charged method of working directly with her inner guides to follow Steiner's anthroposophical art methods more closely, a looser and more sensuous approach. The exhibition I saw in Sweden included many of the later 'Steineresque' works and I could not help but be struck by how small and almost vapid they seemed in relation to the power and magnificence of the works painted 'on commission' in series such as *The Swan* and *The Dove* and other *Paintings for the Temple* (see images below). Af Klint's process over time explored the tension between individuality and inner 'dictation' and involved three stages. Initially she was told what to do (her hand is guided), then told to do it more on her own: painting as a dance between leading and being led. The works I found the strongest (and paradoxically the most 'original') were those in which she had opened most to inner direction in either of these first two ways, while her later involvement with Steiner's 'free' approach had more than a hint of the formulaic about it.

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2 Gurli Lindén. *I Describe the Way and Meanwhile I Am Proceeding Along It - a Short Introduction on Method and Intention in Hilma Af Klint's Work from an Esoteric Perspective*. Hölö: Rosengårdens Förlag, 1996. 15. This small but excellent book draws extensively on af Klint's prolific notebooks (all held at the Hilma af Klint Foundation in Sweden) in which Hilma traces her 'training' in an initial group called 'The Five', though the many stages of her work and process, clearly laying bare its fundamental purpose and intent.

3 The founders of Theosophy, Helena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott, and many founding members were ex-Spiritualists, wanting to investigate spiritual states without losing rationality and objective status.<sup>98</sup>

When I look at the selection of images I have chosen above the words that first occur to me to describe them are balance and fire. The fire is not literal. In both *Buddha's Standpoint in Earthly Life* and *The Swan* balance is achieved through symmetry, created in both abstract and figurative terms, while in *The Ten Largest* balance is more precarious and mobile, but nevertheless achieved. Throughout all her work the fire is the fire of change, of something transforming into something else, but within a framework that the settling of opposites is finally possible.

*The Ten Largest (Childhood, Youth, Adulthood, Old Age)* embody the development of a human being over time in large sweeps of organic rhythm and shape. The series is from the first stage of af Klint's work which was 'painted directly through me without any preliminary drawing and with great force'<sup>4</sup> The colours are magnetic, simultaneously subtle and bold and sometimes slightly acid. The canvases are filled with rolling lines and simplified biological or flower shapes commandingly enlarged. I think of Matisse, but, as Adrian Searle has remarked, 'it is as if af Klint anticipated moves Matisse didn't make until 1908'<sup>5</sup>. It is intriguing to think of works such as these sitting in private, not to be displayed, while traditional portraits and landscapes, brownish/grey in tone, paraded as her public face.

*Buddha's Standpoint in Earthly Life* (above) is one of a series of remarkably reduced and minimalist visualisations of systems of belief such as Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and here Buddhism, each image a variation of a black and white circle. Af Klint examines but is never dogmatic about religion or established frameworks. What is important is the idea of unity, and that all religions are a means to that end.

The series of seven paintings comprising *The Swan* trace the struggle and final fusion of two swans. The 'dual truth' polarities of dark/light, male/female, thought/feeling, black swan/white swan, gradually fuse into coherence and unity, but in this particular painting, relatively early in the series, there is a sense of residual struggle. A fire-like configuration between the two swans symbolically burns where spirit and matter meet. In af Klint's complex cosmology, blue represents female and yellow male. While the 'fire' is blue and yellow and a blue and a yellow webbed foot stick out strangely

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4 Iris Müller-Westermann. "Paintings for the Future: Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction in Seclusion" in *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction*, 2013. 38

5 Adrian Searle. "Out of this world". In *The Guardian*, Tuesday March 14, 2006



from each side of the black and white wings, suggesting male /female integration, something slightly awkward remains. Unity is not yet fully found.

The swan as a symbol is taken directly from theosophical iconography. In *The Secret Doctrine: the Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*, Helena Blavatsky outlines the tradition of the swan embodying the “mystery of mysteries” and “the “majesty of the Spirit”:

“The swan here is thus the manifestation of the divine word, an absolute ‘image word’, a spirit that navigates on the waters and announces the coming of a new era of omniscience, after the marriage of two genders (black/white, male/female) merging in the androgyny of the mental plane”<sup>6</sup>

The Swan series was part of the larger grouping called *Paintings for the Temple* that af Klint considered her central work. The temple was not a building but our innermost self, and the paintings were intended to inspire humanity towards wanting to know this transcendental core. The paintings were to embody what was in fact an old story, but presented ‘in a new guise’. Af Klint’s development as an artist was to mirror this process<sup>7</sup>, accenting in turn the feeling body, then the thought or mental body, then integrating these with the soul ‘body’ through the formless, synthesising qualities of spirit. Theosophists of the time understood this project as an interaction of staggered planes of reality in what Pascal Rousseau has called ‘transcendental physics’<sup>8</sup>. Their concern was to make a science of the interaction of the material and immaterial worlds and liberate spirit as the unifying agent in this process.

At this second stage in the development of her life’s work, the ‘High Masters’ guiding af Klint presented her with inner images that she was then encouraged to understand and to some degree herself interpret. The process had become less an outpouring in which she had no idea what the result would be, as in *The Ten Largest*, than a more co-creative ordering of complex symbology and thought:

What is shown to me, is shown within me and to make this clear my own thoughts generate what I have described. Thereby I have tried to show that what I am going to investigate goes through the central point of my being which is the heart. With the heart I take up the intimation that I receive, later to produce it as mental images. My studies are conducted independently of these mental images, but to bring them to fruition I have to convert them through my thoughts. In this way I have shown the connection between heaven and earth.<sup>9</sup>

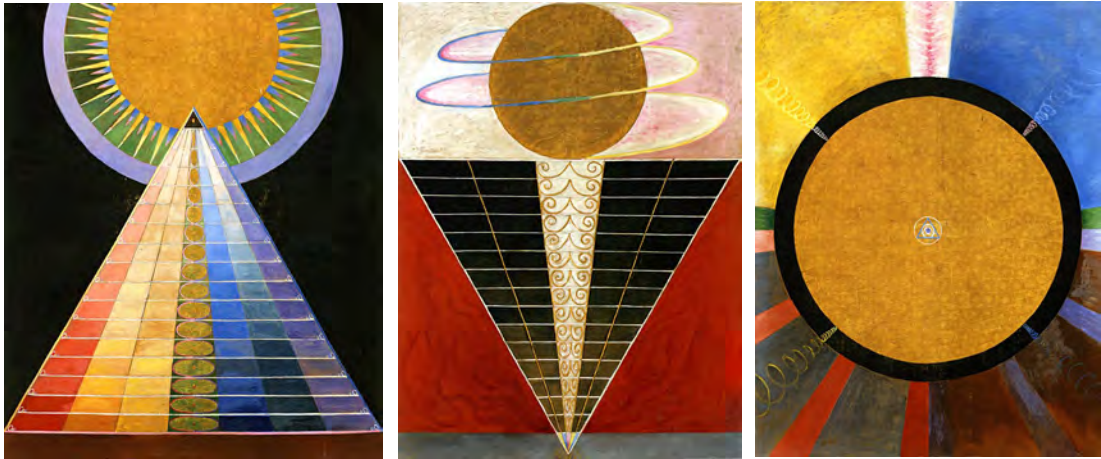
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6 Pascal Rousseau. “Premonitory Abstraction – Mediumism, Automatic Writing, and Anticipation in the Work of Hilma af Klint” in *Hilma af Klint – A Pioneer of Abstraction*, 2013. 170

