



# Abstraction

Celebrating Australian women abstract artists

Education resource

**NGA**  
National Gallery of Australia



Australian Government  
National Collecting Institutions  
Touring & Outreach Program

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## The world turned modern

'Realistic painting has proved to be a blind alley. We have reached the end of that alley, and been obliged to turn around and retrace our steps. Now we have started on the new track, and already find it rich in new discoveries.'

Dorrit Black, 16 March 1932

In her draft speech for the formal opening of her progressive Modern Art Centre in Sydney in 1932, Black summed up with clarity the remarkable ideological shift that had taken place in all art forms in the early twentieth century. It was a shift she was determined to impart to the more conservative forces of the Sydney art world when she returned in 1930 from a long sojourn in France and England with her friends and fellow modernists Grace Crowley and Anne Dangar.

These pioneering women transferred to Australian audiences an evangelical zest and enthusiasm for modernism's great project. Each, in her own way, brought back the theory and techniques learnt under the Cubist masters André Lhote and Albert Gleizes in France and while studying the modernist teachings of Claude Flight and Cyril Power at the Grosvenor School in London. In Sydney, Black shared her newfound knowledge at her Modern Art Centre while Crowley did so at the Crowley-Fizelle School on George Street—their lessons augmented by lavish doses of on-the-spot theory and technique courtesy of Dangar's illustrated letters to Crowley sent from the Gleizes's artist commune in the Rhône-Alpes.

The NGA holds a significant group of rare works across a range of media by Crowley, Dangar and Black, which not only illustrate the great early influence of European Cubism but also, more importantly, unequivocally show the critical role progressive women played in opening up avant-garde practices to artists at home in the 1920s and in redirecting public taste away from conservative, heroic landscapes and portraiture of the Edwardian era. Without doubt, when the world turned modern at the outbreak of the First World War, it was largely women who—along with Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin—embraced abstraction as the new path for Australian art, and they have since been among its most influential contributors.

One of Australia's quintessential modernists, Margaret Preston, whose reductive and abstracted woodblock prints open this new touring exhibition, did not mince her words when she stated in *Art and Australia* in 1933, 'Cubism is the foundation of all twentieth century thoughtful original work', explaining that it is 'a revulsion against the anecdotal type of art' of the nineteenth century, which she saw as the antithesis of modernism. The women represented in *Abstraction*, and the grand sweep of time covered by the exhibition, show the many incarnations of a movement that was as influential in art-historical terms as the rediscovery of perspective by Filippo Brunelleschi in Quattrocento Florence.

From the starting point of Cubism and Constructivism in the first decades of the twentieth century, abstraction evolved globally, and so too did the geographic centre shift away from Paris and London

toward New York. From Cubism, Crowley brought painting toward Geometric Abstraction, a purely non-representational iteration of the form. Other artists practiced a more organic abstraction, such as Inge King in her early carved stone and wood sculptures made at the Abbey in Hertfordshire in the 1940s—two of which, *Animal shapes in space* c1948 and *Figure in oak* 1949, are included in *Abstraction*. She then travelled to New York in 1949, where she adopted metal, which was a transformative experience for her practice.

Another Australian, Yvonne Audette arrived in New York a few years later, in 1952. It was a time of momentous and transformative changes in the art world, ushered in by Abstract Expressionism. She saw exhibitions by Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, and a visit to Franz Kline's studio had the indelible effect of teaching her how to 'paint space'. Her *The flat landscape* 1959 is a critical example of Kline's influence, philosophically and technically.

In Australia, Abstract Expressionism took a number of forms, some of which were derived from the Tachiste painters of Europe. Works such as *West* 1960 by Margo Lewers, and *Earth in spring* 1968 by her friend Eva Kubbos, show the reach of these merged idioms. Kubbos recounted in an interview with James Gleeson in the late 1970s, 'I sort of felt the urge I wanted to be bold and big. I wanted to have this greater freedom in general in expressing myself as an artist. I think that probably was the main reason why I sort of finally dived into Abstract Expressionism'.

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The movement seemingly dominated the art world for over two decades but by the early 1960s, hard-edge abstraction and Op Art began to make their presence felt. The NGA acquired many works by the artists included in the ground-breaking 1968 exhibition *The Field*, which traced this new form of abstraction. Viewed at times as a rather 'blokey' style, only three women were included in *The Field*, two of whom, Normana Wight and Janet Dawson, are represented in the NGA's touring show. Like many of the works in *Abstraction*, Dawson's *Study for lighthouse 1968* is about something intangible and fleeting—in this case, the moment when darkness switches to light in the intermittent flash of a lighthouse globe. While it is hard-edge in immediate style, it is also ethereal and enigmatic, a quality that would often allude Dawson's male counterparts.

