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February 2005
The Protean Grid

Milan Mrkusich, Formalism and Change

Chrissie Craig

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts
of the University of Otago, Dunedin
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December 2004
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Abstract

A paradox of our time is that while every kind of art is permitted and freely celebrated, such liberation often seems to gain purchase on the ground that the art called ‘modernist’ exhibits ‘signs of internal exhaustion’ and ‘repetition’. In considering the work of New Zealand’s foremost and sustained modernist, Milan Mrkusich, this thesis argues a very different, rehabilitative approach to modernism.

The thesis will explore different approaches that have been made to the kind of abstract art produced by Milan Mrkusich; the kind designated as modernist abstract art. Mrkusich’s body of paintings exemplify a sustained exploration and development within the boundaries of modernist practices, and stand pictorially in complete denial of the claims made by certain writers, like Rosalind Krauss; of the stagnant and repetitive nature of the formalist structure of the modernist grid. This thesis argues that Mrkusich’s painting and the development inherent in it requires a more expansive account of its formalist qualities than possible in the approach Krauss promotes in order to make room for the idea of change that it stands for. My elaborations around the writing of Meyer Schapiro and Richard Wollheim provide this. Their ideas offer a broader understanding of abstract art by allowing a reanimated account of it that embraces the kind of changes that occur within Mrkusich’s oeuvre.

Summary

1. The Humanity of Abstraction.
Chapter One explores Meyer Schapiro’s thought that formalist art is a process based on the notion that it is “…the painter’s constructive activity, his power of impressing a work with a feeling and the qualities of thought … [that] gives humanity to art”3. Writing as he does during the late period of high modernism, Schapiro’s ideas are pertinent to the kind of art produced by Milan Mrkusich. In Schapiro’s understanding of painting, the inner life of the artist cannot be entirely separated from the art object, no matter how abstract the painting may appear. Most discussion of abstract painting offer purely formal accounts of the paintings under scrutiny. Schapiro goes beyond this as he believed that this did not allow for what he described as the ‘humanity of art’ and on this basis he focused on feelings and qualities of thought. Feelings and qualities of thought are never repetitive, are always in a constant state of flux, and consequently permit and in fact necessitate the possibility of change and development in abstract painting.

2. Seeing a Painting.
Chapter Two considers the formalist analyses of paintings discussed by Richard Wollheim in a lecture he gave in 1994, the purpose of which is to provide an understanding of his theory that allows and accounts for the process of looking and understanding the form of abstract art. Under consideration are Wollheim’s ideas concerning the flaws and limits imposed with purely formalist analysis, and his belief in the ability of discerning viewers to see representational content in almost all paintings, including abstract paintings. He thus promotes a formalist analysis that not only captures the two-dimensional structure of a painting but also the perceptual and intuitive responses the viewer has to it.

3. *Gridlock.*
Shapiro and Wollheim represent together an opposition to a different form of discourse, exemplified in Chapter Three by in the writing of Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, the chapter serving as a critique of Rosalind Krauss's claims about the modernist grid. This involves an exploration of her theoretical stance on modernist abstract art and its associated grid; that it was static, a non-vital and non-changing form within modernist painting, one that resisted development, was unoriginal and repetitive. In this, her formidably persuasive rhetoric will be put to one side in order more clearly to examine the logic of her thoughts on the modernist grid and the fashion in which she rejects and distorts the previous approaches to abstract art.

4. *The Surfaces are not DEAD.*
Chapter Four examines a selection of Milan Mrkusich's paintings since 1983, how they relate to each other, and whether they reveal change and development during that time. This will involve descriptions and analyses of the paintings of the kind established in the first three chapters of this thesis, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the kinds of compositional relations and coloration Mrkusich achieves in his paintings. This will be considered alongside critical responses to his painting.

Epilogue.
The Epilogue reflects on the preoccupations of the preceding chapters of the thesis: on the humanity of abstraction and the protean character of Mrkusich's painting. The subjectively and perceptually expanded formalist account of Mrkusich's painting, like that discussed in the initial chapters and employed in Chapter Four, provide a humane psychological understanding of the complexity of Mrkusich's painting: of their protean character and of the integrative psychological processes that they instantiate.
Chapter One

The Humanity of Abstraction

It is often assumed that abstract art is a purely visual artefact, dehumanised of any representational properties. The assumption is made even by artists themselves. Frank Stella for instance claims,

"I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting – the humanistic values they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there beside paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object."

This position taken by Stella is a Sixties view, one that adds to the weight of arguments against the humanity of abstract art. Yet without this possibility there are limits to what is able to be understood of an abstract painting; abstraction becomes a meaningless optical exercise, while the viewers' attention shifts away from the paintings in their search for meaning onto what has been written in explanation of them. This shift in focus leads to the kind of misunderstanding outlined by popularising writer Tom Wolfe, in which he is driven to complain about abstract painting, that the "...paintings and other works exist only to illustrate the text". Although Wolfe's position is popularist one gets the suspicion that he is asking of painting, in Pateresque terms, "What is this to me?" – and can find no answer.

It seems that a case can and indeed should be made for the humanity of abstract art and is warranted in order to answer this kind of question. With this focus in mind my exploration necessarily concerns the 'humanistic values' of abstract paintings denied by the likes of Stella. Accordingly I shall structure an argument around four very diverse authors: Meyer Schapiro, Immanuel Kant, Stanley Cavell and Adrian Stokes. It is interesting that these

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4 Frank Stella, 'Questions to Stella and Judd' — an interview by Bruce Glaser first printed in Art News, September 1966, p. 158.
four are so diverse: Schapiro comes from a background of the history of art; Immanuel Kant from philosophy; Stanley Cavell from aesthetics; Adrian Stokes from art criticism and psychoanalysis. For despite the diversity their views all seem to point to an understanding of the humanity of art.

Common to the understanding of these four authors is a broad consensus concerning a structural disposition of the human mind. This is difficult to express with any immediate coherence, as it can become obscured by Kant’s faculty psychology⁷, or, with Stokes’s framework, in what psychoanalysis calls the dynamic theory of mind⁸. However, in general what we recognise as a feature of human activity is a relationship between the operating elements of mind. In terms of a Kantian structure, the relationship is between the operations of the imagination and the operations of the understanding, such that we would regard someone with the operational involvement of the understanding only but not imagination as a rule-governed automaton, and someone with the operational involvement of the imagination only as mad. Similarly, we regard any operational imbalance between the components of psychoanalytically dynamic structure of mind in terms of abnormal behaviour or dysfunctional illnesses⁹. In what follows I shall focus on the idea of a structural disposition of mind and use this as the base for claims about the fundamental recognisability of the humanity of art.