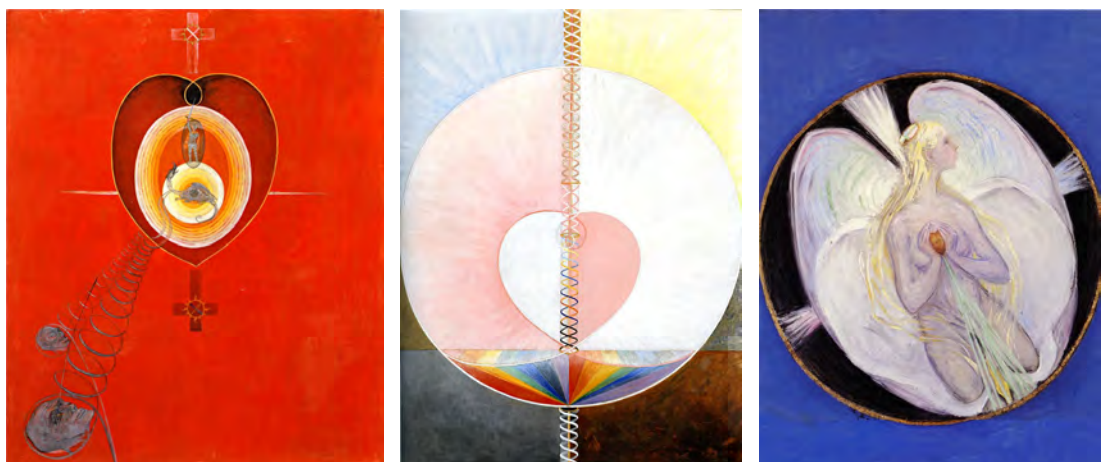
7 Gurli Lindén (1996). 16

8 Pascal Rousseau (2013). 169

9 Gurli Lindén (1996). 26-27



Group X, No 1, No 2 and No 3, Altarpieces, 1915, each 238 x 179 cm



Group IX/UW No 8 The Dove, 1915, 158 x 130 cm and No 1 The Dove, 1915, 151 x 115 cm  
Human Chastity 1915, 74 x 61 cm

Three large *Altarpieces* (above) form what af Klint called a ‘summary’ to the *The Paintings for the Temple*, which include both the *Swan* and the *Dove* series. As I can attest from seeing the exhibition in Sweden, The *Altarpieces* are stunning works in both physical and conceptual scale. They link to geometric abstraction but I think also of Indian Tantric imagery made large. As outlined in af Klint’s notebooks, these three works trace the pouring down of differentiation and manifestation from initial Unity (*No 1*), spiral movement back towards Unity after the gathering of experience in manifestation (*No 2*), then return to Unity, a combination of these forces (*No 3*), before the cycle begins again. The rhythm of human development and that of the larger cosmos are understood to echo each other:

When Oneness dissolved and matter came into existence, polarity emerged and forced evolution. Polarity appears as a basic principle of all life, into which is embedded a yearning for the return to unity.<sup>10</sup>

*Human Chastity* (or *Purity* in an alternative translation) is a single image forming a

<sup>10</sup> Iris Müller-Westermann (2013). 42

'conclusion' to the *Paintings for the Temple* and is intended as a 'primordial image' of a purified human being finally ready to receive inherent divine force. This work in particular needs to be seen in the context of the whole oeuvre. It could be dismissed as too sentimental if it were not for af Klint's astounding accomplishments elsewhere in more accessible form and her overall aim not to reverse domination between the sexes but to validate different forms of power and exchange between them. It could be easy to judge as 'too feminine' and 'too soft' rather than note the power of its poised readiness to receive. Here a woman holds her heart as a seed from which green life streams, gazing into the future. It is an image of yearning, but also of something found: lightness of being as bearable? White wings enfold her in a soft seedpod that suggests both the celestial and a vulva or womb. Gurli Lindén has noted af Klint's premise that the old forms on earth are worn out and need replacing if presently unrecognised areas of our consciousness are to be re-embraced:

'The goal of the studies is to be able to show that what has so far been the world's mental seed that is to be placed in the earth in order to bear fruit is worn out, weak and lacking content. The task has been to collect a new seed, to show that collaboration with divine forces is possible.'<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, *The Dove No 1* is not a blithe dissolving of difficulty, but equilibrium reached after productive tension in an image of great simplicity and abstract strength. *The Dove No. 8* shows this earthly struggle through the traditional Christian iconography of St George slaying the dragon and the death into new life this represents. Pascal Rousseau has noted in this work a strong visual link to alchemical imagery in Agrippa and Fludd<sup>12</sup>, but the tone here, especially through large scale and brilliant red, is quite other than 'old'.

At a 1914 lecture to the Steiner's anthroposophy group af Klint explained that the concept of God at the basis of the thinking is that "God is not a being but a power, not a creature but an eternity, not something with form, but a life that can assume an endless number of forms"<sup>13</sup>. In his book *The Supreme Splendour: A study of Universal Creative Processes and of Man as a Creator In-the-Becoming*, the theosophist Geoffrey Hodson, 'translating' inner messages, spoke in terms remarkably similar:

'Divinity is not a being but a power; not an entity but a force; not a stationary and completed phenomenon, but an ever-flowing stream of life... Divinity is not wholly incarnated in any form... It grows and moves eternally... it is the tide of life on which all manifested worlds are borne.'<sup>14</sup>

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11 Gurli Lindén (1996). 27

12 Pascal Rousseau (2013). 162

13 Gurli Lindén (1996). 19

14 Geoffrey Hodson. *The Supreme Splendour: A study of Universal Creative Processes and of Man as a Creator In-the-Becoming*. Madras, London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1986. 1

Humanity is not separate from this intangible divine stream however, but is 'a portion of the ever-flowing stream of life, a time expression of eternity.'<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to gauge the immensity of af Klint's achievement in the few works presented here as each individual image plays off the context of the whole, but her paintings strike me as precisely this – *time expressions of eternity*.

In both our work there is a sense of series and of travel, and belief that soul evolution is not only possible but the premise of existence. Although our outcomes are very different, there is mutual concern to reconcile multiplicity with unity, abstraction (some organic, some geometric) with figuration and narrative, the vast with the very small and the delicate with the bold. In each of our work the impact of colour is central with combinations that are unusual though not obviously so.

Af Klint creates a convincing articulation of many levels of consciousness and their interaction in both universal and (through her journals) individual life – 'I describe the way, and meanwhile I am proceeding along it'. In this links can be made to the Jonah story and to *Micky and the Whale*. Af Klint's work embodies a highly original example of the 'several simple concepts' I outline in my Introduction as at the core of theosophical inclusiveness: 'everything is alive and has its own kind of consciousness; various planes of being are in constant interaction; and it is part of the nature of consciousness that it evolves towards more and more of the whole'. In Af Klint's world everything is always in movement, perpetually 'becoming', but at the heart of that motion equilibrium and peace are close. What might a contemporary expression of the interaction of the physical and metaphysical self be like? Hilma af Klint offers one resounding answer.

