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The enduring power of abstraction

by Bridie Lonie

Rake-lit by the afternoon sun, against a cream wall, *Heliotropes'* (2005) square canvas generates a vivid blue-purple light (panel 5, detail opposite and plate 37). It seems to be constructed of broken almost concentric circles. The colour is high with patches and intersections of orange-red, a cherry wash and sometimes a vivid yellow-green staining the intersections of the circles, or emerging through what seem to be cracks in the painting's surface. But they are not circles, they are spirals, or clustered shapes that seem to nest within themselves. I imagine a world of diatoms in a bright-lit pond, connecting across each other's translucent forms. Or perhaps a sudden shower breaking the stillness of water's surface. The forms disperse toward the corners but continue to converse and turn toward each other. Their movement reminds me of Wallace Stevens's poem about spring wherein 'the feelings crazily, craftily call.' Certainly this painting changes with the sun's cycle. And having read this, I realize that the title *Heliotropes* refers both to a small, brilliantly coloured flower with many bi-coloured stamens, and indicates a turning toward the sun. The forms are intensely connected, jostling for space like active, urgent life forms.

Fishing #11 (2017, plate 51) is subdued, like shadowy bush on a warm day. Translucent olive-green shapes stream down like falling leaves, but through them I can see complex, slightly curved forms, similarly elongated. Reading from left to right as I am accustomed to do, the second set of forms moves slowly up across the surface. The painting's colours are nothing like those of my country, where the light hurts the eyes and sharp reflective leaves resist the high rainfall and the bright clear sun. These are muted, though there is a blood-ochre red offset by a translucent almost cerulean blue. Behind these forms lies the warm beige linen of the unpainted surface. There are two distinct movements, the greens descending while paler and redder lines move laterally toward a completely different destination. Holding each form in apposition, distinct, though simultaneous, I must hold at the same time the deep space that lies between them.

Fishing #7, (2017, plate 52) on the other hand seems to live in this deep space. A constant intersection of vertical and horizontal forms moves through rotating angles, almost as if they were strands of DNA twisting in light. If I see this in relation to the two previous works, it moves from the jostling surface energy of the first, through the second's distinct dimensional space of a vertical before a horizontal surface, to a third apprehension of space, as if one could read the operations of the electro-mechanical field through the action of colour upon changing surfaces.

The first painting is from a series that explored the experience of seeing in a coastal region of New Zealand with its high levels of ultra-violet light and its plant forms' resistant, compressed adaptations. The second conveys the light and colour conditions of water in deep bush in the mountains of Australia – where the light is filtered and the palette operates across ranges of

tonal similarity rather than contrast. The third is, again, clearly Australian, but this time I feel as if I am within both the space she is describing, and the complexity of perception itself.

Abstraction, as Coats practices it, requires the viewer to engage in the way we do when first using sight to align ourselves in the phenomenal world. Within the compass of a painting, the viewer is moved through adjustments in colour, scale and form that are held in resolution through the mind's capacity to generalize the individual incidents of vision. According to psychologists of perception, our eyes do not register all we see in a single span: instead the eye actively seeks points of interest in little jumps, or 'saccades,' that operate in a relay between mind and perception as we resolve the image into a coherence that renders it recognizable. But what is that 'it?' How do we come to grasp the phenomenal world? Each school of philosophy and psychology nuances the answer differently. The work's abstraction enables very different readings. We can consider C.S. Peirce's notion of 'firstness,' the term he uses for the undifferentiated perception that leads to analysis; recent notions of affect, that are about direct sensation; and moving back into the almost autonomic world of our animal sensory equipment, Jakob von Uexküll's notion of *Umwelt*. The last-named concerns the positioning of a species within the phenomenal world of light, colour and temperature that conditions all our existence but which we take for granted. In these paintings, seeing occurs as a gradual opening out of order and symmetry from the adventitious moments of colour and form in particular environments. Coats deals with the encounter between the seer and the seen.