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⁷ Kant developed a theory of mind based on a structure that involved three cognitive faculties: imagination, understanding and reason. His three ‘critiques’ are an exploration of the ways these faculties operated; *The Critique of Pure Reason*, addresses the faculty of understanding in order to explore our a priori ability to know things, that is, it is the faculty of concepts or rules. The second book, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, addresses the faculty of reason, that faculty involved in exploring the rules of morality. The third book, *The Critique of Judgement*, was different from the former books in that it explores the making of judgements rather than the following of rules, a process Kant wrote of as involving the faculty of imagination. He does this in the introduction to his third book, while summarising the explorative boundaries of each book. Included in these introductory comments is the clearest discussion of the structure underpinning his theory of mind along with a list of the structural components and the faculties they serve. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), trs. Norman Kemp Smith (McMillan, London, 1968), *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), trs. L.W. Beck, (Indianapolis, 1956) and *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), trs. J.C. Meredith (Oxford University Press, 1959).

⁸ Freud’s ideas of a dynamic theory of mind will be explored later in this chapter. Information for this discussion is taken from the translated version of his paper ‘The Ego and Id’ (1923) which can be found Sigmund Freud, Volume 11, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* translated by James Strachey, (The Pelican Freud Library, Great Britain, 1984).

⁹ For Freud the passage between psychological normality and abnormality was one of a shift in the relational balance of the ego, id and superego, rather than a malfunction of one or other of them, a view that led him to claim that ‘We are all ill... since the preconditions for the formation of symptoms can be observed in normal people’. (*Introductory Lectures, Standard Edition, Volume 16, p. 457.*)
§1 Meyer Schapiro's Concept of the Humanity of Art

Meyer Schapiro regards the art object as the result of a creative process whereby the artwork is the product of a combination of both mental and physical activity. He claims it is "...the painter's constructive activity, his power of impressing a work with a feeling and the qualities of thought that gives humanity to art..."\(^{10}\) The artwork conveys through its surface organisation a sense of the creative activities undertaken by the artist in its making. It is the recognition of the process of painting as a characteristically human activity that leads to the idea of the humanity of art.

To elaborate further: during the process of painting the artist is responding to problems as they arise on the painted surface. There are the initial problems, of what kind order is going to structure the painting as a whole, and there are the technical and stylistic problems of how the artist is going to articulate that particular order. It is the constructive abilities of the individual artist, his or her inventive and imaginative powers, that are put to play in balance with the understanding in order to direct the structuring of that canvas. Features of the finished artwork will offer insight into the relational character of the creative activity undertaken, revealing in that character the qualities of thought and feeling that stem from the particular structural disposition of mind.

In this way Schapiro's concept of the humanity of art can be regarded as one based on a particular structure of mind, one that reveals itself through its relational properties, through the balance of the processes, activities and faculties of that inner dispositional structure. Recognition of qualities that stem from an underlying structure reveals something that is distinctly and characteristically human. And for Schapiro the meaningfulness of a painting is to be found in the recognition of these human qualities, that led him to claim that the "...humanity of art lies in the artist and not simply in what he represents..."\(^{11}\), for he understands features of the painting in terms of their being characteristic of a particular structure of mind.

\(^{10}\) Schapiro (op. cit. 1995), p 10.
\(^{11}\) Loc. cit.
While all of human experience can be thought of as deriving from this same structure, a structure fundamental to all humankind, it is the balance of activity of the operational agencies of that structure that allows for and demands that there be a difference in phenomenological expression. It is this balance of activity – the relational activity of the operational components within the structure that determines our experience – that determines the character or structural disposition of that experience.

It is this structural disposition that Schapiro describes as “…an essentially human trait: the capacity for adequate shifting of attitude.” Thought emanating from a relational structure will never be static: they will vary constantly as they adapt and change according to internal and external circumstances and experiences; they will be characterised by particular relational activities, faculties and processes that are protean in nature. We understand the inevitability of this in our experience of our own inner world as much as in our commerce with those around us.

§2 The Kantian Mind

Schapiro asserts that his “…notion of humanity in art rests on a norm of the human…” indicating that it is a universal structure of mind that informs his writing, one that assigns a collective definition to his understanding of humanity. In these two respects, the universality of the structure and the relational properties that direct it toward a particular disposition, Schapiro’s model of mind is in the same spirit as the model Kant put forward for the functioning of the human mind.

The Kantian structure of mind comprises three cognitive faculties: understanding and reason (used respectively in the application of concepts and in relating concepts to each of them), together with the faculty of imagination that is involved in the making of

judgements. These structural components operate in a relational balance determining all human activity, there being more input from one or other agency depending on the circumstances at the time of operation. For instance, the creation of art for Kant is an imaginative unity that appears as if ordered by a rule of the understanding, an activity in which the imagination takes on a greater role. He writes,

... it is only a conformity to law without a law, and a subjective harmonizing of the imagination and the understanding without an objective one.

The discernment of the product of such an activity, such as a painting, occurs with a similar interplay of these faculties.

The employment of these fundamental components of mind is a capacity shared by all humans. Yet all humans are not the same and the result of the kind of determinative mental activity just described, even given that the same fundamental components are in play, is often not the same, nor is it expected to be. This difference in expressive outcome can be regarded as representative of a particular kind of relational operation of such components – of a particular disposition of mind.

To approach works of art with Schapiro and Kant’s universal structural models in mind is to understand the works regardless of a person’s creed, belief, gender or social system. The assessment of a painting in their terms becomes characterised by an attitude of disinterestedness, because they base their approach to that painting on a subjective structure, a structure of mind that is common to all humans, making it possible to make a claim of the painting on behalf of all human subjects. There is no directing interest or set of rules that the assessment has to adhere to, no aspect of the painting which need be ignored. As Kant wrote “...the judgement of taste, with its attendant consciousness of detachment from all interest, must involve a claim to validity for all men, and must do so apart from universality attached to Objects, i.e. there must be coupled with it a claim to subjective

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15 Kant (op. cit. 1959), p. 41.
16 This kind of judgement is one he terms an 'aesthetic judgement', that is, a judgement of taste. This is an evaluation of the “Susceptibility to pleasure arising from reflection of the forms of things (whether of nature or of art)”, Kant (op. cit. 1959), p. 33.
The capacity to approach a painting from a disinterested or unbiased position is a difficult ideal, but it is one that enables the spectator to register and assess any kind of painting.