My encounter with Hilma af Klint's work has expanded my understanding of the nature of the creative process and the liquid existential space it occupies, encouraging me to open wider to the 'knowingness' of the unknown. Her method might seem bizarre or impossible or stupid, but what if it revealed something of the creative process it might be helpful for us to know? Something which science might be closer than we think to establishing as possible and indeed 'fact'? Hilma af Klint might be a pioneer not just of abstraction, but of the future from this point on.

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15 Ibid. 2

## WAVE: ROSSLYND PIGGOTT: LIGHT AND VIBRATIONAL SPACE



Rosslynd Piggott. *Double Bough* 2007, oil and palladium leaf on linen, 1.5 x 3 m

Browsing in an art bookshop in Melbourne one day I noticed an art magazine recording an interview with Rosslynd Piggott by John McPhee. As I read I found startling affinities of approach, language and choice of emphasis between Piggott and myself that encouraged me and helped to contextualise my own research.

The longer I am an artist, is it not enough to say I like something? I love flowers, that's all. They give me great joy – they are radiant, exquisite, delicate, sometimes perfumed, ephemeral and misunderstood wonders on earth! They are sex, life, death and continuation all in one bloom...<sup>1</sup>

Piggott and I both paint the ephemeral and elusive. 'I work with light, as it is captured in layers of paint', she states simply. Within her spaces of air sit the perfumes of flowers: within my spaces of water flash the texture of fish. As I browsed further, taking notes, the phrase '...my interest in a kind of vibrational space' caught my attention.

John McPhee, the interviewer, has asked her about the barely perceptible subtle shifts in colour in her work. 'I want to take the viewer to a space that is a subtle space',

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1. John McPhee. "Rosslynd Piggott: the realm of the senses." *Artist Profile*, 2012. 18

Piggott replied, 'the retina may be challenged, so this sets up a kind of body response that is to slow down in order to allow that seeing, to be still, maybe like a meditation.'<sup>2</sup> Slow tempo, subtle time, beauty in the stillness.

Time is also passing in the bookshop, and at a quicker rate: by now I have bought the magazine. Later, back in Canberra, I note more of Piggott's reflections that resonate with my own:

I have been interested in the realm of sensorial and vibrational experience for a long time. This is such a major part of who we are as human beings. Our senses guide us through the world, giving us basic information for our survival and also help form our psychological, memory and even spiritual connection to the world and others. Vibration is really who we are. The investigations of current physics are all about this. Not that I profess to understand very much, but there certainly have been wondrous discoveries, such as the concept of many multi-dimensions in time and space. A basic teleportation of light has been achieved. It's also fascinating how many fields of knowledge and thinking can overlap and collide at similar points. However I am an artist and in these works I try to set up a situation, a space or spaces, where there might occur a quiet awareness of this more subtle or higher part of ourselves and an interconnectedness with living things.<sup>3</sup>

*'However I am an artist...'* stands out in my memory and reaffirms for me the position from which I both paint and write. I remember also: 'I love flowers, that's all'.

Perhaps it is that simple: 'I love the sea, that's all.'

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2. Ibid. 17

3. Ibid. 17-8

*Riding the Wave*

## **Wave: HeartMath**

In this studio research and in the writing of this Exegesis I am seeking to find balance between the rational and the intuitional, harmonising ‘from the head’ with ‘from the heart’. The Institute of HeartMath was founded in 1991 by Doc Childre with Rollin McCraty as Director of Research. HeartMath brings together scientific research from the fields of physics, mathematics, biology, psychology, health, medicine and computer science.<sup>1</sup> ‘Why do people experience the feeling or sensation of love or other positive emotional states in the area of the heart?’ and ‘What exactly are the psychophysiological links between the heart and the brain?’ are key questions that researchers there have asked. The complexity of the heart’s intrinsic nervous system and the extent of the influence of its hormonal secretions (including oxytocin, the ‘love’ or ‘bonding’ hormone) are now understood to effect perception and awareness directly to the point that it is feasible to talk of ‘the heart’s intelligence’, not just that of the brain. Responses in the heart can even be significantly ‘earlier’ than in the brain, indicating emotional and other response originating in the heart. In the creative act no less than elsewhere, synchronising the two unique but interconnected intelligences by putting mind and heart in phase becomes key. Such research gives biological validity and stringency to the concept of sympathy or empathy of the heart in the creation of art work, and helps free it from the sentimentality with which ‘from the heart’ it is often currently clothed.

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1. McCraty, Colin; Atkinson, Mike, Tiller, William A. and Thomasino, Dana. *Science of the Heart: Exploring the Role of the Heart in Human Performance: An Overview of Research Conducted by the Institute of HeartMath*. Boulder Creek: HeartMath Research Centre, Institute of HeartMath, 2001. <http://www.heartmath.org/research/science-of-the-heart/head-heart-interactions.html?submenuheader=3>



## *WAVE: Sympatheia*

*Sympathy is 'what things feel when they shape each other'*

Lars Spuybroek

Lars Spuybroek's suggestion we return to something like the Greek Stoics' understanding of *sympatheia* or cosmic sympathy, became a coordinating focus for many elements of my research. In his book *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*, Lars Spuybroek's re-evaluation of the notion of sympathy<sup>1</sup> gave me new ways of thinking about art practice, and the way the qualities of synthesis and 'livingness' could be used within it. The notion of sympathy expanded the way I saw the relationship between the finished work and the viewer and between the painting and the exhibition space in which it is shown. I saw that it could also be applied to what is happening between maker and the painting as it is being made and even be applicable to the relationship that exists between the various parts of the painting itself. It re-enforced ways of seeing abstraction and figuration as related rather than separate categories. Importantly, it led me to see both individual art works and their final exhibition in terms of 'an ecology of sympathetic relationship' and to understand more fully the importance of re-envisioning our relationship to nature with ourselves as included in the organic whole rather than outside manipulators of it. The notion of *sympatheia* bought new resonances to my considerations of Bachelard's 'poetic reality' and fed additional life into both my ideas and my material practice.

Sympathy, as Spuybroek posits it, applies to all things - animate, inanimate, plants, animals, and humans - and exists through relations between them. Sympathy is 'what things feel when they shape each other'. In this context, humans too are 'things'. With the proviso that quantum physics has shown us that all things are at base 'events', in which 'matter becomes more and more a relationship between qualities or energies that are constantly being transformed',<sup>2</sup> I could accept this categorisation and explore the notion of sympathy further.

1. Lars Spuybroek. *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*. Rotterdam: V2 Publishing, 2011

2. David L. Miller. "Schrödinger's Cat and the Imagination". *Science and Consciousness: Two Views of the Universe: Edited Proceedings of the France-Culture and Radio-France Colloquium, Cordoba, Spain*. M. Cazenave. Oxford, New York, Sydney: Pergamon, 1984, 274

Spuybroek laments that over the years sympathy has slipped out of serious philosophical consideration while empathy has become a diluted form of sympathy and 'fluffy'. Sympathy is currently understood as a weak notion related only to psychology. It has lost the strength of the ancient Greek Stoics' understanding of *sympatheia* or 'cosmic sympathy' as responsible for holding the world together in a deep accord in which human psychology and the physicality of things were equated.