Karl Popper suggested once that, in studying the history of ideas, one can understand them as ever-evolving complexities, or through the questions each philosopher was trying to answer, questions that stemmed from the development of thinking in their time. We can read Coats's work using both approaches simultaneously. Over her life, Coats's approach to painting has interrogated succeeding questions, constantly testing idealism against empiricism. At the same time, the work has developed in visual complexity. In these pursuits, she has appeared at times avant-garde, at times unfashionable. She has been characterised as intellectual, committed, lightweight, focused on femininity, unfeminist, political and a-political. These paradoxical readings demonstrate ongoing issues for abstraction.

New Zealand

Coats studied in New Zealand where she gained insights from her teacher Colin McCahon and the painter Geoff Thornley. McCahon's paintings always demonstrate his awareness of the intense contrasts of the colouration of New Zealand bush and sky, its clouded, water-laden nature and the sharp glitter of its predominantly glossy leaf cover, reflective and resilient. McCahon's commitment to figuration, whether of a symbolic or representational nature, was in some ways a colonial focus on locatedness, on differences between this environment and the apparent universality of non-semantic abstraction. Each artist he studied – Cézanne, Mondrian, Newman – was firmly re-located within the political and sensory conditions of New Zealand.

Somewhat differently, Geoff Thornley argued that there was no need to indicate location through representation or label. Rethinking materials and methods, and considering American and European abstraction, he worked to produce images that would be 'real' in the sense that they were internally consistent, but had characteristics drawn from the phenomenal world. He used grid formats, working with transitions of tone and texture, in colours that were undramatic. He introduced Coats to the thinking of the Russian avant-garde artists, in particular pointing out the work of the women painters, and to Agnes Martin. Martin's combination of austerity and contemplation was to prove vital for Coats as she sought a role

model who was both a woman and dedicated to a practice that was at that time gendered male. But the Russian approach to phenomenology – the acknowledgment of the significance of a positioned observation of the visual world was demonstrated in an art that worked between embodied response and the structures intrinsic to the geometry of the pictorial surface, and provided Coats with the kind of logic she needed. The publication of the journal *The Structuralist* and the work of Charlotte Douglas opened Coats's eyes to the experimental logic of the Russian artists. Coats grew interested in the approaches of the artists who worked with Mikhail Matiushin. They were concerned with the properties of colour as a grounding for being in the world, a focus that stemmed from their attentiveness to the material conditions of existence. This led to an experimental approach to painting, expressed in paintings, painted wooden figures, abstractions and representational work. This interest was given new expression in her doctoral research on the works of Matiushin, his partner Elena Guro and the Ender siblings.

Archaeology, Australia and Greece

In 1974 Coats returned to Australia, where she lived in Sydney and in Melbourne. For a period she worked on an archaeological site in the Western District of Victoria. This entailed careful grid analysis on the ground over several months while living on the land. The balance between the broad undifferentiated field of the earth and the patterns of data that the grid made visible, gave her a productive dialectic that she was to use for the next four decades. This was not simply a formal question: the analysis of the earth included an understanding of its mineral qualities and of its age. Finding human remains that were 2,000 years old offered a sense of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the 'deep history' of human presence and experience on the earth. Again with archaeology in mind, she travelled to Greece. The archaic Greek sculptural forms of the *kore* and *kouros* impressed her as the sculptors explored the delicate balance between verticality and movement. Their movements can be seen as gestures of being in the world, one with a hand held forward in offering, the other with one leg forward, twisting its body slightly, shifting weight from side to side in a symmetrical but alternating movement. It is possible to see these movements throughout Coats's subsequent work, removed from figuration. Her understanding of bilateral symmetry, added to that of the grid form as a container for contingency, remains the formal grounding of her work today. One can make connections with high modernist understandings of the grid and of verticality and horizontality here, and Coats paid attention to those, but she sought experiential validity in empiricism rather than teleology. The tension of the structured form enabled a holding pattern that resisted an increase in entropy or dissolution, avoiding the logic of abjection. The capacities of formal abstraction on the painted and vertical surface remain for her endlessly testable.

