Borderlines

Amid a set of eight digital inkjets proofed in 2003, composed simply of lines of text stacked on a page, Gordon Bennett may have laid a most useful trace to assist reading motivations for the ‘pure’ abstractions now showing at Sherman Galleries.

His small print, titled subject matter [2004], names and connects notions of ‘burden’ and ‘controversy’, while another, titled removal [2004], hints at the heart of a process of ‘deracination’, of paring back and ‘stripping’, to facilitate minimal means of image creation. At the same time these digital works were created, Bennett began the first works in his ‘stripe and line’ series with major drawings and paintings on paper. Importantly, both groups of works share key conceptual ingredients which inform the viewer about a radical new motivation in Bennett’s practice, and ways by which he relates to spectatorship of his work.

By the time these works were in production, Bennett had reached the apex of the ‘Notes To Basquiat’ series. Exhausted, he knew his painting needed to address the possibility of a breach from the ‘postcolonial project’ he’d engaged with for the previous 17 years. In that time, across various series, he’d considered international and domestic shifts in various modes of abstraction. In 2001 he studied works by Piet Mondrian and the DeStijl school at The Gemeentemuseum, Gunther Forg and Dan van Golden at the Stedelijk Museum.

Back home, he looked at Ian Burn, Richard Dunn, and the paintings of Emily Kngwarreye, Ronnie Tjampitjinpa and George Tjungarrayi, along with debate surrounding reception of their work. He was interested in myriad ideas shifting around ‘non-representational’ painting, and readings of contemporary indigenous art in the context of a Western rhetoric for abstraction, and domestic trends in geometric painting. Bennett particularly enjoyed the irony of lines just speaking for themselves.

“I was envious that Emily could just paint lines and I wanted to do some. I wanted to speak about other things. It was about freedom.”1

Australian art and its institutions, particularly since the 1980’s, catered for people who wanted to say things, and by 2003, Bennett's work had achieved a resonant voice in the discursive spaces he had directly and indirectly assisted in creating. Besides, Bennett has always been interested in reinvention as a strategy for survival. Aware of the implications for artists from proposed sedition laws, Bennett grappled with the inevitable perception that he’d succumbed to self-censorship. This, perhaps, was compounded by a feeling that audiences for his work had well-honed their filters to apply when viewing it, affecting a burden of representation that he felt deeply. He knew it was becoming untenable, and was frustrated in knowing that he was expected to comply. At the heart of his desire for a strategy of silence then, or the advance of an ‘aesthetic of indifference’, as it has been coined, was his personal sense of impotence before a tirade of military and governmental indifference.2

Once begun, he quickly enjoyed the open experimentation and possibility this new direction offered him, and by July 2003, a small group of works on paper, featuring black and white verticals emerged. Using a one-inch brush, he played with interstices between graphic marks and bands. It took him back to the beginning. These strokes focussed him solely on the relationship of the paint to the surface of the paper. He became particularly interested in the ways he could drag the line out across the surface using basic lineal form and with the inherent anxiety and risk involved in that process. Regulation and control of it inspired new ideas about minimal ways to construct an image.

Titles, or more accurately, numbers, were allocated to the works to minimise suggestions or narrative potential – an intended departure from the architectural in Stella, or bodily in Utopia line works by Gloria Petyarre. In any case, he wasn’t seeking appropriative association with Tingari boxes or body designs seen in Central Desert painting, or in being Stella-esque, although these were certainly influences.

Rather, he’d come at it with a desire to test the prospect for the image being ‘in itself’, and a lineage of modernist ideas examined in Australian art by precursors for this sort of conceptual
abstraction, via Greenberg and American influences, such as early works by Sydney artist, Robert MacPherson. Perhaps this is best seen in the next set of abstractions Bennett made in the series. He picked up a green wattle stick found outside the studio, and, drawn to its fibrous edge and homely ‘truth to material’ resonance, made works on paper now in the Queensland Art Gallery titled Scale from the Stick 1-4 [2003]. These works link image with tool, with landscape, and with the way variants of international modernism are defined by domestic vernacular. Bennett also sets up a great conundrum. How are works like this, by this artist, capable of testing the exclusion of all things external to the object? How might they be apolitical, or resist being read in conjunction with his previous work, say, like in the case of an artist also has a great understanding of, American painter Philip Guston, whose figurative works were perhaps among his best abstractions...

In 2004 a suite of Bennett’s line works, including the first done on linen, and the first to open up a controlled palette of colour, travelled to Arco, Madrid. Metallic tint itself acts as the form. Watercolour, gouache, paper and works on linen incorporated different sized brushes, seen to great effect in an intense group of small works on paper, some of which are studies for larger paintings.

Bennett’s abstractions attempt to skirt a borderline between subject and subject matter, as in the digital works with which we began this essay. To put it more plainly: a subject, or design, is what the artist intends in the picture. And his intention in a painting has a point of view to which his subject matter, that is the formal elements of the painting, will contribute as an integral part of the whole. The subject or design of his painting is, therefore, the painting itself and all of the statements which it makes simultaneously. The two meanings of ‘subject’ that emerge are not synonymous, so for the sake of clarity let us call the first, popular meaning of subject ‘subject matter’, and the second subject as denoting the design or intent of the painting as a whole.

Sydneysiders are able to experience this work in a context not seen previously, in that it functions as the first survey of Bennett’s new abstraction, featuring among the earliest and most recent works across all mediums, all released for the first time. In it we find a conceptual painting project that has ostensibly changed its stripes, offering more ways for viewers to challenge the physical object with the external aesthetic issues only Bennett could bring to the perceptual object. Hovering in the background, then, is the urgent question of why most non-representational painting in Australia, except ‘aboriginal abstraction’, has resisted broad embrace by audiences. Perhaps this is a project for that other great contemporary Australian artist, John Citizen, to develop further down the line.

1. Gordon Bennett quoted from unpublished interview with author 15/05/06