The process of sympathy is felt rather than thought. This feeling becomes an abstract, interiorised form of motion. It doesn't engage with the other as an image or as a form but 'as a rhythm of behaviour over time', a phrase that reminded me of Christine Buci-Glucksmann's emphasis on the importance of 'motion, energy and flows of force' and of my focus on the sea in motion in the *Seas* paintings. These felt relations have an 'ascending intimacy': the first is empathy or 'feeling-into', the second is sympathy or 'feeling-with', while the third (more difficult to explain) is 'living with'. 'Looking at' becomes 'living with'.<sup>3</sup> All three became avenues for further exploration into the possibility of unifying disparate elements through currents of 'felt livingness'.

In an pertinent emphasis on force and 'being formed', Spuybroek emphasised that to feel sympathy we need to see form and being-formed simultaneously; we need to see-feel form and force at the same time. Sympathy is a resonance, an attunement of feelings that creates a true connection or bond. Indeed, everything is part of a relational, resonating network of sympathies:

There is just no use holding on to the dualism of subject and object and then building bridges of feeling between them, while keeping little bits of consciousness behind, as we see in phenomenology...sympathy only appears when the dualism disappears, at the point where things become feelings and feelings things<sup>4</sup>

Spuybroek's sympathy starts with naturalism but goes further. In his view naturalism tends only to depict outer form, and creates 'an image of life and not life itself'. He suggests we need to go further than the outer form, 'into the object and into the realm of forces', towards a 'double orientation' that breaks down opposites, including those between abstraction and naturalism:

Sympathy is positioned between pure naturalism and pure abstraction. These two territories are like peaks in a continuous field, like mountains in a landscape, and are not like two poles with a rigid border between them and necessitating choice, rather they necessitate double orientation.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Lars Spuybroek. *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*. Rotterdam: V2 Publishing, 2011. 169

4. Ibid. 183

5. Ibid. 189

Although referring to the extreme ends of the abstraction/representation debate, I found the concept of 'double orientation' useful and relevant in my own experimentation regarding the relationship of the abstract and figurative and the organic and the geometric as elements of the same continuum.<sup>6</sup>

I began to consider, however, the importance of asking what kind of energy was being exchanged in any sympathetic relationship. Hazrat Inayat Khan has spoken of the influence of a work of art on a vibrational level. He calls for artists to be aware of (and take responsibility for) the energy they create in a work, 'the rhythm and the swing of mind' they put into it, which lays bare the vibratory power of their innermost motives and intent, creating an influence which either constructs or destroys, makes or mars, but keeps on living and speaking: 'The art is, so to speak, a cover'.<sup>7</sup> In *The Mysticism of Sound and Music: the Sufi Teaching of Hazrat Inayat Khan* a questioner asks 'Is the thought attached to things a vibratory power?' to which Khan replies:

It is a life power, but in order to define it I would call it a vibratory power. From a mystical conception vibrations may be considered to have three aspects: audible, visible and perceptible. Perceptible to what? To the intuitive faculty of man. But it is not meant by this that the one who lacks intuitive faculty does not perceive it. He perceives it too, but unconsciously.<sup>8</sup>

I found Spuybroek's concepts of sympathy and 'living with' and his concern that we see form and being-formed simultaneously (bringing motion into the heart of practice) important in giving context to my own search for synthesis both in my artwork and across the various aspects of my research. They reinforced the importance of the part played by sympathetic relationship and intuition in the establishment of an organic whole, and the relevance of being aware of what kinds of qualities and energy flows I used to integrate elements both within individual artworks and in the relationships between them 'shaped each other'. They also became an example of the dynamic and productive interplay between theory and practice as it can occur in process-driven research. I felt energised in my creative practice and ready to again step into it and 'ride the wave'.

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6. Links might also be made to Daniel Seigel's 'mindsight' in psychology, in which he equates the inner sea of mind with the outer sea of life, arguing that each has the power to transform the other through 'transpiring' or 'breathing across', and to Paul Carter's 'archipelago thinking' in art theory.

7. Hazrat Inayat Khan. "The Influence of Works of Art". Chapter IV in *The Mysticism of Sound and Music: the Sufi Teachings of Hazrat Inayat Khan*. Boston, London: Shambhala, 1996

8. Ibid. 192

## Wave: SEA

Freedom is what happens when, given the choice between A and B, we invent C.

Frederick Turner<sup>1</sup>

In my exploration into how I might unify the diverse and unexpected in a series of artworks, I made several key discoveries and decisions that acted as turning points. Firstly I changed the working title of the final body of work from *Seas* to *Sea*. This created a conceptual shift towards simplicity, synthesis and universality.



Micky Allan *Emerald Sea* 2012, acrylic on linen, 112 x 142.5 cm

I painted several more abstract 'soundings' of underwater movement and plays of light. In *Emerald Sea* for instance, the qualities of transience and something more permanent are both present, as if there might well be a timelessness out of which motion springs. There is a nebulous, ethereal quality, a kind of poise, but also a sense that everything moves and always will. Larger cycles of death and renewal become quieter, simpler rhythms of transience and subtle change.

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1. Frederick Turner, Frederick. *The Culture of Hope: A New Birth of the Classical Spirit*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: The Free Press, 1995. 118



Top left: Micky Allan Sea (*eclipse*) 2013, engraved glass over pastel on paper, 66.5 x 66.5 cm

Top right: Micky Allan Sea (*divers*) 2013, engraved glass, acrylic over acrylic on paper, 66.5 x 66.5 cm

Lower left: Micky Allan Sea (*currents*) 2013, engraved glass, acrylic on film over paper, 66.5 x 66.5 cm

Lower right: Micky Allan Sea (*fractal*) 2013, engraved glass, acrylic on paper, 66.5 x 66.5 cm

Creating a series of engraved glass panels laid over painted (or drawn) imagery on paper beneath became a significant catalyst in resolving issues concerning both the integration of abstraction and representation and the numinous with the everyday, while at the same time giving more scope for unexpected spacial configuration of very large and very small for instance. These works also pushed technical innovation into significantly new territory. What is unique about layering engraved glass over drawings is the complex interaction set up between the light reflections created by the line cutting through the glass and the blending and merging capacities of the paint (or pastel) on the paper beneath with the glass imagery above. Two normally separate ways of rendering imagery or creating mood merged to create effects neither could achieve alone. I had worked with some engraved glass previously, but had not

experimented technically to this degree. The rewards proved rich.

Engraving fine detail into the smooth surface of the 'float' glass allowed detailed representation of the natural world while the qualities of transparency and translucency natural to glass simultaneously gave the figuration, even if precisely rendered, an ethereal presence. Glass reflects back, allows one to see through, refracts, deflects and dis-oriens expected spatial depths – much as I had experienced swimming underwater out from Heron Island. In some ways a smooth glass sheet, especially when tinged with green, can be likened to the surface of the sea through which one peers to see what is happening below. The use of engraved glass gave additional voice to the elusive characteristics of the sea, and allowed me to highlight both 'abstract' and 'real' forces within it in a new and poetic way.