Feminism

A committed feminist since her arrival in Australia, Coats's feminism was initially centred on issues of social justice rather than the position of her painting within feminist thought. During the early 1980s abstraction was not seen as a suitable job for a woman, and, leaving that question aside to some extent, Coats argued more for the rights of women to do what they chose to do. She studied the work of women painters who had, like her, chosen abstraction. Gender posed fewer problems for the Russian avant-garde as we see from the careers of Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, and the Ender sisters. Coats also worked at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, where her work involved the contextualization of the domestic through stories of use. While her interest in situatedness and embodiment is contiguous with feminist thought, a difference between New Zealand and Australian approaches to art and its political efficacy may

have played a role here. New Zealand art education was primarily predicated on Herbert Read's notion of self-expression, originality and authenticity, while Australian art education was more analytical, detached and political, embracing the semiotic turn far more readily. A concern with the phenomenology of colour risked appearing intensely personal and apolitical at that point, however dedicated the intellectual effort.

Chameleons

Coats called the first series of works she exhibited *Chameleons* (plate 2). One in this exhibition is a brilliant red-orange, but it is constructed of minute brush strokes that demonstrate infinite variation in an *en abyme* structure. Each stroke seems a lesson in self-control. As with Agnes Martin's works, each brushstroke is both similar and different, mediating past and future. The chameleon's colouration changes in response to its environment, in a partial merging with it. Using Jakob von Uexküll's early ecological term, the chameleon's *Umwelt* or way of being in the world is entirely attuned to the conditions of light. This, the first naming, explicitly links the visual order of the paintings with the order of things in the natural world.

While most geometric abstraction involves a rectilinear grid – and Coats's work most definitely did at this point – she moved quickly toward a rounding of the square. The rosette form provided her with a set of multiplicities that both denied and reinforced the square's security. Centring the grid suggested a pivot point. Offering alternative centres at different levels of the constructed space made the whole space active. Coats was creating a productive dialectic between the surface topology of the field and deep space. Often, as with the archaeological grid, a formal structure – say, of concentric surfaces – appears as a gap within the mark-making, something that opens up an underlying structure. The archaeologist brushes the ground carefully to reveal what lies underneath, without disturbing it. In the works where the structure is revealed by the absence of mark-making a reticence or respect for something alive seems to allow that structure its own light. This approach was extended in the *Garden* and *Cicada* series (plate 6 & 7; 22-24).

Working with archaeologists in Australia in the 1970s, Coats grew aware of the problematics of making imagery which bore visual resemblance to Indigenous artforms. Primitivist modernist artists depended on the convenient positioning of Indigenous forms as non-art, while appropriating their use of symbolic and mathematical structures to order the pictorial surface in plays with symmetry and asymmetry. However, many Indigenous artforms are experienced in the play between deep and surface structures, and parallels will occur when artists engage in overlapping concerns. It is likely that visual forms have a certain autochthony/indigeneity formed of the visual experience of the spectrum: by comparison, today's globalized, 'non-place' artwork is likely to be based on the colour spectrums (the urban citizen's visual *Umwelt*) of industrialized building forms and digital, screen-based artificial light. Coats is deeply committed to the idea that we must acknowledge the impact of our embodiment in place and time, whether a city warehouse or a domestic setting facing a garden.

Containing forms

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s Coats explored two themes common amongst women artists and writers at that time. One was Buddhism, in particular Tibetan Buddhism, which she saw both as a practice of discipline and compassion and as an intellectual attempt to explore relations between the world of phenomena and the worlds (if they can be separated) of pure form or idea. During a residency in Japan she studied Zen Buddhism. The notion of the image as a form of teaching, reinforced by meditation and embodied attentiveness led her to

engage more explicitly with dimensional space. The principles of folding and unfolding, extension and intension, make the pictorial space dimensional without producing representational illusion. She placed lines, blocks, chevrons, arcs, cartouches, against spaces of breathy canvas or translucent colour, opening up the pictorial surface so that they appeared to move and open avenues for the viewer in turn, to enter and penetrate. Sometimes foundational lines suggested rotations or lateral movements, as in *The Fisherwoman and the Garden* series (plate 14-18). Sometimes a light flickering suggested the movement of heat and vibration in the shimmered repetitions of the *Cicada* series. The titles always presented a context within which the works could be read; they pointed to key understandings, but were not didactic. The viewer was asked to read from her response to the image and back again, just as the painter had – finding not representations of the world around her, but parallel forms or analogies.