Schapiro claims that "The charge of inhumanity brought against abstract painting springs from a failure to see the works as they are; they have been obscured by concepts from other fields...". If, for instance, the conceptual field is one defining a religious, social or personal group the assessment made will be from the point of view of that group; the rules that govern that group will apply in their assessment. As there is not a detachment from interest these rules will dictate a non-universal determination of the painting under scrutiny. The constraints imposed by the conceptual field on the assessment, directs that assessment to particular features of the painting. This type of assessment will only apply in cases of certain kinds of art, in certain cultures, for certain people.

It is this kind of conceptually biased approach to art that becomes the topic of Chapter Three of this thesis, in which a post-modern theoretical ground is employed to determine abstract art, an approach that is an instance of Schapiro’s comment of a groups ‘failure to see the paintings as they are’. For in a post-modern approach the concepts of post-modernism take precedence over what lies on the canvas.

The engagement with art using an approach underpinned by a subjective structural disposition of mind, like that proposed by Schapiro, offers a far broader determination of art than one driven by personal, cultural, religious, gender or conceptual based systems. To explain: his is a way of thinking about art that does not make an assessment on a single feature of a painting only, such as the subject matter or a politicised or group message. Rather Schapiro’s approach recognises the expressive and representational features common to all art regardless of the artist’s creed, gender, era, political and social affiliations or constraints. He focuses on those qualities of thought and feeling that are generated by the underlying relational structure of mind. With an approach to painting

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17 Kant; *op. cit. 1959*, p. 51.
18 Schapiro; *op. cit. 1995*, p. 11.
based on a subjective structure such as his, "...all the arts of the world, even the drawings of children and psychotics, have become accessible on a common plane of expressive and form-creating activity. Art is now one of the strongest evidences of the basic unity of mankind."  

§3 Structural Disposition and the Possibility of a Shared Humanity

It is the representation of qualities of feeling and thought on the painted surface that enables us to identify an underlying structural disposition of mind, one that provides the sense of 'unity' that Schapiro is commenting on. We can regard these characteristic qualities as emblematic of that basic structure and thus also of a shared humanity. This is an emphasis that is also the mark of the writing of Adrian Stokes. As Stokes writes,

In regard to the kind of expressiveness with which I am principally concerned, the framework required for communication is foremost the sharing with the artist and his patron of the human state, of body and mind in aspects that are held not to have varied for many thousands of years.

However, the structure that underpins Stokes's thought has a psychological character rather than the philosophical character that informed Schapiro's. Stokes writes that "The process of living is an externalisation, a turning outward into definite form of inner ferment, hence the mirror to living which art is, hence the significance of art..." For Stokes, all commerce with the world, including art, is characterised by our elemental psychological processes and structures inflecting the product of such commerce with qualities of thought and feeling through which we understand ourselves to be human.

Stokes identifies these as emblematic qualities, as qualities based on an expressively subjective structure that exemplifies the idea of humanity. He claims art in this way can be

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understood as "...the symbol of all expression, of the turning of subject into object...".22 Having read Freud’s texts and having undergone psychoanalysis with Melanie Klein, Stokes was well aware of the psychological structures and ideas of both, and it is Freud’s dynamic theory of mind as it was employed by Melanie Klein that informs and provides an ongoing theme in his writing.23

In his writing Freud outlined a dynamic theory of mind and claimed of it, "...if the differentiation we have made of the mind into an id, an ego, and a super-ego represents any advance in our knowledge, it ought to enable us to understand more thoroughly the dynamic relations within the mind..."24 As a dynamic structure Freud believed these agencies operated together in an active relational balance determining all activities of life for all humans. For him the process of psychoanalysis was a way to disclose the relational properties of the three operating agencies in the underlying dynamic structure of mind. In its universal nature and relational properties, Freud’s dynamic structure of mind is similar to the Kantian structure that underpins Schapiro’s writing.

Melanie Klein’s structural theories are closely associated with those of Freud. She was however, an original researcher and thinker and her views and emphasis was on the psychological development of children. Her observation of children led her to confirm and elaborate on Freud’s dynamic structure. As Hanna Segal comments on the connection between Klein and Freud’s theories, Klein “...developed further the structural theory throwing new light on the origin, composition and functioning of the superego.”25

25 Hanna Segal, Klein, (Fontana Modern Masters, 1979, Great Britain), p. 11.
While doing so she was advancing her development of new techniques in child analysis and her understanding of object relations. For instance, in evaluating an individual's relationship to objects Freud considered the actual objects involved to be of minor importance, concentrating instead on the tensions caused by instinctual sexual energy, whereas Klein's focus was more on those objects involved in the relationships. This difference in focus led her to develop her object-relation theories, theories that differ from the ideas of Freud, even though they are based on the same dynamic structure he had discovered earlier.  

Klein's theory of object-relations distinguished between two central operating positions, that of the depressive position and the paranoid-schizoid position. As Richard Wollheim explains, these were names,

...not to be taken as indicating that the positions are in themselves psychotic. On the contrary, they are part of normal development, though they are related (like the phases of sexual development that Freud identified) in several significant ways to the disturbances of adult life.

Klein's object-relation theories were dependent on Freud's dynamic structure of mind while providing an additional understanding of infantile development that was inaccessible through his theories and techniques. In the thoughts of both Freud and Klein though, the dynamic psychological structure can be regarded as having a capacity for a structural disposition of mind similar to that of the Kantian structure of mind, once again allowing for and expecting difference in the output generated by that structure.

In his critical writing Stokes identified two opposing traditions in art: that of 'carving' and 'modelling'. In order to explain the emblematic qualities he discerned in art he linked

27 Her use of the word ‘position’ was an intentional departure from Freud’s term ‘phase’ and the associated phases of the libido that Freud described such as the oral, anal and genital phases of development. The term ‘position’ is used to describe a position in relation to an object, one that Klein believed was more fundamental even than Freud’s phases.
29 Stokes first identified the concepts of carving and modelling in *The Quattro Cento* which can be found in Volume One of *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes*, (London, 1978), they were however, conceptions that he used and refined throughout his critical writing. By Volume Three the association he made to Klein's psychological positions were much more explicit.
these modes of artistic endeavour with the object-relation positions Klein had described. To this end he aligned carving with the depressive position, whereby the carving tradition and carver is thought of as,

...respecting the integrity and the separateness of the stone, celebrates at once the whole object with which he characteristically enters into relation and also the integrated ego that he projects.30