In *Sea (eclipse)* a shoal of 'real' fish plunge into the centre of an eclipse. The eclipse form was drawn on a day of an actual eclipse, again highlighting the importance of direct links to empirical experience in the generation of this research. In *Sea (Divers)* two divers (one male, one female), float out past a finely detailed coral tree into a gestural 'space' that might be galactic or might be the sea: in either case, they are entering an unknown. In both images there is an atmosphere of the nebulous and unnameable, bringing back the notion of the void and its death/renewal, dark/light, empty/full resonances. The colour in *Sea (fractal)* is a vivid spreading pink. In *Sea (currents)* another deep sea diver is contained within a spherical diagram of the earth and its ocean currents, as if it were a satellite or a submersible. This in turn is adjacent to a giant (in comparison) fish. Circular forms, which could be seen as either microscopic sea creatures or galaxies, bring another 'double orientation' into play.

Technically, these engraved glass works entered unusual territory. I engraved 3 mm sheets of glass with a small dentist's drill, with various changeable 'bits' varying the mark making from very fine to thick and granular. Glass engraving is exciting but risky: water must be kept running over the surface to prevent overheating and once made the mark stays - there is no erasing and little hiding and no blending away of 'mistakes' as can be done in the wetness of paint. Complexity happens through detail and the building up of varieties of line, but also through layering and depth. I engraved on both sides of the glass, giving a sense of slippage between different depths. I also

painted on the underside of the glass, sometimes with glitter, which further scattered light. I tried etching paste but its hydrofluoric acid base made it impractical to use on the scale I would have liked. Nevertheless, its cloudy, spreading effects, heightened into the gestural when put on with a palette knife, provided counterpoint and variety to the line work of the drill.

I realised that combining paintings as panels to create larger works along the lines of my earlier experiments, which I had experienced as floundering in the whale, was too extreme and confusing. Placing together three white panels and three dark panels from *Sea Plunge* eventually emerged as a simplification of this principle, which I repeated with *Emerald and White Sea*. I began several new paintings that were similar in size but different in terms of technique and style. These metaphorically related to different levels of the sea, and in this cohered. I was approaching the unity/diversity issue from another, simpler, angle.



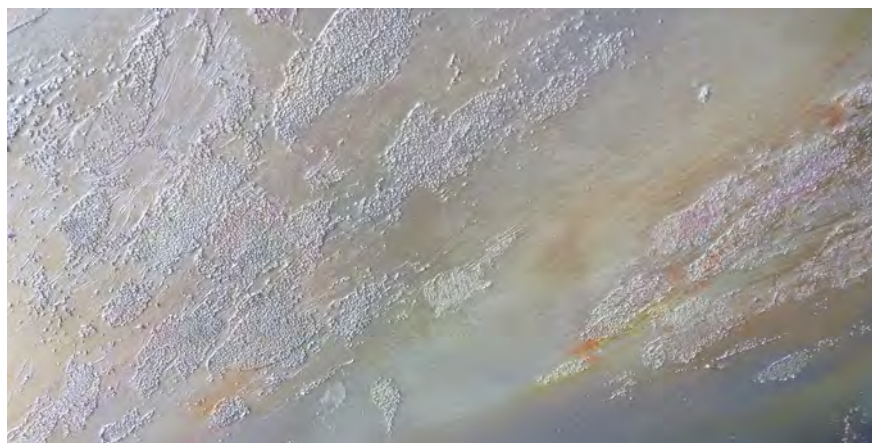
Micky Allan *Abyssal Sea* 2013, acrylic and oil on linen, 122 x 152.5 cm

*Abyssal Sea* grew out of and in some ways consolidated elements explored in *Sea Plunge*. It evoked the darkness in the lower levels of the sea, where small microscopic 'animals' self-ignite in phosphorescent flares despite the lack of any trace of the sun. Silver paint was blended into various greys and browns while green glitter created an occasional sparkle.



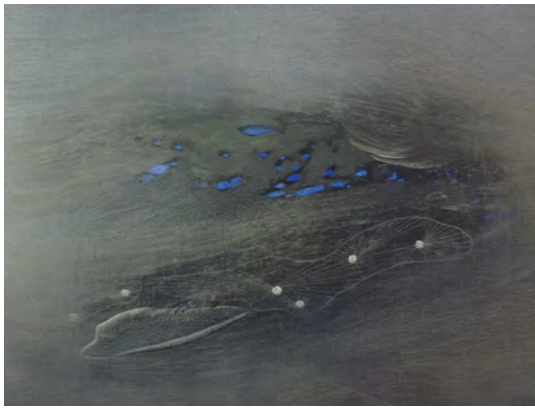
Micky Allan *Mercurial Sea* 2013, acrylic on linen, 122 x 152.5 cm

*Mercurial Sea* referred to mid-level sea space, which has more light than the abyssal zone but less light than on the surface. It accented the criss-crossing motion, rhythm and textures of moving sea forms that 'abstractly' 'represent' fish. The role of texture and the sense of touch became of particular significance. Light caught the raised surfaces of modelling medium applied thickly with a palette knife. Tiny glass beads carried in the painting medium made the palette knife to roll over them and move unexpectedly, so that, like watercolour but in a completely different way, the action felt slightly out of control. The glass beads, a relatively new addition to painting mediums, also created a refracting gleam through the texture while mica-based iridescent paint, either added to the medium or scumbled over surfaces later when they had dried, added further to the creation of complex plays of light freed from their conventional role of establishing form.



Glass beads in *Mercurial Sea*





*Abyssal Sea* (detail)



*Mercurial Sea* (detail)

This work in particular clearly showed me that something can indeed be 'represented' without literally 'looking like'. Invented abstract forms suggest the patterning of fish and other sea forms without recognisable reference to actual sea creatures. Thin and layered glazing in the areas in which these textured forms 'swim' adds to the subtle complexities in the whole. The geometric has an organic feel and there is sympathetic relationship established between figure and ground as specific forms emerge out of and back into the surrounding 'sea' as if they were living creatures in it. Through experimentation with these mediums and techniques I integrated many diverse elements (thick, thin, textured, smooth) within a single work, covering something of the range found in the 'liquid space' of the sea, but without literal verisimilitude.



Micky Allan *Sea Dive* 2013, acrylic and oil on linen, 122 x 152.5 cm

*Sea Dive* portrays the shimmer and sparkle of lighted areas closer to the surface of

the sea. Although conventional size relationships are ignored, encounters between plant, animal and fish life are rendered in more literal terms. Geometric forms are given the same 'life' as coral or fish and become equal and participating elements in what could well be understood as organic equivalence in 'an ecology of sympathetic relationship'.<sup>2</sup> *Sea Dive* creates its own 'climate' or ecology, in which relationships between organisms and their environment, between 'living' and 'non-living' (geometric) forms, are brought equally alive in the environment of the pictorial space and through the 'living' medium of its paint.



*Sea Dive* details

Just as *Abyssal Sea* and *Mercurial Sea* in some ways condense the explorations of *Sea Plunge*, the many technical and sensory trials in the earlier *Wonders of the Sea* series find some synthesis and fruition in *Sea Dive*. Intense colour, fluorescent

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<sup>2</sup> The Oxford Dictionary defines ecology as 'the branch of biology dealing with the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment, including other organisms.' In another definition, ecosystems are described as being 'composed of dynamically interacting parts including organisms, the communities they make up, and the non-living components of their environment.'

paint, glitter, glass beads, gold leaf and the iridescence of mica all play their part in creating an atmosphere of the richness and diversity of life. Texture catching light to make it flicker is again significant. Experimentation with thinner palette knives and twisting and turning them differently brought new results and contributed to the sense of adventure and play.