This process can also be understood in terms of psychoanalytic theory, another of Coats's interests in common with feminism. Theories of containment and transference posit the artwork as a transitional object. Where the work asks the viewer's active re-alignment against a visual matrix, viewing becomes a focussing, meditative practice which can help to diminish the white noise of psychic disturbance. Coats's approach to feminist psychoanalytic theory was to see women's ways of being in the world as more attentive to their surroundings, more nuanced and situated in environmental conditions. She sought to use painting to return people to this awareness.

The form in time

As the matrices within which Coats was working grew more complex, so did the mark-making that both formed and resisted them. The squared form continued to hold its interest during the 1990s and beyond. What changed were the regularity of the marks, and the degree of determinacy with which they were constructed. Chance is always present in an artwork, but Coats began to set up situations in which pigments would operate on their own terms, interacting with other pigments and with the surfaces they encountered, such as raw canvas, gesso, paper, board or later, glass. Geometric strokes became patches, areas of stain – unpredictable but always within clear parameters. In 1998 Coats worked for four months in China, exploring ways in which traditional Chinese painting worked with the artist's knowledge, setting up dialectics of chance and predictability. In such practices, the materials are enormously important. The quality of the brush, especially its deictic, or sequential capacity, the strength and viscosity of pigments, the resistance or yielding of the gessoed surface: these are the ways in which orders created by the artist are manifested. Again resisting the semiotic turn, this time that of the conceptualism of the dissident artists of China, Coats explored traditional Chinese forms for their understanding of ways in which the artist's attention to her environment could produce resonant images. Her study of Chinese brush painting supported Coats's engagement with the creation of dimensional space as temporal experience, reached through the skilled and sequential reading of images rather than the immediate focus of balance and order demonstrated in Western European systems of perspective. Such considerations had led Ad Reinhardt and Agnes Martin to study Eastern painting; the insights were not new, but the context was.

During the 1980s and 90s semiotic and critical theory's increasing focus on the artist's position in space, time, gender, ethnicity and culture produced a return to narration and figuration. This presented another problem for the abstract painter: now not simply arguing for a practice that was seen as gendered, but apparently presenting universals in a time when contingency was all. This might not have mattered to Coats, but she wanted an intelligent, articulate audience and sometimes it seemed that the devil had all the good tunes. Theories of immersion and affect had

been built upon the foundations of a corporeal phenomenology; Coats's work can be discussed in terms of the latter and consequently with the former, but new theories tend to attach themselves to new media and painting can struggle to be seen as similarly relevant. Nonetheless Coats measured theoretical ideas against those of her own understanding of the ways humans perceive colour.

Engagements with complexity

Around the turn of the century, in the experimental modality that characterises her intellectual history, Coats had become interested in the scientific study of symmetry and asymmetry and their developments in chaos theory and Bohm's notion of an 'implicate order.' She presented at interdisciplinary conferences on mathematics and symmetry. Such approaches seemed against the grain at the time, at odds with post-structuralism's critiques of scientific objectivity. However they overlapped with the topological models of post-structural theory and with consciousness theories that saw the mind as a neural network of connectivity. Seeking shared territories, Coats ranged widely across the theoretical apparatuses of the time, investigating the mathematics of weaving, the metaphorical mnemonics of print patterns, and the complex bilateral symmetries of biochemical forms. Her *Morphic* series (plate 28 & 29) resonates with notions of chaos, order, form, fingerprint patterns, difference and self-similarity. The formal structure asserts itself against the contingencies of stained colour as the series rotates through warm and cool colour sequences. By now the properties of the materials she used were enabled to produce fractal microcosms as they responded to like and dissimilar physical properties.

