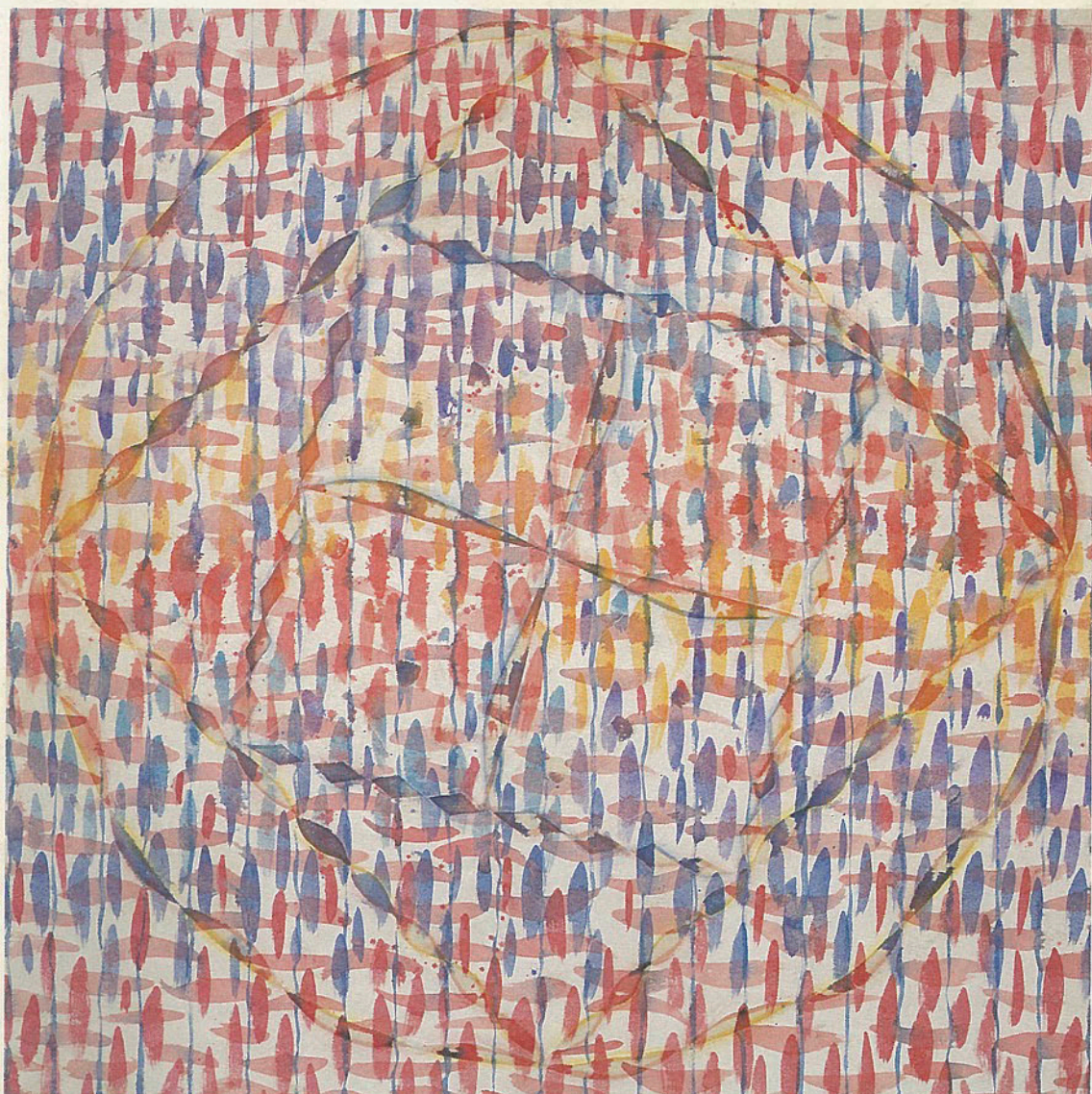


TRANSFORMING • ART •

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• A NEW VISION OF NATURE •

• EXPLORING THE BURNING HOUSE •

THE VISUAL ARTS

An interview with LIZ COATS



Liz Coats is a non-figurative painter living in Sydney. Her most recent paintings, *Cicadas*, were shown at Annandale Galleries in June, 1992.