With these new paintings and engraved glass works I felt that I might finally be approaching something akin to 'riding the wave': happiness, pleasure in process and a feeling that the disparate elements I was seeking to unite could indeed cohere. Faced with choice between 'A' and 'B' (abstraction *or* representation, transcendent *or* everyday, material *or* metaphoric *or* poetic) I felt I was closer to inventing 'C', a personal language that roamed though them all, combining and recombining in changing emphasis and flow, but with all elements as part of the same continuum and infused with the same indwelling 'life'. Riding in and through all differences was the uniqueness of personal touch and the particular combination of material, metaphoric and poetic resonances inherent in that person alone. Paint is wet and malleable and in the act of painting every nuance in the brain, every tremor in the hand, every subtle shift in feeling, thought or consciousness runs through the brush, or whatever tool one is using, directly into the paint and through to the mark-making on the canvas (or paper, or glass) as direct *touch*. Such touch is one of the most significant differences between painting and new media, including photography. Each touch is unique, carrying a personal sensibility that can unite without making uniform. In this doctoral research I have sought to integrate a wide range of style, technique, approach and content in a way that respects complexity but avoids homogenisation. I discovered the maker's touch was a fundamental synthesiser.



*Endless Sea* detail



Micky Allan *Endless Sea* 2013, acrylic on linen, 122 x 152.5 cm

*Endless Sea* distilled the symbolic death and renewal investigations of both *Sea Plunge* and *Micky and the Whale* into a single work. *Sea Plunge* had seen the abyss as predominantly dark. Here the void is light and full of promise. Fear of death and transformational processes evident in *Micky and the Whale* have become a shining sea of colour and light. The skeleton is alive: dying into life. Death becomes a site not just of change, but endless possibility.

When I was in my thirties I once stepped from a street onto a curb in a busy shopping centre and experienced a strange phenomenon like no other I have ever known. The closest I can come to describing it is as complete 'vacancy'. In the smaller than a fraction of a second of the 'time' it took for my foot to hit the curb, I 'knew' that the phrase 'all is one' was a fact, completely and unquestionably true. I had forgotten this incident, but the certainty it engendered that there is indeed a timeless ground of being out of which this reality springs is perhaps the deepest driver in my work, and every mark I make is in some way seeking to make physical at least the 'flavour' of that unity, however inexpressible it actually is.

In *Endless Sea*, geometric and organic abstraction combine. In a hint of the surreal, a figure travels towards a future that is unknown but full of promise. There is a feeling of 'float' reminiscent of the experience that generated this research, when I stood looking at slowly moving creatures of the deep sea in a dark museum. That 'unknown' has been transformed into another, about to unfold. *Endless Sea* is less about specific death and renewal than the principle of dissolving and re-forming in an ever-changing, ever-flowing sea of life.

## CONCLUSION

When I recall the original experience that generated this research project, of standing in a Melbourne museum before moving imagery of the deep sea, I remember feeling called to step further into the sea's 'unknown'. At the time the sense of 'inner space' this generated was somewhat murky and unclear. In comparison, the sense of 'the sea within' as I finalise these explorations, is of a vast and expanded space, full of colour and light and brilliantly flashing fish: a fluid world of still expanding possibility.

I set out to explore the 'liquid space' of the sea as an empirical, experiential and metaphoric space, and through this to develop a personal understanding of the nature of reality and of the creative processes at its heart. Was there a further 'poetic reality' beyond the physical, emotional and conceptual that gave these three life and synthesised them? Was there a multi-dimensional interplay between them that made separation inadequate as a way of understanding the complexity of the whole and the way that whole can seem at once unified and in perpetual motions of death and renewal, transformation and change? Can the transcendent be seen as 'naturally' immanent?

How did my discoveries unfold? Through the initial painting series *Sea Plunge* and concurrent examinations of historical visual imagery of Jonah and the whale I explored the sea as a space both of transition and of plunging into the void. This void was investigated as a complex paradox of dark/light, empty/full, life/death resonances. I noted a sense of the eternal and numinous in certain medieval manuscripts and through paintings of abstracted concentric circles moving inward to a centre sought to 'ground' something of this same sense of endlessness in a contemporary form. I found that painting could simultaneously merge rhythms of change with a sense of timelessness and that both the sea and the creative process could be understood as a site of death and renewal on many levels.

Field trips, and the immersion in nature and place they facilitated, were seminal to this research. The first of these, to Cape Leveque north of Broome, helped me to experience directly the feeling that everything is alive with a numinous force that is difficult to name but appeared 'naturally' immanent. I found that my unfettered response to this in terms of process was to both abstract and render figuratively, with aspects of this figuration (unexpected juxtapositions of near and far, up and down, large and small) relatable to the surreal: blending diversity was 'natural' to me. I felt 'invited' to simplify, but this did not seem conflictual or even paradoxical with range of approach.

*Wonders of the Sea*, a group of small celebratory works that grew out of the Cape Leveque trip, accented the importance of colour and sensual liveliness. While exploring the changing rhythms of the sea, these technically inventive works blurred boundaries between drawing and painting, abstraction and figuration and transparency and solid form. Also based on experiences at Cape Leveque, the making of *Tidal Drift* revealed the liquidity and beauty of process, in which 'order and disorder are continually touching and changing each other', much like the ebb and flow of tides. It too was a translation of multilayered experience into physical form. Through both works I examined how unity might be created out of the complex and diverse, and here found Csikszentmihalyi's notion of the essential role of complexity for the evolving self, bringing together both differentiation and integration but distinguishing complex from complicated, most helpful in my evolving research.

My second field trip to Heron Island Research Station on the Great Barrier Reef also accented the value of this kind of fieldwork to creative research. Seeing a heron 'with feet in the water, beak to the sky, body a conduit between' indicated something of the multi-levelled reality of nature and the self that I was exploring and sought to unify. On Heron Island I brought together physical experiences such as snorkelling underwater with readings and musings on aspects of contemporary science, merging the metaphoric and the experiential, the 'conceptualising' and 'feeling' self. I encountered both Bachelard's 'dream-producing' and 'idea-forming' activities and found that while both needed to be present to create a sense of the poetic in an experience or a work of art, something more elusive and intangible, something that could perhaps be understood as numinous or transcendent, did at times exist in both the inner and outer activities I engaged in on the island. The scientific 'ideas' of Hal Puthoff, Fritz-

Albert Popp and Walter Schempp seemed to be 'alive' and to merge with the physical environment I was in: that at our most elemental we are not a chemical reaction but a physical charge, that the central engine of our being and consciousness was a pulsating energy field and that physicality and consciousness coexisted and were 'irreducibly interacting' in a unity of relationships in which everything resonated with all else. An underwater encounter with a shoal of large white fish, which emerged later in semi-figurative terms in the painting *White Sea* and informed all the more abstract works of *Seas and Sea*, seemed at the time far more than a solely physical or even metaphoric event, but rather an engagement with what could well be called Bachelard's 'flow of soul' – a 'poetic reality' that included but was not confined to materiality and metaphor. On Heron Island I discovered that the transcendent can sometimes be experienced as 'naturally' immanent and that the numinous and the everyday can at least at times be experienced as one.