With this in mind the ‘carved’ work of art can be understood as an object in which the integrity of its wholeness has not been disrupted. For Stokes painted examples maintaining the integrity of the object were to be found in the works of Piero della Francesca. In his writing of the homogeneous character of Piero’s paintings he described the inter-relationship between the elements as revealing the “family of things”31, and of there being an even emphasis across the surface, a “homogeneity of space”32. He states of the character of Piero’s paintings,

In his case we can not speak of a background to figures: the relationship is far too positive. His background colours and even textures are often carried into an (on the picture plane) adjacent foreground form of an entirely different character.33

Stokes related his conception of the modelling tradition to Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position, most easily recognised by being the polar opposite of the carving mode. The artist working in the modelling mode is makes demands of his material, manipulating it without regard for the medium, imposing forms on it in a manner that does not maintain the sense of that material’s wholeness or integrity. Modelled works do not stand alone easily as separate or whole entities: the formal elements compete for attention. As Stokes explains, “...the colours, forms and stresses are far more disjointed...”34. For him the modelled works were characterised by contrasting elements, a sense unease, of non-homogeneity of surface.

33 Stokes (op. cit. 1978), Vol. II, p. 41
By associating the artistic traditions of carving and modelling to Klein’s psychological positions Stokes was better able to articulate the human qualities he recognised and valued, qualities he described as serving as emblems of humanity. He identified them with psychological qualities that are generated from a structural disposition of mind. For him, “All artistic creation is like the perfect flower that shows by a certain still shape the stress and strain of roots, the gradual cycle of its nurture. Art is the face of mankind, the symbol of living...” and it is this emphasis that provides an overriding theme in Stokes’ critical writing. Through his conception of the association between art and life he was considering art in a psychological and humanised way.

For both Schapiro and Stokes then, a painting is seen as a recognisably humanised artefact, a construction whereby the physical putting together of colours and forms on a surface represents qualities of feelings and thought. The subtlety of their thinking is that the structures of a painting indicate, as already discussed, a dispositional structure of mind. A painting in this sense is not understood as a vehicle for the expression of a particular emotion such as joy or sadness, indicating an individual’s inner experience in terms of specific emotions experienced. Rather, Schapiro and Stokes recognise the artefact as reflective of a structural model characteristic of all humanity, independent of particular circumstances and vicissitudes.

With this understanding of the humanity of art, wherein paintings have emblematic qualities and can be understood as humanised artefacts, it comes as no surprise that our regard for an art object such as a painting is more like that of our regard for other human beings than for inanimate objects. As Stanley Cavell comments of our reaction to art,

...objects of art not merely interest and absorb, they move us; we are not merely involved with them, but concerned with them, and care about them; we treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve only for other people — and with the same kind of scorn and outrage.

36 There is a kind of ambiguity and confusion that arises from not understanding this distinction clearly. For instance the confusion and mystique caused by the comments of Mark Rothko that “I’m only interested in expressing basic human emotions — tragedy, ecstasy, doom ...” Quoted in Anna Chave, Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction, (Yale University Press, 1989), p. 188 and also in Schapiro, p. 200.
They mean something to us, not just the way statements do but the way people do.\textsuperscript{37}

What Cavell is describing in this comment is our reaction to the human qualities we recognise in art objects; that as a result of our recognition of those sensations we afford objects of art special status. The significance of art for Cavell, as it is for Schapiro and Stokes, lies in this representation of humanity.

It is this special status and our recognition of human qualities in art that leads Schapiro to write of the concrete structure of a painting as one that conveys an underlying order that is "...a known order, familiar and reassuring."\textsuperscript{38} What Schapiro is alluding to is again that it is a basic structure that is being recognised; a structure that will be familiar or known in the sense that it founds our own thinking. In the same spirit Kant maintained that art provided "...the faculty of being able to communicate universally one's inmost self..."\textsuperscript{39}, whereby the encounter with art is one that provides insight or affirms the properties of the self, of our disposition. Similarly Stokes claimed that "Art opposes self-concealment; painting should reveal its student."\textsuperscript{40} And these authors are of course not alone in their thinking, and there are other instances of written responses to art that are similar in kind; Oscar Wilde for one wrote that, "It is art, and art only that reveals us to ourselves..."\textsuperscript{41}. Walter Pater too, in asking "What is this ... to me?"\textsuperscript{42} focuses our awareness on human qualities, toward a recognition of a structural disposition of mind in our commerce with the world. What these authors are all suggesting is that through the recognition of structural dispositions in the art that we view, we will better recognise our own structural disposition.

\textsuperscript{37} Stanley Cavell, \textit{Must We Mean What We Say?} 'Music Discomposed', (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 197-198.
\textsuperscript{38} Schapiro (op. cit. 1995), p. 17.
\textsuperscript{39} Kant (op. cit. 1959), p. 226.
\textsuperscript{40} Stokes (op. cit. 1978), Vol. III, p. 236.
\textsuperscript{42} Pater (op. cit. 1998), p. XXIX.
§4 Qualities of Thought and Feeling in Painting

For Schapiro, Stokes and Cavell, painting is a recognisably humanised artefact, a construction which can be understood as standing as an ‘analogue’ of human thought and feeling, whereby the particular structures of a painting exemplify the idea of a structural disposition of mind. It is because they understand painting as an analogue of human thought and feeling, as corresponding to familiar qualities of thought and feeling, that Schapiro is able to argue for the humanity of art, that Stokes is able to talk of the emblematic character of art and Cavell is able to raise the status of the art object to a level which usually we afford only to people.

Consider the way an analogue works. It conveys those relationships that cannot be seen by the eye; relationships that can only be understood by the mind. It does this by generating a form of correspondence or association between the elements; by forming a connective relationship between those elements, by the paralleling of similar qualities. For instance, an analogue watch can be understood as an analogue of the passage of time. There is no visible resemblance or correspondence between a watch and time, yet as an analogue of time a watch parallels one particular quality of time; its movement. In this way the spatial movement of the hands of a watch parallels the temporal movement of passing time.