"One senses a potential of infinity in interior space if one can suspend rationality as the images unfold, without tumbling into dispersal and the utterly unnameable. Those substances which congregate in a painting emerge as patterns of energy. They can offer a glimpse of intuitions which are barely formed in fleeting experience or are constant when one is in a state of incapacity to describe them. Associations are relative. Patterns of order and disorder; beautiful meetings, bright flares, slow dances. The painting emerges as recognition rather than memory. Art which is co-existent in its responsive capacity without being illustrative. The house is burning and I am still here!" Artist's statement from 'Frames of Reference' Exhibition, The Wharf, Sydney, 1991.

Transforming Art: Tell me about the way in which you came to create your new paintings, *Cicadas*?

Liz Coats: I began to work with layers of colour brushmarks in 1975. At that time I was starting from nothing. I used very simple means; square canvasses; one colour one layer; directional contrasts in the mark-making linking the underlayers to the top layers; no obliterations, no corrections. Various levels of friction or dissolve occur amongst the colour contrasts according to their opacity or transparency, directional tendencies and the brusqueness or fullness of the marks. I began to notice the emergence of patterns and rhythms which I have come to acknowledge as the structures inherent in the work. I also realised that in the congregations of particles I could imagine possibilities of sound. Later, in 1984/5 I made a group of paintings called *Soundings* which developed this sense of vibration as an extension of spatial repetitions and frictions. I knew then that I would like to work with this speculation further.

With the *Cicadas* I was experimenting with old structures in new combinations which encouraged a swelling and expansive volume as well as visual shifts and patterns of circulation. I had already made several of these paintings in the spring of 1991, when I was in the bush with a friend. We came across a cicada which was about to emerge

from its shell. I could see a small split opening in the dusty brown casing and we crouched there watching for at least half an hour while the insect emerged. Every change in the sequence could be seen clearly, while also seeming to be framed in stillness. One could easily imagine a liquid energy pulsing through the creature, forcing it to expand and change through every point of its body. Simultaneously it was changing colour from the inside with patches of light brown to limey green. Bumps on either side of the abdomen began to lengthen and unfurl into transparent and veined wings which extended beyond the length of the body. It finally shed the hard shell of its underground form and clung there on a piece of burnt wood, strengthening and firming in the sun.

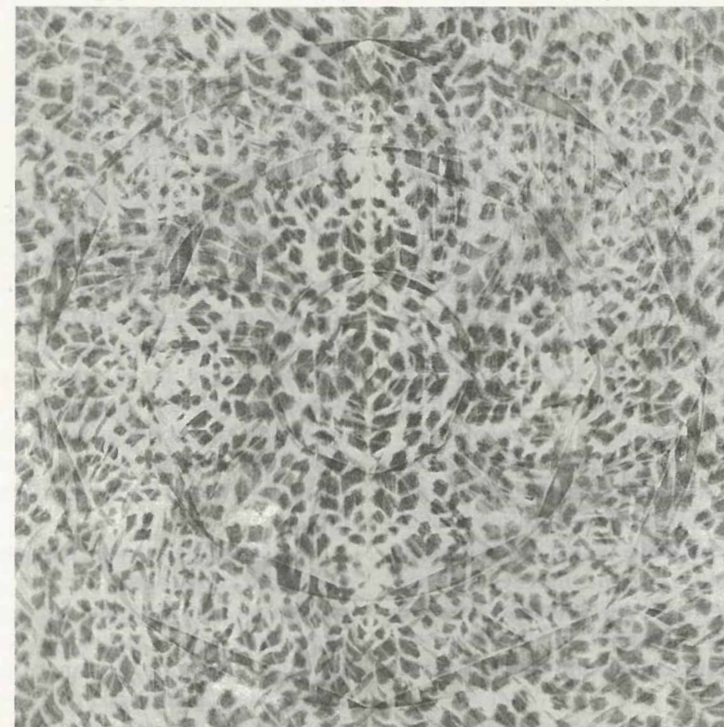
At home I realised that it was entirely appropriate to connect this observation of the emerging cicada with the paintings I was doing. I was also reminded of the experience of being enveloped in the massed sound of hidden cicadas in mid-summer — those swelling and receding waves of sound which penetrate the ears and body of even the most resistant person. Walking through these zones of sound in sunlit bush, the intense vibration resounds through one's body and touches against

its very solidity. The dynamic particles of which one is made seem to surge to meet the sound in an autonomous exchange quite apart from one's will.