The quest to capture a transient, elusive, mutable subject or event inspired many artists to harness abstraction. It was no longer about theory or philosophy. Instead, emotional response became a primary factor in the later decades of the twentieth century. Lesley Dumbrell, whose language is entirely abstracted, found it to be the only solution for depicting the invisible. Her monumental *Foehn* 1975 draws its title from the wind force that moves from the ocean over mountains. She describes the work as capturing the sense and feeling of the changing wind current or the cold of sudden drops of rain or snow at the top of the ridgeline. In the work of Indigenous women painters, the deeply spiritual nature of weather patterns and phenomena are seen as intrinsically linked to ancestral creation mythologies. In her delicate work *Ilyara*, Mary Meribida paints the aerial view of the living

water sites or 'jila', which are so fundamental, not only to her peoples' survival but also interwoven into their spiritual beliefs and ceremonies. Many jila are inhabited by powerful ancestral figures. Here she has captured the impossible – the rising, shimmering heat haze over the waterways. In marked contrast, in *My grandfather's country*, Sally Gabori reduces the palette to two colours only, punctuating the red field with a dramatic patch of black creating one of her most abstracted evocations of country within her oeuvre.

Dumbrell and other women, such as Elizabeth Gower and Virginia Coventry, were also constructively leading the charge into a new feminist perspective with the formation of the *Women's Art Register* in 1975 and the publication of the highly influential journal *Lip*. As a young mother in Hobart, surrounded by children's paraphernalia and an endless stream of junk mail, Gower began to take her immediate 'feminine' domain and repurpose it in her linear abstractions of everyday life in works such as *Then and now* 1987.

The importance of Indigenous artists cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it took an Indigenous woman, Emily Kam Kngwarray, living in the Central Desert region of Utopia, to crack open the mystery of abstraction for a wider Australian audience. Prior to her rise in our consciousness, abstraction had been a highly regarded but seemingly niche practice, collected mostly by institutions and the cognoscenti. In a manner that was deeply tied to concepts of land and country, her exuberant fields of colour painted on heroic scale, quashed much of the remaining conservative opposition to abstraction and opened to now willing audiences that 'new track' Black had spoken of in 1932. Indeed,

Indigenous artists have mobilised abstraction as a powerful technique to express their spiritually rich visual language replete with symbols and patterns informed by their ancestors.

**Lara Nicholls,**

Assistant Curator, Australian Painting and Sculpture

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## From European Cubism to Abstraction in Australia



**Anne Dangar** *Pochair composition* 1936  
drawing in brush and gouache, 33 x 27 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2002

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'It is a revulsion against the anecdotal type of art ... Cubism is the foundation of all twentieth century thoughtful original work.'

Margaret Preston, *Manuscripts*, No 4 February 1933

Margaret Preston summed up the remarkable ideological shift that had taken place in all art forms in the early twentieth century. In 1912, the year that Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger published *Du Cubisme* and Marcel Duchamp exhibited his revolutionary painting *Nude descending a staircase*, Preston commenced her second sojourn in Europe, where she absorbed the wide-ranging tenets of modernism feeding into the evolution of abstraction. When she returned to Sydney in 1919, she set about making Australian art modern, paving the way for abstraction to take root.

In 1926, Grace Crowley and Anne Dangar left Sydney to study in Paris. Encouraged by Crowley's letters published in the journal *Undergrowth*, Dorrit Black met her friends in London in 1927, where she immediately enrolled in the Grosvenor School of Modern Art. And, by the end of December, she had joined Crowley and Dangar at the Paris-based school of Cubist master

André Lhote, travelling on to his summer school in Mirmande for further study.

However, their practice was revolutionised by Albert Gleizes, who taught a wholly abstracted form of painting. Such was his power that Dangar permanently settled at his utopian artist colony in the French countryside near Lyon, allowing her the opportunity to create and exhibit in the midst of the European avant-garde. When her friends returned to Sydney, Crowley established the Crowley-Fizelle School in George Street and Black set up her Modern Art Centre.

In her own way, each woman brought back to Australia a range of avant-garde theories and techniques learnt in Europe. Through their evangelical zest and enthusiasm for modernism and abstraction, they transferred these learnings to a new generation of artists and collectors. Without their tutelage, it is unlikely that abstraction could have progressed in Australia as it did.