The six weeks spent alone in a cottage on south Bruny Island in Tasmania provided the solitude and concentrated time to analyse the complexity of process in relation to my research questions. Here I engaged in the 'spontaneous praxis' of taking the leap into the unknown that is at the core of the making of a work of art or the beginning a new body of work. Concepts and relevant feelings are brought to the fore then strangely suspended in an indefinable inner 'space', out of which the risky plunge of a beginning is made. In *WAVE: When I paint which 'body' do I paint with?* I linked such experiential processes with theory, touching on convergences and differences between concepts of the body in the Asian philosophy (such as Daoism and Buddhism) and Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body, particularly in relation to spontaneity and Chung Tsu's 'cool self-loss'. I described my own process as seeking to align with the *ki* energy of Daoism and this 'extra' spontaneity, but noted that energies that might one day be named more specifically but are presently not in the scientific spectrum, 'additional forces of nature from additional symmetries' as the scientist Geoffery Taylor calls them, might also be involved in the creative process.

The *Seas* paintings seeded in the isolation of South Bruny Island were a breakthrough in terms of simplified abstraction but the impulse towards figuration persisted, generating more theoretical research. I looked at Kobena Mercer's discussion of the wide range of influences edited out of Greenbergian formalism and the limited notion of modernist abstraction this engendered. Psychology, Eastern philosophy, philosophical developments such as Surrealism's exploration of inner worlds, and

other transcendental and cross-cultural tendencies, had for some time been more or less ignored and are only recently being reintroduced as true to the actual concerns of the artists of the time and as relevant to any discussion of abstraction now. I noted Doris Drathen's work on the encounter with the work of art as 'a metaphysical event' occurring in a 'vortex of silence'. I read Oliver A.I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche's re-evaluation of the formalism of early modernist abstraction to include organic biomorphic streams and a questioning of the distinction between organic and inorganic: all matter was animate with at least potential life. I examined Christine Buci-Glucksmann's analysis of present day abstraction as transitioning from 'a culture of objects' to 'a culture of flows', transforming the traditional opposition of abstraction/figuration, organic/geometric and nature/culture into a more symbiotic and free-flowing exchange. Buci-Glucksmann accented the importance of motion itself and relationships between the forces and energies creating this continually transforming space. This understanding of the relationship between abstraction and figuration left me freer to explore both, and to place myself in the larger context of this current re-evaluation of abstraction. Thinking in terms of energies and flows of force resonated strongly and, alongside Hazrat Inayat Khan's comments on vibrational space, strengthened my belief in the importance of the qualities chosen to activate these energies.

I examined the making of *Pink and Red Sea*, *Green Sea*, *Light Blue Sea* and *White Sea* in the light of such issues, further exploring the nature of process and aspects of it such as the role of meditation and the influence of specific materials. In particular I noted the effect of using pearlescent mica based paints and their importance in activating 'motion' in light and colour, suggesting the numinous and grounding a sense of the immaterial into the material in a very particular way. I investigated the role of using a projector in *Green Sea* and *White Sea* in which photographic images were projected then 'danced with' so that in effect the literal image 'died' and was transformed. It became a rendition of the sea's constant motion and continually shifting light in simplified abstract terms. Literal form remained as a suggestion in one but was more like an afterimage in the other.

I had asked whether abstraction was more able to embody the numinous than figuration and even if it was in some ways more 'serious'. I compared *White Sea* and *Light Blue Sea* and found that both were equally able to embody the *qualities* I sought to include and that *White Sea*, despite its recognisable fish, was equally 'poised' and not innately more or less 'serious'. Both paintings were 'about' fluidity and



the continuing appearance and disappearance of the immaterial into the material and back again. Both sought to convey translucency and softness without losing power and I concluded that both abstraction and figuration were equally able to embody the content I wished to express.

*Micky and the Whale* was an essential and ongoing current in the wider investigation of the sea. As in the *Sea* paintings, this watercolour and mixed media series investigated the rhythmic interaction of formlessness and form but through storytelling, allusion and a reframing of the traditional story of Jonah and the whale. In this it added to the multiplicity of approach, mood and metaphoric resonance of the whole. It swung easily between abstraction and representation, generated new and inventive combinations of materials and experimented with the creation of space through complex layering and disruptions to normal narrative time. Its theme of endless birth and symbolic death, in life as in the ebb and flow of the sea, extended the concerns of *Sea Plunge* and metaphorically linked wider themes concerning the interaction of various layers of being (physical, mental, poetic) to the ups and downs of both spiritual striving and the creative process.

As if in the belly of the whale, I went through a period of uncertainty and confusion in my process, unsure how to bring cohesion to the multiplicity I had embraced, but then entered the period I called 'riding the wave'. Looking at the work of other artists, finding new theoretical permutations to the conceptual frameworks I had been working with, trialling ways of putting work I had already made into more simplified relationships, and making new artwork (additional sea paintings signifying different levels of the sea and engraved glass panels over works on paper), all began to coalesce. Significantly, Lars Spuybroek's re-evaluation of the Greek Stoic's *sympatheia* and his attendant thoughts on 'an ecology of sympathetic relationship' provided new ways of thinking about coherence within multiplicity. It reinforced understanding of Bachelard's 'poetic reality' as a synthesising force collapsing separation between materiality, metaphor and the poetic. Indeed the poetic reality was that these elements were not finally separable, but existed together in a space of liquidly shifting emphasis and flow.

In this research technical exploration and combination of different media has been inventive beyond conventional practice. This has been particularly through the placement of engraved glass panels over painting/drawing underlays, an approach that I do not believe exists elsewhere in quite this form. These works also break

new ground in the interplay of transparent and opaque representations of space. The layering of drawing and painting materials, such as placing semi-opaque film over paintings on watercolour canvas, or glass beads over drawn or painted surfaces, are not only unusual in themselves, but also extend pictorial space through additional refractions and plays of light. The pearlescent qualities of mica paint have uncovered new possibilities in its thick or thin application and in the range of subtle effects it can be made to evoke, not least in the way light can be made mobile and changing with your point of view. All of these experimentations and technical innovations have helped establish new understandings of space as 'liquid' on a material level.

While providing important cultural context, the work of other artists was influential less in formal or stylistic terms (I rarely see another artist's work and then try particulars of their technique or style) than through affinity of intent and admiration for the originality of their orientation. These opened me to new possibilities within myself or gave me courage to continue something already begun. What actually transpires in such exchange is as nebulous and difficult to name as the 'life' of a work of art.