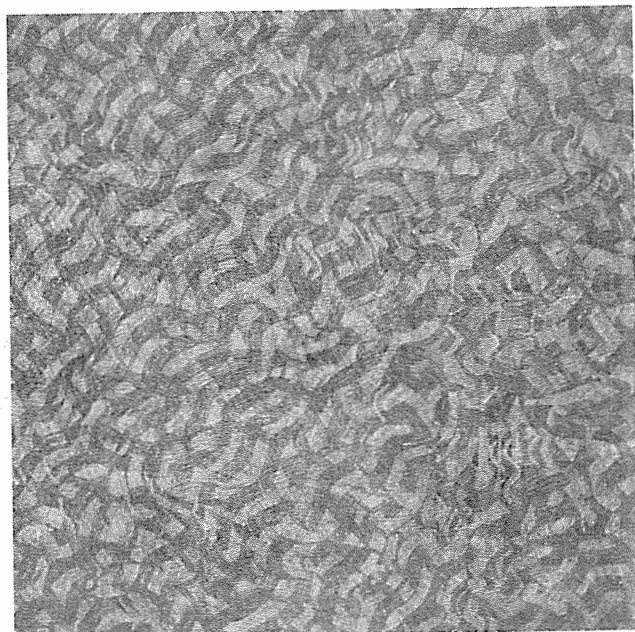
TA: Was it just the particular fascination of those experiences of cicadas that was significant for you or does it have a meaning which goes beyond that?

LC: It took a few years for me to realise that the paintings I was making mirrored for me a sense of life force or energy which was occurring inside my body. Previously I had only observed the outer extensions of my inner vulnerability — sensations of pleasure or discomfort in responding to outer stimuli — without reflecting on the totality of the body as a receptor in all its complexity.

The way I work is to follow a strict discipline of repetitions of structural/colour layers without trying to describe or illustrate anything beyond paying attention to the evolving possibilities of the work itself. From the beginning of my work as an artist my intention was simply to keep the painting alive. What I began to discover was that it was not the type of imagery emerging, nor its density, but that with a certain persistence of working with the surface and a process approach



Liz Coats *Cicadas B1*, 112 X 112 cms, Pigments and acrylic medium on cotton canvas, 1992. Photo: Liz Coats



Liz Coats *Chameleon 12*, 78 X 78 cms, Acrylic on cotton canvas, 1977.
Photo: Liz Coats

where one makes choices in a consecutive and considered way, one can bring forth emotionally powerful and tensioned forms. Ultimately, it was the patterns of energy which emerged out of the layering process which impressed me. I knew that this could only be achieved by slow and indirect means; that this quality was apart from drawing or iconographic skills and related in part to the maker's emotional and physiological balance. Somehow in the intensity of the work, it became a private investigation into the cohesion of matter.

Reflecting on the feeling of energy moving in the body I do not feel a liquid flow. Perhaps there is resistance but I sense a multitude of points combining in variable pulses in a continuous circulation. I experience a dynamic space which sits behind form and language, a space which surrounds me, is within me, and in which I can move. I can find no adequate verbal container or constant visual image to describe this dimensional space. It is a felt experience which guides me to apply colour as structure and to construct surfaces as containers for light. At an energetic level, a completed painting presents a complex of structure and flux which is beyond verbalisation.

TA: But there is a perceivable geometry within your paintings. It's like a grid or a frame within which everything else is occurring.

LC: I found the way to really strengthen the impact of the visual image was through a containing geometry. One defines edges in order to apply focus, to assist gravity. The idea of edge and fluidity, as an osmosis of colour flowing through resistant surfaces, often seems attractive to women. It suggests the desire for an intuitive relationship with one's surroundings, to experience one's body as a receptor through which one's experiences are refracted.