## Activities

### From European Cubism to Abstraction in Australia

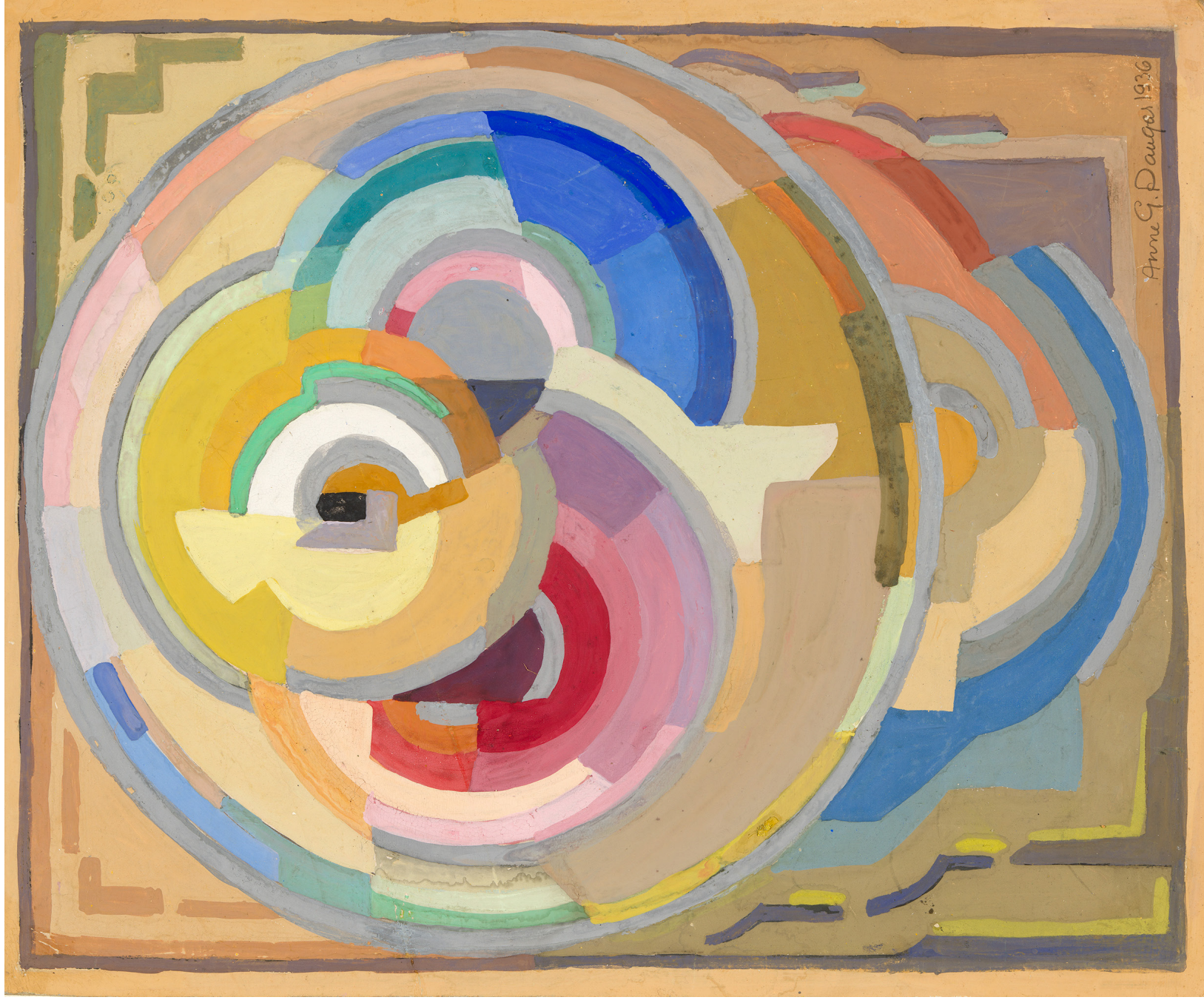


**Anne Dangar** *Pochoir composition 1936*  
drawing in brush and gouache, 33 x 27 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2002

1. Research the stencilling printing technique called 'pochoir, a technique used mostly in France from the late 1800s to the 1930s. Set up a still life of some objects you usually have around, – such as items on your desk or on a breakfast table. Draw the basic elements of your still life as geometric shapes and cut them into negative and positive stencils. Using small rollers with different coloured paint, stencil, print and repeat your shapes. Deconstruct your image of the still life by building layers and rearranging the coloured shapes to explore the relationships between them and the flatness and depth between the layering.
2. Set up a still life of 3–5 objects and draw the composition in pencil from three different angles on the same piece of paper. Consider your drawing and erase some of the lines that create separation between the objects until the figurative elements are difficult to discern. Recreate the composition as a series of shapes using a variety of textured materials including newspaper, foil, bubble wrap and other easily available textured surfaces.
3. Compare and contrast the forms of Cubism practised by Picasso as compared to Albert Gleizes.