Consider then the example of a painting understood as an analogue of human thought and feeling. The painting does not directly reveal the qualities of human thought and feeling, rather the painted forms are structured such that they lead us to think of the idea of those qualities; they in some way parallel or analogue those qualities. That the physical structure of the painting does not visibly mirror the inner structure of mind in some diagrammatic form is not problematic, as the painting is not presenting a structure that reveals a correspondence through likeness of form. Rather there is a correspondence through the sense of relational connection of the mind with the painting. In this way the structure and representational nature of the medium of a painting invokes the idea of, or corresponds to, qualities of thought and feeling generated by a structural disposition of mind.
Schapiro claims that the "Humanity in art is therefore not confined to the image of man. Man shows himself too in his relation to the surroundings, in his artefacts, and in the expressive character of all the signs and marks he produces."43 One way to understand this is to think of a painting in terms of its being an analogue of the human qualities of thought and feeling – as a representation of humanity. One of the more obvious parallels that can be made here is a correspondence between the protean character of human thought and feeling and the protean character of art. And this is what we recognise when looking at the diversity of artworks produced. The relational operation of the components that make up the philosophical and psychological structures of mind discussed allow for and in fact demand different structural dispositions of mind, and it is the employment of different structural dispositions of mind in the production of art that ensure diversity in the paintings produced.

Schapiro writes, "Abstract painting is clearly open to a great span of expression; it is practiced differently by many temperaments, a fact that by itself challenges the idea of its inhumanity."44 The many temperaments or variety of dispositions Schapiro cites as stemming from a common structure of mind, go some way to account for the vast array of styles in art, even within a specific genre such as abstract art in which there are such vastly different paintings, from Jackson Pollock's 'action' splatter paintings, to the soft edged forms painted by Mark Rothko, to the more geometric forms that Milan Mrkusich paints.

At the same time there will be a recognisable steadiness of disposition in the oeuvre of one artist, a steadiness that manifests itself as a familiarly recurring quality of thought in his or her work. A dispositional structure of mind, such as either of those proposed by Kant or Freud, are structures that work in a constant state of relational balance, whereby the operational components are utilised in constantly varying proportions, whether in the constructive activity of creating a painting or in an activity of life. It is an overriding structural disposition of mind that dictates the balance of the operating components, that directs an allegiance to one thing rather than another, to certain ideas rather than others.

It is in these terms that abstract art, like the paintings produced by Milan Mrkusich, can be understood as humanist, as inflected by the qualities of thought and feeling of the artist – qualities that instantiate a dispositional structure of mind. Allowing for and acknowledging these qualities in our experience of painting encourages an account of it that is more than an assessment of the purely formal elements. This in turn broadens the scope for understanding and explaining the meaningfulness experienced when looking at particular works of art.
Chapter Two

Seeing a Painting

The focus of discussion in the first chapter of this thesis was the claim by Meyer Schapiro that there is ‘humanity’ in abstract art, that “It is the painter’s constructive activity, his power of impressing a work with the feeling and the qualities of thought that gives humanity to art”\(^{45}\). In this chapter, to take a different approach to the idea of humanity in painting, the claim that I want to make is that the experience of seeing a painting, any genre of painting, reveals to us the workings of our cognitive faculties; namely those faculties that, in Kant’s sense, define our humanity. An interpretative ground can be found for this claim in Richard Wollheim’s essay ‘On Formalism and Pictorial Organisation’, and the related book *On Formalism and its Kinds* because in these texts, what Wollheim draws attention to, is a particular element in our seeing a painting – any painting – whether pictorial or abstract, namely its representational nature.

Underpinning Wollheim’s critical method is the notion that all art is representational. This stems from his identification of the twofold nature of our capacity to ‘see-in’ a painting, a technical term which I will explore shortly, that draws attention to our ability to be aware of the marks of paint on the two-dimensional surface, as well as their representational value: that is, our seeing forms in three-dimensional terms, as represented ‘things’. For Wollheim it is an interplay of the cognitive faculties that allows us to construe the flat pigments as having form, a process of seeing that is unique to the visual arts such as painting, drawing, graphic imagery, and film.

The perceptual image arising from the two-dimensional surface supplies us with further imaginative data for our aesthetic experience. It is the faculty of the imagination that

enables the two-dimensional marks of paint to represent three-dimensions, even in the instance of abstract painting such as that produced by Milan Mrkusich. However, the extra dimension supplied by the workings of the imagination have not been part of conventional formalist analyses – and by conventional formalism I mean the kind of analyses advanced by early twentieth century formalist Clive Bell and his counterpart Roger Fry – as their methods limit the investigation to the two-dimensional structures, to those lines and shapes that can, for instance, be traced from the painting onto a sheet of glass.

In his text *Art*, Clive Bell discussed the nature of the aesthetic experience as a "purely subjective business" but paradoxically his analytical methods can be characterised as ‘objective’. He believed there was an essential quality in the formal structures of a painting, a quality he called ‘Significant Form’, and it was this he held responsible for provoking the aesthetic response in the spectator.

Bell’s analytical methods focused on the formal structures of a painting and ignored the representational features as – *ex hypothesi* – irrelevant to the explanation of painting. On this basis, the task of explaining a painting had become a limited task, an objective process attempting to explain a subjective experience. It is this limited kind of analysis that may well be the cause of the inadequate and unsatisfactory nature of conventional formalist criticism.

In contrast, it is by way of Wollheim’s understanding of the representational nature of painting, of the involvement of the mental faculties of the experiencing subject, that he provides an expanded formalist account of painting that includes the perceptual contribution of the spectator as they see a painting. The extra dimension of apparent depth contributed by the spectator enabled a fuller exploration of the painted form that included both the surface values (two-dimensional) and the representational values created by the marks of paint on the surface. With the inclusion of the perceptual contribution to the qualities of a painting Wollheim was advancing a subjective kind of formalism, one

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founded on a particular capacity related to the way in which we visually organise our experience. Wollheim’s attention to the perceptual contribution we make to the experience of seeing a painting in this way was in the same spirit, is founded on a similar relational structure of mind, as Kant’s a priori characterisation of those faculties of the mind responsible for organising experience so that it can be known.

Wollheim’s inclusion of the subject’s perceptual experience of ‘seeing’ a painting in the explanation of that painting broadens the data available for analysis, drawing upon the fundamental phenomenological character of our experience in response to that medium. A formalist account of painting that includes this material is a more satisfactory explanation in the sense that it endeavours to explain all of the experience of seeing a particular painting, not just one aspect of that experience. It is in light of the inescapable ‘twofold’ character – as Wollheim characterises the phenomenon – of seeing painting that the formal considerations, even those of abstract painting, can be understood as embracing a sense of the human condition: namely, its subjectivity, through the constant referral to and exercise of our perceptual and mental faculties.

§1 Conventional Formalism

The theories and conventions advanced by Clive Bell as a system of aesthetics were intended to clarify the aesthetic experience for the spectator.47 As already stated, his method was paradoxical in the sense that he discussed the nature of the aesthetic experience as a “purely subjective business”, and also claimed, “a system of aesthetics can have no objective validity”48, both statements fixing the aesthetic processes and faculties as belonging to the subject experiencing the art object.