I have studied the historical development of abstraction, particularly its geometric form and that history has offered useful insights. However, my concern with women's sensibility meant that I had to search for a sustaining emotional and personal base for my exploration rather than accepting analytical or formalist methods per se. The implications of my process, by logical extension, would force transformation of the outer form.

Texts on the transformational process use the metaphor of a vessel, a container in which heat condenses and expands, for instance. That inner expansion meets an edge, and then perhaps through a struggle, an inner friction, the impulse that causes the friction might become conscious. It is important for me that this inner recognition comes from feeling sensation in the body.

TA: Could you say something more about how your work relates to the women's art movement?

LC: It has slowly become clearer to me as I have paid more attention to my functioning, both internally and in society, to my emotional responses and my body sensations, that there are patterns of growth and change within my body, the kinds of processes which are connected with what were once called 'mysteries'. The understanding of a mystery implies a healing, an unfoldment or 'passage'. My reflections on the notion of 'passage' suggested that it is an experience of conscious unfolding into a greater expansiveness and connectedness. I think what many artists have intuited but perhaps not understood is that artists are the communicators of the 'mysteries'. That is their social role and the essential nature of their so-called radicalness is the necessity for them to remain alert and responsive at all times to their present experience, while honouring their connection to history.

Many creative women at present are looking to ancient sources for images of the cycles of living, of our connection to nature and the grief and joy one finds in relationships. Old history sometimes looks more secure than the present. We look at these symbols of another time and we absorb the stories which describe the condition or experience. Jungians go further by saying interesting things like: 'the gods have become our diseases'. In other words, those involuntary cycles in which our being remains in perpetuity—breathing, the circulation of blood, aging, our ability to form fresh human lives within our bodies, are barely connected any more to a consciousness of 'passage' within our social life or our cultural thinking.

TA: All your work has a highly abstract form. I'm wondering if you ever feel the desire for it to become so formed as to become more directly representative of something; for instance, the 'mysteries' or ancient symbols you are talking about?

LC: I can only work from my own experience. Constructing an image identified with a figurative symbol would seem like an outer shell and I have no intention of illustrating or describing anything literal during the making of my paintings. I am seeking subtle colour changes and enigmatic binding of structures for my own interest. I observe the sequences of colour marks as they settle, creating their own spatial order, fusing and

resisting to the point where they vibrate or rotate within their own quality. This is not predetermined but it can be recognised. We are so overloaded with visual symbols; mostly they trigger a language response and the experiential base of their connectedness is overlooked. My interest and instinct proposes more abstract and energetic solutions. The abstraction cuts through general cultural conditioning and the energetic connects below the head to the emotional 'centres' of the body.

Amongst feminists, formalism as in abstraction has been seen to reject content in favour of stylistic refinement. It was seen as a development out of the work of certain modern masters which allowed for a limited range of solutions requiring consolidation through certain critics, galleries and magazines. Any emotional content in abstract work was seen to indicate uncertainty because the aim was to remove anything impure (meaning subjective qualities) from the object. In those terms, nothing could be more objectionable to feminist experience. However I think that the underlying issue in so-called 'purified' form which has been so strongly criticised, is that it can be reflective of a condition of personal evolution. The clarified form works in parallel to a personal experience of purification. This is not a moral paradigm; the necessity for clarification demands a burning, a melt-down of resistant and non-personal frames of reference in the body.

My reading of artists such as Mondrian or Ad Reinhardt suggested that the evolution of their work was highly self-referential although their most successful works reveal clarity beyond the emotional self. At that level the work cannot be understood from a cool, analytical point of view. It is useful to view abstract work with the understanding that it was made with a particular passion of concentration towards an inner necessity.

TA: So your concern is with an inner observation of sensation, not simply with the expression of emotion but an understanding of the actual dynamic of emotional energy?

LC: I must separate here observations of the complexity of inner experience and the process of making a painting. I have been trying to say that the receptivity of the artist, combined with a disciplined approach to process, might allow for the emergence of an energetic quality in the work

in as much as that awareness exists in the body. Then, depending on the clarity and balance of the structure, the viewer can share in the experience. It is for the viewer to recognise and participate independently in the qualities of aliveness.