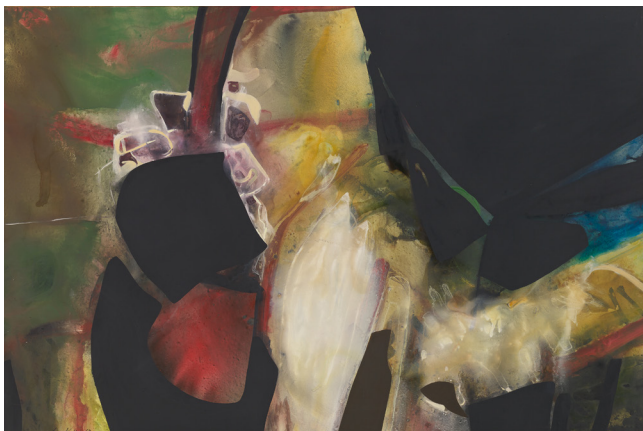
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**Anne Dangar** *Pochoir composition 1936*  
drawing in brush and gouache, 33 x 27 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2002

## Abstract Expressionism



The end of the Second World War saw a significant shift in the geographic and philosophical centre of abstraction from Europe to North America. New York became the epicentre of a new form of abstraction that was gestural, improvised and experiential. Based on emotion and the physicality inherent in the very act of painting, as opposed to the geometry underpinning earlier abstract art, it had a seismic impact on art history. Painters, poets, writers, dancers and musicians formed a loose collaboration known as the New York School and, within this milieu, one of the most influential iterations of non-representational art emerged, Abstract Expressionism.

While the art-historical focus on this movement often falls to the men, particularly Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, a number of influential women were central to the story. Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell were luminaries. Australian women, too, responded to these new endeavours. Yvonne

Audette arrived in New York in 1952 and was awarded the Fogg Scholarship two years later to study at the New York National Academy of Design. During this time, she was invited to Franz Kline's studio, an experience that had an indelible effect on her painting. It was there that she discovered that 'form free of all associations was now valid in its own right!'

The term Abstract Expressionism was first publicly used in Australia in 1956 by Elwyn Lynn in the *Contemporary Art Society Broadsheet*. However, Australian artists practised a hybrid between Abstract Expressionism and its European counterpart, *Taschisme*. Margo Lewers was an exponent of the style, stating, 'my adventures in paint are very personal experiences'. In the late 1970s, her friend Eva Kubbos revealed to James Gleeson, 'I wanted to have this greater freedom in general in expressing myself as an artist. I think that probably was the main reason why I sort of finally dived into Abstract Expressionism!'

**Eva Kubbos** *Earth in Spring* 1968  
synthetic polymer paint on composition board 122 x 183 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1968

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## Activities

### Abstract Expressionism



1. Take a photograph of your face with an emotional expression. Consider the angle of your head. Print the photograph and then using textas, crayons and pencil exaggerate the lines of the face. Extend some lines to the edge of the paper and continue to draw over the image filling in spaces and erasing features using gestural marks. When you have worked the image as much as you can, use white paint to erase areas you are less pleased with to transform the overall composition and to highlight the strongest areas.
2. Compare and analyse the differences between the two movements, Abstract Expressionism in New York and Taschism in Europe.

**Eva Kubbos** *Earth in Spring* 1968  
synthetic polymer paint on composition board 122 x 183 cm  
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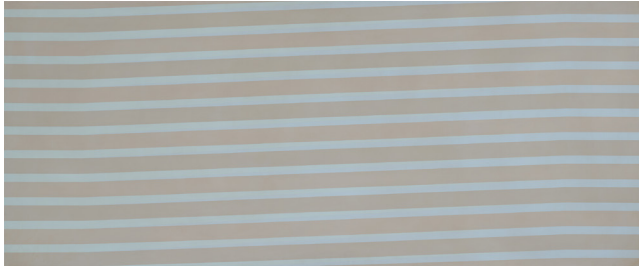
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**Eva Kubbos** *Earth in Spring* 1968  
synthetic polymer paint on composition board 122 x 183 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1968

## Minimalism and Op Art



'Art work that is completely abstract—free from any expression of the environment—is like music and can be responded to in the same way. Our response to line and tone and color is the same as our response to sounds. And like music abstract art is thematic. It holds meaning for us that is beyond expression in words.'