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47 Bell (op. cit. 1958), p. 16-17.
Bell continued in this vein with the claim that "...forms arranged and combined according to certain unknown and mysterious laws do move us in a particular way..."\(^{49}\), highlighting the relationship between the experiencing subject and the physical object in the experience of art. However, Bell believed that the aesthetic experience occurred as a result of an intrinsic factor that belonged to the art object – a belief that reveals him as an essentialist. He contended that there was a specific physical element common to all paintings responsible for the aesthetic response of the subject, one that defined the object as an art object. Of this element he stated, "...it is essential. There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist..."\(^{50}\) As a result of this belief, the formalism practised by Bell was of the kind that focused on extracting this factor from the object under scrutiny, and in a painting this meant looking for a feature amongst its formal elements.

But there is a paradox here. Bell’s type of formal analysis, and its preoccupation with the physical form of the object had no concern for the perceptual or representational values, and could be characterised as an objective analytical process. Yet, this seems to be at odds with his initial claim that "a system of aesthetics can have no objective validity"\(^{51}\). It would seem logical when subscribing to a system of aesthetics based on subjective values, that those values be investigated too. But this was not the case.

Bell hypothesised that ‘Significant Form’ was the “quality common and peculiar to all the objects”\(^{52}\), that it was the Significant Form of a painting that provoked the aesthetic emotion in the spectator. It was for this reason that Bell’s analysis of painting was structured to scan the purely formal qualities of a painting, and ex hypothesi, did not involve the non-formal or representational values in art. Bell’s analytical method put the representational values of a painting to one side as a kind of ornamentation or distraction from the surface nuances and formal structures that housed the significant form; he was only occupied with the formal “relations and combinations of lines and colours”\(^{53}\).

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\(^{50}\) Bell (op. cit. 1958), p. 17.
\(^{51}\) Bell (op. cit. 1958), p. 18.
\(^{52}\) Bell (op. cit. 1958), p. 17.
While it could be said of painting that this is the intrinsic nature of the medium – Piero the consummate rationalist virtually does in his assertion that, “painting is nothing but the demonstration of surfaces and volumes diminished and enlarged upon the picture-plane”\(^{54}\), and also Ad Reinhardt who claimed of his own painting there was, “for me no fooling the eye, no window-hole-in-the-wall, no illusions, no representations…”\(^{55}\). Yet the problem with this particular stand in relation to painting is that it refuses to engage with the representational nature of our experience of painting, with our perceptual responses to the formal elements we see. Painting has always involved the use of coloured forms on a two-dimensional surface however, we see the formal elements in a way that inescapably produces an image, as some sort of representation, an ‘image in form’, to use Adrian Stokes phrase.\(^{56}\) Conventional formalism evades precisely this fundamental characteristic of our experience of painting.

It should be noted that while Bell gave a general definition of Significant Form, he did not offer anything more specific than “…lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms stir our aesthetic emotions…”\(^{57}\); there was nothing determinate in what he was suggesting. When writing of Cézanne, his discussion of the painting is obscured by his aesthetic theories, for instance he wrote, “Cézanne set himself to create forms… Everything can be seen as pure form, and behind pure form lurks the mysterious significance that thrills to ecstasy…”\(^{58}\), and in this he seems more intent on validating his theory of Significant Form than on analysing the painting. This emphasis on the theoretical is an emphasis that colours all his writing and prompts the thought that the


\(^{56}\) This phrase comes from a lecture Adrian Stokes gave called ‘The Image in Form’ in which he was concerned with our perceptual experience of art and asserted in that essay, “formal relationships themselves entail a representation or imagery of their own though these likenesses are not as explicit as the images we obtain from what we call subject matter”. Stokes (*op. cit. 1978*), Vol. III, p. 331.

\(^{57}\) Bell (*op. cit. 1958*), p. 17.

\(^{58}\) Bell (*op. cit. 1958*), p 140.
theory he put forward was an ideal that was difficult to apply, a condition that might account for the lack of critical work that Bell undertook.\textsuperscript{59}

Bell’s formalist theories meant there was a large portion of subjective information not investigated, assumed \textit{ex hypothesi} not to be relevant in a formalist analysis. On this basis, the task of explaining a painting had become a limited task, one in which the parameters were severely restricted to this formal aspect of painting. The consequence of this limited enquiry was that it produced an equally limited explanation, as the explanation could not exceed the parameters of that inquiry. Under such restrictions, conventional formalism could produce no more than a descriptive account of what lay on the canvas. While these kinds of analyses are able to draw attention to previously unnoticed features of the painting, they can be dry, barren accounts of the paintings under scrutiny, with the descriptions bearing little relevance to the experience of seeing them, to their meaningfulness or aesthetic appeal.

The critical application of such a focus was, as Richard Wollheim revealed in his essay \textit{On Formalism and its Kinds}\textsuperscript{60}, difficult. Theoretically it seems plausible to envisage extracting the formal structures from an image, and Wollheim discusses a method of applying a sheet of glass over a painting, a procedure that would enable the formalist to mark the lines and structures of significance on that glass. Yet the method is fraught with difficulties, difficulties as fundamental as which features should be included and which should not: that is, \textit{which} painted marks are significant.

\textsuperscript{59} His counterpart, Roger Fry was more capable of applying these theories in his critical writing and was thus more specific in the details of form he drew attention to in a painting. There are, for instance, numerous examples of Fry’s critical work in \textit{Transformations: Critical and Speculative Essays on Art} (Chatto and Windus, London, 1926), yet there are none to be found in Bell’s texts. It is interesting to note however that in all instances Fry relies heavily on the representational features of the paintings, even when dismissive of these. Wollheim draws attention to one such account in his text \textit{On Formalism and its Kinds} (p. 8), Fry’s criticism of Pieter Breughel’s \textit{Christ Carrying the Cross to Calvary}. Fry uses this criticism to dismiss what he described as an illustrative aspect of painting, one “more closely akin in its essence to literature than it is to plastic art”, and through this he judges the painting to be, in plastic and spatial terms, “entirely trivial”. Yet in all his criticism he draws attention to both formal and representational features, a critical process that belies the kind of formalism that both he and Bell advocated theoretically. It is seemingly a theory that is easier be applied in a negative fashion, that is to condemn works for lacking significant form, rather than in a positive way, promoting works for the significant form that they exhibit.