I would like to speculate here on the continuing relevance of some forms of devotional art. For instance, with Tantric art the intention is to affect a transference, to trigger an emotional projection from a viewer who is in a state of openness, so that the image may 'come alive'. It may draw to the attention of the viewer an inner reality which is constant and which may not otherwise have been perceived. This has a positive and health-maintaining aspect in contrast to that common sense of isolation people feel within contracted boundaries. I think that an artist having experienced a significant coalescing of emotional energy will make of that experience a visual form within the known boundaries of the technology and aesthetic of her or his culture. Its form and character are constructed out of the acuteness of the containing involvement of that experience. The image gains symbolic stature as it is repeated by other artists and accepted collectively for its effectiveness and guidance towards a particular devotional practice.

I might add that I don't think that energy has a definite form; it becomes shaped by your response to and experience of it. I think a possible achievement of any kind of visual image-making is that one can actually create images, whether they are figurative or abstract, which display an inner energy which is part of the process of forming that image. That comes close to a sense of living experience.

TA: What about a painter in the Western tradition like Cezanne, who remained attached in his work to the outer appearances of nature and forms but also tending those forms towards an abstract expression? Does his work have any of that energetic quality you have been talking about?

LC: I think his work is much more radical than most people realise, particularly his late watercolours. He was actually seeing light spectra, painting colour in light. At the same time his extraordinary discipline and respect for the painting tradition kept him grounded and connected to the outer form of the images he was constructing. He ties this intense and prolonged experience of the nature of light to images in the natural world. At the same time the colour marks

are moving and vibrating and collecting and associating in a way that is quite detached; that's why he's so radical. Colour is structure; it is detached from the fixed edge of things so that objects are not solids.

Cezanne leaves it to the viewer to come to conclusions about the nature of the adherence of the parts to the whole and the gatherings of energy which might hold them together. With the fineness of his observations on the nature of matter, he cannot afford to let go of attention to the outer form of the containing structure for a moment, lest he lose the holding tension of all the parts. This tension in the observation and practice is enormous for the artist. I think that he and other artists at the beginning of modernism were working for more and more subtlety in the connection between the parts rather than considering other elements that might emerge. They were watching the subtle interactions between the parts, particularly the volatility of colour and how this operated apart from composition and drawing.

One of the driving forces in the tradition of geometric abstraction is the desire to achieve stillness, an absence of emotive elements. There is also a tradition of private 'self work' practised by committed abstractionists. One works on oneself in order to keep disorder or subjective impulses out of the work. The idea is that the inner quality or 'nature of things', apart from the personality of the artist, might show through in the abstraction if it is reduced to an absolute of stillness. Understanding ultimately that objective stillness is impossible forces a tension which magnifies the difference between 'pure' substance in its stillness and vibrant elements which might emerge.

I am concerned with recognising the body in this process. In fact I find it impossible not to acknowledge the flow through of instinct into the working process. I acknowledge the value of stillness in the work as much as I value the inner calm which one might enjoy in the body. But I also understand this inner calm can be experienced as a platform, or a divide perhaps, in which the stilling becomes simply a means for rational observation of this domain of inner and outer; for selective discriminations about one's condition; for listening to one's deeper signals.

TA: Tell me about your relationship to forms of art which go back beyond the modern period; what kind of images are you most connected with?