Agnes Martin, 15 October 1975

As artists moved away from the spontaneous expression and large gestural works of the 1940s and 1950s, the extreme reduction of form into simple shapes, lines, contours and colour became a paramount concern among artists both in Australia and abroad. There was a return to the fundamentals of Geometric Abstraction and Constructivism, which produced a new coolness and sense of detachment, loosely referred to as Minimalism.

In 1968, the highly influential exhibition *The Field* was curated to open Roy Grounds's new building for the

National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. Taking its name from the Colour Field movement in America, it included works by a new generation of young artists painting in Hard Edge or Geometric Abstraction as well as Colour Field. It included only three women, Wendy Paramor, Normana Wight and Janet Dawson, the latter two represented in this touring exhibition.

There were many other women painting in this manner at the time including Virginia Coventry, who had returned from studying at the Slade School of Art in London as *The Field* opened. Her painting *Mirage* 1968 is considered to be one of the finest examples of Minimalism painted in Australia. Its eloquently restrained palette and gently curving horizontal stripes is a step away from being an Op Art expression. Lesley Dumbrell practised her own lyrical form of Op Art, evident in her masterwork *Foehn* 1975, which was acquired by the NGA the year after it was painted.

**Virginia Coventry** *Mirage* 1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas 101.5 x 244 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2016

© Virginia Coventry. Licensed by Viscopy

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## Activities

### Minimalism and Op Art



1. Using a ruler draw a geometric shape on an A5 piece of paper. Photocopy the shape at various sizes, not exceeding A4. Cut out shapes and arrange on a piece of A3 paper using symmetry, repetition and mirroring to create various effects. Trace around the shapes to produce 2–3 different compositions, paying attention to or considering the way the shapes connect to the edges of the paper. Choose one composition to paint using complementary colour and uniform brushstrokes.

Extension:

Paint a composition using lighter colours for larger shapes and darker colours for smaller shapes. Reverse and observe the different spatial effects.

2. Research Bridget Riley's work in the National Gallery of Australia and compare her technique and composition with Lesley Dumbrell and Virginia Coventry.

**Virginia Coventry** *Mirage* 1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas 101.5 x 244 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2016

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**Virginia Coventry** *Mirage* 1968  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas 101.5 x 244 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2016  
© Virginia Coventry. Licensed by Viscopy

## Organic Abstraction



**Inge King** *Figure in oak* 1949  
oak 88 x 33.5 x 21.5 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1988

The natural world has inspired artists for millennia. One of the great threads running through abstraction is the re-imagining of nature in new ways. Abstraction has proved to be an ideal conduit for capturing its essential forms and has enabled artists to work with the intangible, fleeting elements of the world around us in ways that realism cannot penetrate.

Cubism and Constructivism championed a geometric form of abstraction, pushing it into the complete abandonment of representational art, but a form of organic abstraction also evolved in the 1930s. While the Abstraction-Création group in Paris tended to promote austere forms, some of its members expressed a more organic dynamism in their work.

In the United Kingdom, sculptors Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore found ways to carve and hone stone and timber and cast metal as though it had emerged from the earth itself. Norma Redpath, who moved to Italy from Melbourne, created major sculptural fountains where her archetypal, organic formations fused with the water coursing through them.

At the Abbey in Hertfordshire in the late 1940s, Berlin-born sculptor Inge King worked with organic forms, carving sensuous shapes that emphasised the curved line of nature as though she was unlocking the life force of an otherwise inanimate media. In 1951, she

moved to Australia and, through her major public sculpture, commissions became one of the most influential modernist sculptors in the country.

Throughout the many incarnations of abstraction, artists have been drawn to its capacity to express the intangible aspects of nature such as wind, rain, heat, cold, light and darkness, and especially the sensation of being amidst nature. For Indigenous artists, these elements are in constant flux. They exist and are informed by the ancestors, thus they hold critical importance in the expression of their intrinsic connections to Country. This suggests that humankind is not separate to the environment but is in fact nature itself, and organic forms of abstraction often mirror this philosophy.

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## Activities

### Organic Abstraction



1. Take a modelling medium and sculpt it in ways that resemble forms found in nature such as seed pods, shells, fruit, rock formations and waves. Abstract the shapes so that they don't imitate exactly.
2. Research the work of Barbara Hepworth and Inge King and explain how nature inspired their practice.