Deixis and the indexical

During a residency in Beijing in 1998, Coats further developed the underlying issue of fluidity and movement in time of the pigment and the mark. Her gessoed surfaces had held stains from each side of the canvas, but this time she focused on more saturated forms of ink and Chinese paper. Works done during this residency move almost out of coherence, asking yet more of the viewer who works to enter these spaces and discover their order. Reading them requires an intellectual gathering of the self, as it works across opposing and clearly inflected cultural forms. In Chinese forms the movement and the intended reading is deictic, or sequence-based. In Western works, the gestalt, structured to be understood as a singularity, dominates. The interplay between the two ways of reading the image is both challenging and fascinating.

Return to New Zealand

Coats revisited New Zealand in 1999 where she explored the sources of her thought on situated colour and form in the new medium of glass with new works that interrogated the deep contrasts and sombre darkness of New Zealand's light conditions. As part of this research she curated an exhibition of Colin McCahon's work, including his explorations into the use of glass. New Zealand's light is very clear and the ultra-violet count is high even beneath the cloud cover. Plants protect themselves with bright, glittering, reflective surfaces. Coastal winds move clouds quickly. Coats explored a range of dark blues and greys and experimented with the addition of a carved surface print. The pigments were allowed more autonomy as she began to work as much from the back of the canvas as the front. She continued also to work with paper and began to make works that were hung in sets. At times the carved forms call to mind the spiralled, whorled forms of Maori responses to the turbulent waters and swirling kelps of their country.

Return to Matiushin

At this point Coats returned to Australia, first to Sydney and then to Canberra. She decided to undertake a doctorate to gain a deeper understanding of the methodologies implicit in her work and their wider context. The interdisciplinary structure of the ANU approach suited her as she developed a research project based around the exploration of colour by the Russian artists. Travel to the George Costakis collection in Thessaloniki to view paintings of the Organic Studio artist movement, and to Russia itself, gave her insight into the intensely experiential and in a sense very pragmatic explorations of the colour theorists amongst the early Russian modernists. A residency in London with Winsor & Newton gave her further understanding of the physical properties of pigmentation in relation to perception of the human spectrum of colour. The Russian Organic Studio artists' interest in the dimensional qualities of colour differed from those of the more retinal (to use Marcel Duchamp's term) explorations of the Impressionists and, as Coats points out, in her thesis, the object-based explorations of the cubists. Asking art to enable a new era in consciousness, the Russians had adopted an almost biochemical approach, as they considered how the energy that is drawn from the sun conveys itself to us not simply as light, but through colour. Their 'constructivism' was not simply mechanical but formal, situated and phenomenological.

Expansion

Coats's doctoral research was made in the context of her exploration of the Russian approach to dimensionality. During that project she moved from the centred form of the square toward a form she called 'streaming' that allowed her to convey the notion of extension. While in previous work an implied repetition found itself confirmed in gridded matrices of panels, the *Streaming* works (plate 46 & 50) were in portrait or landscape format. She had used this before, but in these works the destabilization of the downward vortex resolves within the vertical dimensionality. They recall the explorations into symmetry and balance of the *Kore* series (plate 4 & 5) but provide a far greater test of the viewer's movement toward alignment. Coats drew on Matiushin's exploration of what he called the third intermediary that occurs between two contrasting colours and balances them without one or the other becoming dominant. This research acknowledged that the body's awareness of colour was more nuanced than the representational approach to colour would imply.

Finally, how do these beautiful paintings respond to today's urgent questions? Coats's work is very relevant in the era of the Anthropocene. In this context, her understanding that we forget our situated embodiment at our peril, has a political edge that is apparent as the climate changes and non-human species – plant and animal – around us diminish. In her quest to produce aesthetic forms attuned to the colour spectrums of particular environmental ecologies, she brings together in each of her works the formal disciplines of painting, the empiricism of an experimental engagement with colour, and a wise and passionate attention to human relationships with the land.

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While writing this I referred to the following texts.

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