\textsuperscript{60} Richard Wollheim, \textit{Formalism and its Kinds} (Fundacio Antoni Tapias, Barcelona, 1995), this essay was published in an amended form in 2001 in \textit{The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism} as ‘On Formalism and Pictorial Organisation’ (Volume 59, No. 2, Spring 2001), pp. 127-137.
The more pertinent difficulty, however, is that our eye will generally perceive 'something' of the resulting web of lines on the glass which is greater than and different from the mere lines and structures: a 'something' that can be described as an image. This occurs because of the perceptual abilities of the experiencing subject whereby our vision is structured to interpret two-dimensional visual information – a field of colours, lines and structures – as a representation of a three-dimensional visual field.

For Bell though, this natural capacity to interpret two-dimensions representationally, as, for instance a field of objects or representations of objects, was discounted as irrelevant, as a kind of ornamentation. He even gave this capacity a negative value when he described the representational features of a work as a distraction. To illustrate this view Bell told a story of a Japanese gentleman's response to Renaissance painting, claiming "...with their descriptive pre-occupations, their literary and anecdotic interests, he could see nothing but vulgarity and muddle." Bell used this story to claim that in these paintings the "...universal and essential quality of art, significant form, was missing, or rather had dwindled to a shallow stream, overlaid and hidden beneath the weeds, so the universal response, aesthetic emotion, was not evoked." The point that he was making was that not only were the representational values of a painting irrelevant, but they distracted from, or literally got in the way of the true source of meaning by obscuring the 'Significant Form' of the painting with extraneous clutter.

Yet, the formal analyses of painting undertaken by Bell suited the artworld of the early twentieth century as the art produced at that time was radically different from anything that had been produced before. The avant-garde – especially the French avant-garde artists – were producing works that were so foreign to most spectators, especially with the dissolution of descriptive or pictorial elements, that Bell's formalist accounts and the inherent concern for the non-representational or purely formal elements of the altered styles

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63 Here, the artists I have in mind are the Impressionists, the Cubists, and individuals such as Robert and Sonia Delaunay, and Paul Cézanne.
offered a way of approaching the new forms of art. Bell’s formalism could be seen to be actively putting into words the emphasis that the contemporary artists of that time had in their paintings; the character of the art was forcing his writing into new philosophical and critical areas.

There remained however, difficulties with the application of Bell’s kind of formalism and even he encountered difficulties in making a clear distinction between what was formal and what was non-formal or representational in a painting. The obvious differences were easily handled: representation in a painting was for him irrelevant, so that if the painting was descriptive of the world and its effects Bell did not pay attention to those representational qualities per se, he only considered the lines and colour relationships that structured them. As he wrote,

Let no one imagine that representation is bad in itself; a realistic form may be as significant, in its place as part of the design, as an abstract. But if a representative form has value, it is as form, not as representation. The representative element in a work may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant.64

Even though representational values were discounted by Bell’s formalist principles as, ex hypothesi, ‘irrelevant’ in his formal analysis, there were some instances in which the representational forms were assessed as having significant form and were thus not irrelevant. Bell recognised the problem and tried to clarify the confusion by conceding that in some cases some representational values should be allowed for within the parameters of his formal analysis. He writes, “If the representation of three-dimensional space is to be called ‘representation’, then I agree that there is one kind of representation that is not irrelevant.”65

However, the confusion remained, indeed it might be said it was compounded with these remarks. Even Bell’s closest counterpart, Roger Fry, distanced himself from the altered

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64 Bell (op. cit. 1958), p. 27.
65 Bell (op. cit. 1958), p. 28.
view. He claimed in his essay ‘Retrospect’, that Clive Bell’s “…view seemed to go too far since any, even the slightest suggestion, of the third dimension in a picture must be due to some element of representation” and thus be irrelevant to the kind of formalism he practised. Fry was railing against the concessions Bell made to the limitations imposed by the rigid parameters of the formalism he had promoted previously. Apparently Bell now recognised and included some of the effects generated through our perceptual abilities: he seemed to have conceded what, we shall see, – as Wollheim is arguing strongly, and that all kinds of art, including abstract art, generate representations of an image: that inescapably there is an image in form.

§2 Wollheim’s Perceptual Psychologising of the Experience of Painting

Wollheim’s focus is a philosophical counterpart of Kant’s a priori characterisation of those faculties of the mind responsible for organising experience so that it can be known. While Kant deployed this characterisation to outline the aesthetic determination in the experience of art, Wollheim recognised the involvement of the mental faculties in the perceptual experience of art as the foundation for his contention that all art is representational. It was this recognition that established a broadened range of data in his formalist accounts of paintings.

Wollheim’s identification of the twofold nature of our ability to ‘see-in’ a painting is an identification of our ability to be aware simultaneously of the marks of paint on the two-dimensional surface, as well as their representational value: that is, our seeing the image in form, or forms as represented ‘things’. For Wollheim it is the interplay of the cognitive faculties that construes the flat pigments as having representational form, a process that

66 Roger Fry, a contemporary formalist who worked closely and until this issue, in a complimentary fashion with Bell’s formalism. Fry was the stronger theorist and critic of the two, yet Bell’s writing offers a clearer expression of their complimentary views. However, even in Bell’s writing, the theories were not particularly clear and logical; as Malcolm Budd observed in his book Values of Art: Pictures, poetry and painting, they had “… an idiosyncratic form and with a notable absence of arguments” (p. 49).

stems from our experience of negotiating and interpreting the raw visual data of the world into the space we occupy.

Wollheim’s philosophical and theoretical exploration of the experience of seeing a painting that highlights the inherent perceptual capacity of seeing-in and the associated phenomenological feature of twofoldness, must now be considered in order to disclose his expansion of conventional formalism and his inclusion of the subjective perceptions in his analysis of the experience of painting.

Wollheim had identified the experience of “seeing-in” a painting as a special kind of visual experience that was a kind of representational seeing. He employed this term to describe our perceptual capacity to see something in something else; to ‘see-in’ a physical structure things that are not physically present. The most straightforward illustration of this kind of perceptual seeing-in can be found in the figure/ground distinction we make: that is, we are able to perceive a single mark of paint on a flat surface as either lying in front of or behind the otherwise undifferentiated surface it is made on.

A phenomenological feature of our seeing-in is that we are able to discern both the representational image and the physical marks of paint at the same time. In the case of the figure/ground example while we see that one colour stands in front of or behind the other colour, we also see the surface as just that: a flat painted surface. Wollheim identified this dual character of seeing-in as “twofoldness”.