**Inge King** *Figure in oak* 1949

oak 88 x 33.5 x 21.5 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1988

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**Inge King** *Figure in oak 1949*

oak 88 x 33,5 x 21,5 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1988

## Spirituality and mysticism



Abstraction has long been the handmaiden of spirituality and mysticism. One of the founders of abstraction, Wassily Kandinsky published a treatise on the subject in 1912, *Concerning the spiritual in art*, which influenced a number of artists in this exhibition. Kazimir Malevich's *Black square* 1915, one of the world's most famous abstract paintings, mimicked the traditional placement of orthodox religious icons in Russian homes. One intention of the work was to commit a great emptying out of historical clutter from art and society.

In a recent art-historical breakthrough, it has been acknowledged that some of the earliest western abstract paintings in existence were created in 1906 in Sweden by Hilma af Klint. Unseen by the world until 1985, they reveal abstract depictions of the spiritual dimension communicated to her during seances. Although trained as a realist painter, she chose abstraction to express mystical experiences. In Australia, Shay Docking later echoed a similar connection to the spirit world when she described *Mooncatcher II*, a painting of a shattered Angophora tree that 'scoops at the night sky as though it would divine the ultimate mystery'.

In its almost universal aim of representing the intangible, abstraction allows artists to portray the highly conceptual and emotional notions of spirituality.

Some find the act of creating alone to be a mystical experience. When she painted the series *Magnetism*, Liz Coats was examining Buddhism and found a correlation between her experience and the Buddhist belief in an active connection between artist and materials. In her series *Samsara*, Margaret Worth explores the meaning of the Sanskrit word of the title, which refers to the uninterrupted cycle of death and rebirth.

Over millennia, Australian Indigenous artists have inherited a spiritually rich visual language of symbols, patterns and meaning. This uniquely Indigenous abstract imagery is informed by their ancestors. Artists such as Angelina Pwerle have deep cultural obligations to use this visual language to communicate with the spiritual realm and reinforce their cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

**Angelina Pwerle** *Body Paint* 2002  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas 124 x 78.5 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
Gift of William Nuttall and Annette Reeves 2013. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

## Abstraction

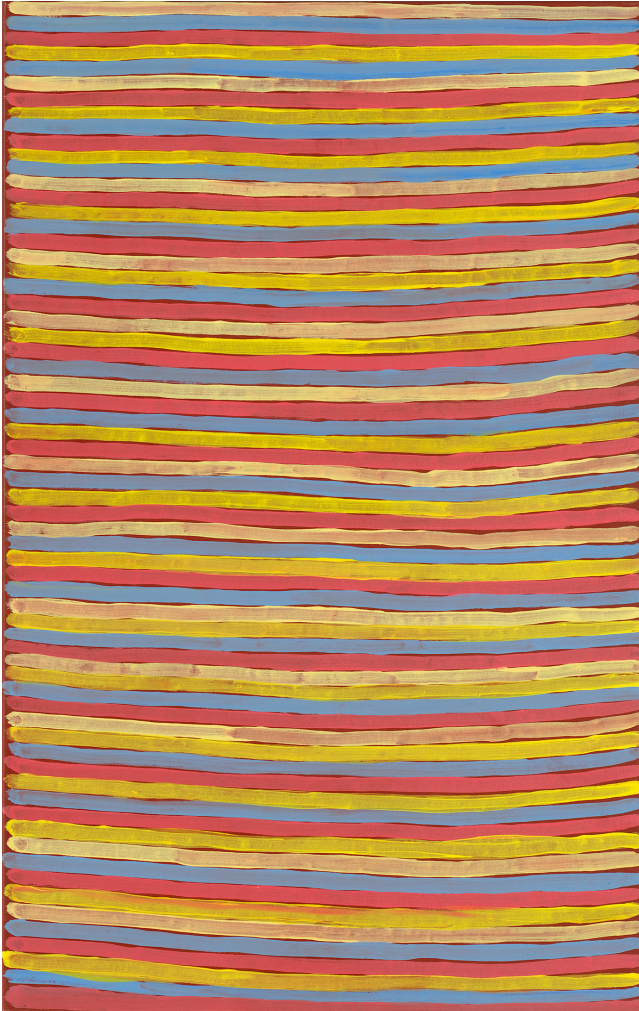
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## Activities