LC: I can mention several historical visual forms

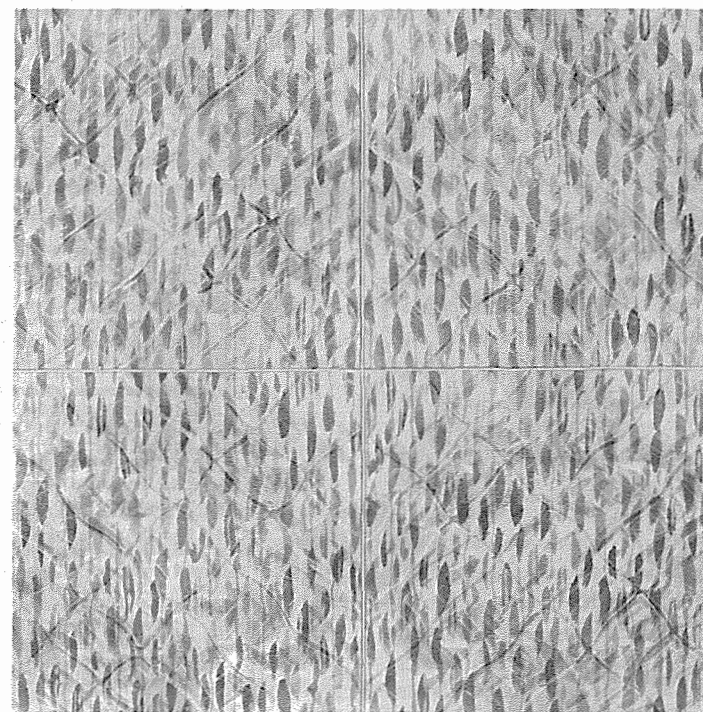
which have become interesting to me in recent years; for instance Byzantine icons. The traditional forms were repeated over hundreds of years but I had previously never asked why these images survived. I talked before about tantric images in general terms, in relation to emotional transference. I think something similar occurs in Mary and the infant Jesus images in the Christian icon tradition. The form usually appears simple, without close attention to realistic detail or perspective. Great attention is paid, however, to subtle directional impulses in the outline drawing; the way it weaves across the body implying gesture through folds of the fabric; the way the faces of the mother and child incline towards each other while one or the other glances out of the picture. There are no disjunctions in the bodies, however concealed under the clothes. One intuitively knows how the inner energy flows. When one connects with that, through belief in the image and its emotional familiarity, the viewer is able to collect the experience into a state of equilibrium and feel a sense of expanding compassion.

Of course these images suffer through constant repetition over time. The tenderness of the artist toward the subject, the artist's technical confidence and a sense of the universality of com-

passion connected to personal experience, condition the impact of the icon. As with Tantric images, these paintings were believed to contain 'mana'. They were thought to be containers for the spirit of that devotional discipline. They were also intentionally portable. We have become accustomed to thinking of art images which have age or monetary value as being rare and valuable objects rather than asking why these objects have survived, what was their purpose.

It has also become clearer to me that the stained glass windows of medieval cathedrals have a clearly conceived emotional content. Because of the proliferation of visual images in modern times the compelling nature of these windows doesn't seem so extraordinary to us. They are constructed with a geometric balance, but they also contain a flow of integrated movements which develop between the colour fragments. It seems to me that the rose windows in particular are images of emotional expansiveness. They are images of the heart, the opening of the heart, and there is nothing exclusive about this experience.

TA: That theme or activity in art which is concerned with the 'opening of the heart'; that is something which hasn't been carried through into the modern tradition, at least not in any overt way.



Liz Coats *Magnetism* 143 X 143 cms, Pigments and acrylic medium on cotton canvas, 1991.

LC: No. This is what I have found so surprising. I and other students with whom I studied art were always trying to understand and articulate what were the special qualities we were trying to evoke. We never seemed to fundamentally understand those qualities in so-called 'great' works which are carried through from century to century. I knew there was something there which I couldn't see and it has taken me all this time to begin to articulate what it might be. It now seems to me that an understanding occurs though one's experience in one's own body — not just through emotional intensity but the conscious unfolding of the nature of the body over time. And I think — why, with all the information that we have, why is all this natural, obvious, fundamental understanding so difficult to access? I now know that what I am experiencing is part of history and I feel angry at how difficult it has been to find conscious access to these simple 'places' that are common to us all but so rarely spoken of. One's formal education must

be turned inside out to gain a sense of continuity in living that is human and sensible.

I can respond to art which is intense, beautiful and absorbing, but as a practitioner I must ask myself — what *is* this tradition that I am maintaining? I'm really a novice at this and I can only talk from my own experience but it seems that if one can develop an emotional engagement with art works which are recognised as central to a particular tradition, or become involved in devotional practice which maintains a vivid practical base as well as having a strong historical background and relate this to everyday life, there can somehow begin to occur the unlocking of these inner processes. I'm just talking about glimpses of the notion of fullness rather than its achievement. At the very least one might treat one's discipline with the greatest respect as if it might make a contribution to the community apart from any return or self-gratification. ≈