Kamin Lertchaiprasert's *Sitting* deals with the transformation of the personal self in dialogue with the tenets of Buddhism in quirky contemporary terms. *Micky and the Whale* references traditional belief structures more inclusively (Christian, Buddhist and Hindu symbology can be found), but travels a relatable path. Eugene Carchesio also forges an idiosyncratic language (in his case via small watercolours on modest graph paper) that nevertheless deals with vast themes. In a search for meaning on many levels, he draws on a variety of spiritual traditions and creates a highly personal universe in which principles of order seem almost washed away by principles of transience, only to return. It is the 'flavour' of his intent and the originality of his approach that most interests me. Rosalind Piggott sees her painting in terms of slow time and a sensual 'vibrational space', which she links to contemporary physics. She speaks of 'light captured in layers of paint' and 'quiet awareness' of the subtle higher aspects of our selves. Affinities between her work and my later *Sea* paintings, *Emerald Sea* for instance, could well be found, but whether noticing her work afresh and delighting in the synergies between us contributed specifically to the development of these works remains for me within the mysteries of creative process. Despite interesting differences, Philip Wolfhagen's renditions of the sea and mine have much in common in terms of spatial composition, process and shared interest in beauty and love of place. Julie Merethu's spatial dynamics and 'visionary utopian thinking' invite social

change in particularly contemporary terms. The effect of Phillip Otto Runge's *Morning* on my research was to affirm that, for me at least, the numinous can indeed be active in a work of art and that figuration is as able as abstraction to transmit it. Flows of force and radiation of energy were confirmed as central considerations and I wanted to touch the 'ground of being' that I sensed in Runge's work and translate it into my own terms. Hilma af Klint's innovative work convincingly fuses abstraction and figuration in the development of a personal cosmology that embodies larger themes of existence and human development. Each artist studied, in some way modelled a possible way to consider immanence and the metaphysical in contemporary terms.

This research has opened up new ways of considering the interaction of the physical and metaphysical self in contemporary art, and contributes to a growing interest on many fronts seeking to redefine how this might be done. Several factors have emerged as significant features of this new approach. Specific religions or traditional systems of thought may be referred to, but direct representation of deity is rare. If they are portrayed, there is an absence of dogma or prescribed forms of representation such as set proportions, colour and attributes for specific deities. Accent is more likely to be on the personalised journey (Lertchaiprasert, Carchesio, *Micky and the Whale*) often through the invention of a highly idiosyncratic cosmology that links personal and human development to larger rhythms of cosmic development (Hilma af Klint). Metaphysical space is not seen traditionally as only involving one-way motion from above down with 'heaven above and abyss below' (*Into Cosmos forum*), but rather as a mobile space of multi-dimensional and multi-directional flow-motion equally from below up, sideways or at an angle. Science becomes a contributing rather than oppositional factor in these developments, working towards the creation of a 'transcendental physics' in which art, science and metaphysics occupy the same free-flowing, liquid and relational space. Importantly, materiality is not seen as something to be escaped or denied, but as naturally able to hold and express the transcendent, being infused with the same 'life'. Abstraction and figuration are understood as equally able to embody the numinous, either separately or in combination. Vast, amorphous 'abstract' spaces can carry something of the infinite and timeless (the *Sea* paintings, Wolfhagen, Piggot) but the eternal can equally be portrayed through defined form and transformed traditional symbology (Hilma af Klint, the glass engravings). It could perhaps be argued that a common thread in these endeavours to manifest the metaphysical in fresh terms is a desire to portray a 'felt aliveness' that is simultaneously rational and mysterious. The transcendent is here and now, naturally, immanent, not just 'elsewhere'.

The point of this research has been not to have a single overarching approach but to trace the complex influences involved as meaning is formulated through the process itself. Exegesis writing is a comparatively new field that is rapidly evolving and this research is a contribution to that field, particularly in the depth of its attention to the multiplicity and range of forces involved in the creative process and by implication the manner in which studio-led research creates knowledge. I examined the complex alignment of inner and outer forces in the generation of new work by drawing not just on art theory and other artists, but also on philosophy, psychology, various spiritual traditions and personal life events as they have impacted on the work, covering a wider range of influence than is conventionally considered.

I have come to understand the process of painting more fully through the process of writing as it has interacted with the process of painting – they have informed and changed each other. The maker's eye and the experience of doing have conditioned the writing dynamic and vice versa. In this Exegesis I have embraced the principle of creating meaning not just through analysis and conventional form, but through an alternative structure of *Waves* in which poetry and unexpected juxtaposition have their place alongside analysis in defining the reality of the creative process and in creating knowledge as a fusion of the intuitive and the intellectual. In this I believe this Exegesis makes a significant contribution to its field.

Through this research I have come to know the sea by experiencing it physically – swimming, diving, plunging in, experiencing its motion and light, crosscurrents and tidal pull. I have explored it metaphorically, as a site of life and death, the evolving self and the nature of existence as far as I can grasp it. I have discovered, however, that such empirical, experiential and metaphoric elements are not in themselves sufficient to understand the life of a work of art or the creative process at its heart. A poetic reality, existing as qualities and energies and flows of force that are unprovable but palpable, runs through all these and unites them, so that they become co-creative and relational rather than separate and distinct. I have discovered interaction between these elements as even more complex and fluid than I had envisaged, but that there is a simple rhythm at the core of perpetual renewal and expanding hope. When I stand by or swim in the sea itself it is this simple complexity that I feel, an elusive many-levelled intensifying 'life' that I have sought to anchor and further understand through the pictorial means of paint.

## Patti Smith and the gesture to disclose

On the death of her former long-time partner, commenting on the importance of 'the gesture to disclose', the contemporary singer, songwriter and author Patti Smith wrote the following:

On hearing of his death, I listened to music (an aria from Tosca). Suddenly I realized I was shuddering. I was overwhelmed by a sense of excitement, acceleration as if, because of the closeness I experienced with Robert, I was to be privy to his new adventure, the miracle of his death...

Finally, by the sea, where God is everywhere, I gradually calmed. I stood looking at the sky. The clouds were the colour of a Raphael. A wounded rose. You will see him. You will know him. You will know his hand. These words came to me and I knew I would one day see a sky drawn by Robert's hand.

Words came, and then a melody. I carried my moccasins and waded to the water's edge. I had transfigured the twisted aspects of my grief and spread them out like a shining cloth, a memorial song for Robert.<sup>1</sup>

I hoped that *Sea* might incorporate something of this sea and this sky, and the small cycle of 'dying into life' held within them. That it might hold something of my own 'gesture to disclose' and in some way unite my personal 'ocean' and 'sea'.

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1. Patti Smith. *Just Kids*. London: Bloomsbury. 2010. 277-8

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Australian National University School of Art Painting Department for its innovative and challenging Post-Graduate research program. As Chair of my supervisory panel, Ruth Waller has been truly outstanding. I would also like to thank Gordon Bull, Vivienne Binns, Helen Ennis, Jan Hogan, Melinda Hinkson, Anthea Cullen, Ann Brennan and Nigel Lendon.

My partner Steenus von Steensen has not only offered unfailing support and encouragement, but has also provided indispensable technical expertise, aesthetic advice and design skills, particularly in relation to the making of the *Micky and the Whale* animation and the final layout of the Exegesis.

As a fellow artist engaged in parallel post-graduate research, I warmly thank Eleftheria Vlavianos for her stimulating insight and companionship along the way.

A.H.Johns, Paul Carter and Barbara Creed were generous in providing aspects of their research. For various reasons I would also like to thank Jenny McFarlane, Peter Tyndall, Anna Eggert, Jeff Stewart, Sue Ford, Tim Forster, Tabatha Noble, Ken Bolton, Cath Kennealy, Kurt Brereton, Domenico de Clario, Mary-Faeth Chenery, Annie-Mai Hartley, Jade McCutcheon, Joana McCutcheon, Juan Davila, CSIRO Hobart. Georgina Buckley, Vanessa Barbaray, Julie Brooke, and Brenton McGeachie.

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