### Spirituality and mysticism



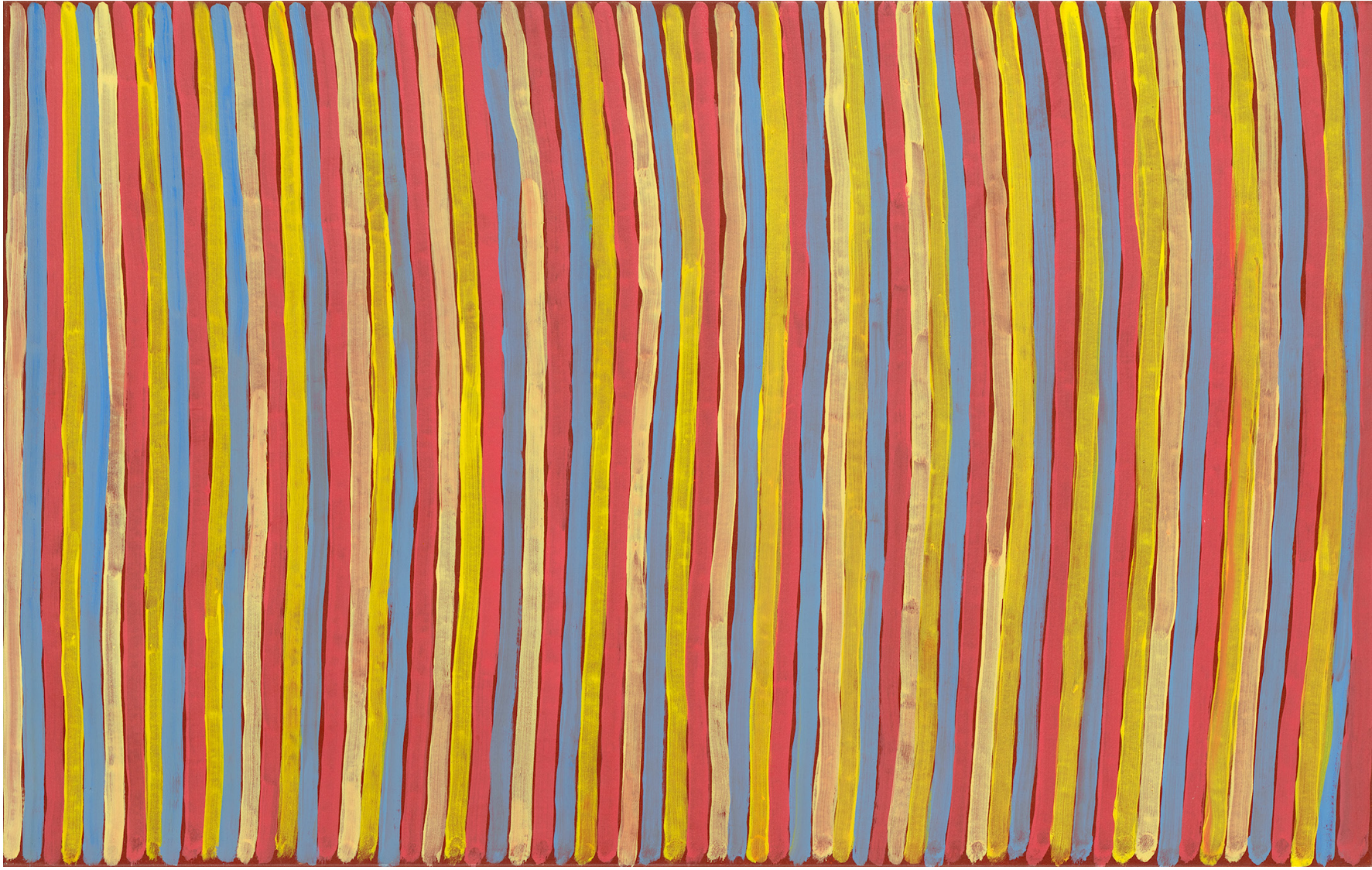
1. Lie on your back and look at the sky being careful to avoid looking at the sun. Using a pencil and paper placed on the ground beside you draw the light as it shines through the branches and or leaves while lying on your back and without looking at the paper. When you have finished drawing, colour the shapes you created using lighter colours in the centre and darker colours near the edges of the paper.
2. Investigate the ways in which different cultures use abstract symbols to represent their systems of meaning and belief.

**Angelina Pwerle** *Body Paint* 2002  
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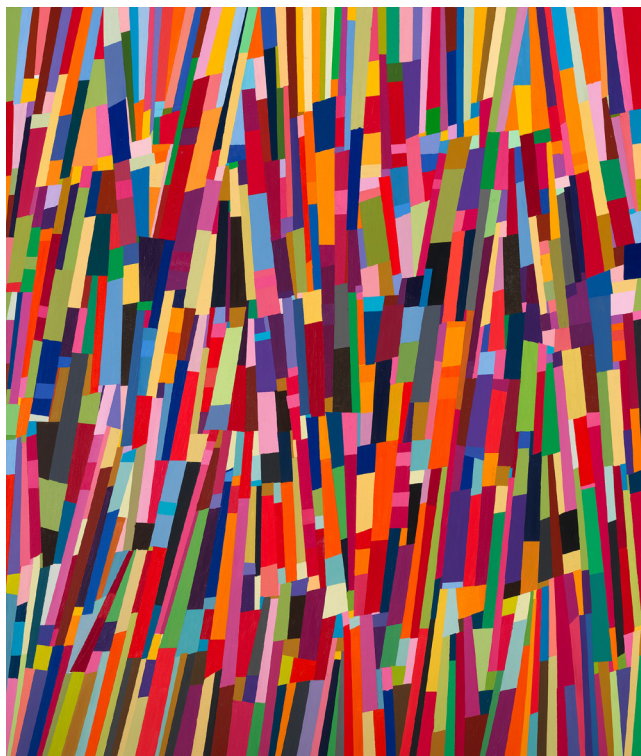
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## Contemporary adventures with Abstraction



**Melinda Harper** *Untitled* 2001  
oil on canvas 183.5 x 156.4 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2001  
© Melinda Harper. Licensed by Viscopy

In 2013, *Art News* posted an article boldly arguing that 'the golden age of abstraction is *right now*' and that contemporary artists credibly continue to work in abstraction. They do not practise a derivative art, quoting achievements of past masters, but instead harness abstraction to find new ways to reflect the world today. Women remain at the forefront of this renaissance.

In 1936, Alfred H Barr drew his sinuous map of Cubism and abstraction, which showed the world how fluid and broad these key modernist movements are. Even at this early juncture, abstraction was not evolving in a linear fashion—nor has it continued to develop in a neat, tidy line in the twenty-first century. While an awareness of past movements is evident in contemporary practice, artists today are often employing its forms as colour blocks and line to mimic the materials of urban existence.

Melinda Harper paints such explosive slices and shapes of colour that one is immediately brought back to the

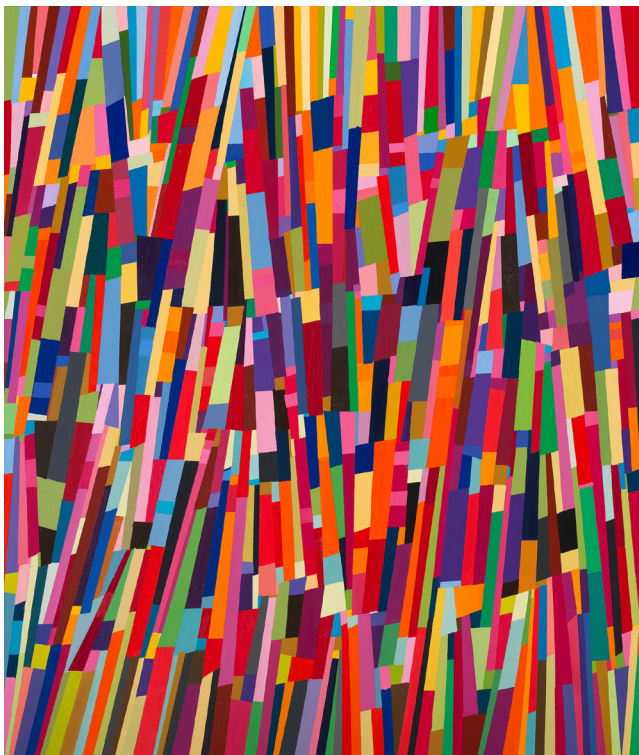
dramatic use of colour and geometry of the Cubist and Constructivist artists of the early twentieth century. Yet, her work is conceived from her lived experience and direct observation of daily life now. In *Various levels* 2002, Savanhdary Vongpoothorn has employed the grid structure associated with both traditional textiles and early geometric abstract paintings to express her experience walking in urban Japan. Debra Dawes uses the formal mechanism of alternating chevron patterns not as a mere abstract construction but as a way of expressing her critique of the deceptive use of language in modern politics.

Perhaps the most powerful iteration of contemporary abstraction lies in Indigenous painting practice, where dot, colour, line and bold ceremonial patterning rhythmically flow across the surface of the canvas in the same way that ancient songlines of complex mythologies dance across the Country as part of the Dreaming.

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**Melinda Harper** *Untitled* 2001  
oil on canvas 183.5 x 156.4 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 2001  
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1. Download the iMotion app. Select a number of brightly coloured items of clothing from your cupboard or household items and arrange them within an A1 rectangle. Using stop-motion photography take 30–40 photographs moving the items in between each photograph.
2. Pretend you are a contemporary artist and list the ways you might employ abstraction to express your view of the world.

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oil on canvas 183.5 x 156.4 cm  
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