One consequence of twofoldness is that we are not mistaken about the experience we are participating in. Consider the experience of looking at a portrait or a figurative painting: for instance Piero della Francesca’s portrait of Federico da Montefeltro (c 1465). The experience of ‘seeing’ the painting of Federico is never mistaken for the experience of actually standing in front of him. Similarly, our experience of seeing a landscape painting

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70 Piero della Francesca, *Dipych Portraits of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, (c 1465).
such as Grahame Sydney’s *Boundary Road, Ida Valley* (1997), is also different from the experience of actually standing looking at the view while in the Ida Valley. In both examples the kind of seeing that we are involved in when looking at painting is inescapably twofold: we are aware of the two-dimensional surface qualities *at the same time as* the representational or three-dimensional qualities that we perceive of those surface configurations.

It is the awareness of medium in the experience of looking at a painting that stops the experience from becoming an illusory experience. That the spectator does not mistake the portrait of Federico to be that of the person Federico is because the process of looking does not involve an illusion, understood here to be a false belief or conception of what is seen.\(^7^1\) The process of seeing this painting is a twofold experience, the spectator aware of the medium of the painting under scrutiny at the same time as they are aware of the representational image of Federico.

There is however, an exception to the twofold experience of looking at painting, in the genre of trompe l’oeil painting in which the artist attempts to minimise the awareness of the medium in the process of looking at painting, to the point that the experience is one of an *illusion*. Arthur Danto states, “If illusion is to occur, the viewer cannot be conscious of any properties that really belong to the medium, for to the degree that we perceive that it is a medium, illusion is effectively aborted.”\(^7^2\) In the instance of a trompe l’oeil painting such as Edward Collier’s *Quod Libet* (1701), the artist aims to trick the eye of the spectator into mistakenly believing that what is being looked at is a framed note board, with a collection of folded paper and various other items tucked into three leather straps. The technique and composition of the painting aim to preserve this belief. To this end, there are no obvious brush marks that draw attention to the literal surface of the canvas and the objects depicted are all flat and placed in a way that would be expected of a real note board. Yet as soon as the ‘trick to the eye’ of the spectator has been revealed, the illusion is broken, and the

\(^{71}\) *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 705. Illusion is defined as “the faulty perception of an external object.”

experience of seeing even the most convincing trompe l’oeil painting becomes inescapably twofold no matter how hard the spectator tries to reclaim the illusion.

In order to make Wollheim’s distinction of the twofold nature of our seeing-in clearer, the term ‘representation’ needs to be considered. Wollheim’s use of the term is very specific, having none of the ambiguous meanings assigned to it in recent art writing. For instance some art writers contrast pictorial painting, the painting of figures, landscapes and other worldly objects, with non-representational art, inferring by this use that non-representational means something akin to non-objective or non figurative or abstract. 73 Involved in this use of the term is the presumption that abstract art does not represent. While it may be true to claim of abstract art that it does not represent content that in some way equates to the spaces and objects of the world, it is not valid to claim that it does not represent, that there is no image to be derived from the form.

Malcolm Budd made a claim in his book *Values of Art*, that “Three things are true of any representational picture: it is a pictorial representation; it has a specific representational content; and it represents its content in a certain manner determined by the non-representational character of the picture surface.” 74 Yet to write of a ‘representational picture’ begs the question: what is a painting if it is not a representation? Consider again the figure ground distinction we make of the single mark of paint on a surface. Even in such an uncomplicated instance we see the mark of paint as representing either the figure or the ground: as the surface lying in front of or beyond the mark of paint. By calling attention to a classification of painting such as ‘representational painting’ Budd is losing sight of the fundamental nature of painting, choosing instead to use the word loosely as meaning something akin to the term ‘pictorial’ or ‘figurative’: as defining those paintings that depict the spaces and objects of the world. Wollheim’s employment of the word ‘representation’ is quite different from this, as his usage of the word specifically indicates the perceptual experience we have when looking at paintings.

73 An instance of this is in an essay by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe called ‘The Current State of Nonrepresentation’ in *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. by Frances Colpitt (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.119-129.
In light of Wollheim’s specific meaning for the word representation, his claim that “form cannot be identified without reference to representational content”\textsuperscript{75} can be more easily understood as a further refining of the notion of seeing-in. He maintains that seeing the physical surface and ‘seeing-in’ the three-dimensional representation are inextricably connected and unable to exist as separate entities. In practical terms he appears to be right. Take the example noted in the previous section of trying to extract the pure form of a painting using a process such as (or similar to) applying a sheet of glass over a painted surface in order to trace its visible lines. It is not possible to see the resulting formal structure without experiencing some sort of representational ‘seeing-in’ effect. Even an uncomplicated array of lines cannot escape imagistic representational possibilities.\textsuperscript{76}

Theoretically though, and a feature that tends to confuse the twofold idea of seeing-in, is that each aspect of the process can be described in a way that makes it appear to be a discrete experience completely separate from the other. Conventional formalist analyses provide an example in which the physical two-dimensional structures and colours could be discussed without reference to the perceptual experiences that were generated by and enriched those same structures. It is not that the experience the conventional formalists were having was not twofold in character; it was merely that they chose not to report the experience in its entirety, as they considered the representational features irrelevant to their analyses.

Another example of descriptions distorting the twofold nature of a painting is at the other end of the scale, where only the representational features are considered. The majority of pre-twentieth century criticism involved this imbalance in which discussion of the representational image takes priority over any inflection that is made on the canvas: the narrative nature of the representation of religious scenes, or heroic deeds or mythical texts.

\textsuperscript{75}Wollheim (op. cit. 1995), p. 12. This is also cited in the later and slightly revised version of this essay ‘On Formalism and Pictorial Organisation’, Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Volume 59, No. 2, Spring 2001, p. 131.

\textsuperscript{76}It was this character of painting that Bell appeared to have identified and conceded (as described earlier) by his admission that the representational considerations went beyond the purely physical formal considerations he had previously espoused.
what Alberti referred to as the istoria\textsuperscript{77}, takes precedence over the formal features. This was the case in Cephalus and Aurora (1631-2) in which Poussin represented a scene from the story told by Ovid in his text Metamorphosis, in which Cephalus rejects the goddess Aurora's love.\textsuperscript{78} The weight of information to be taken from the painted narrative means that the emphasis of most analyses tends to consider only this aspect of the painting.

In some instances the artists seem to have actively worked to achieve and accentuate this particular imbalance by minimising the inflections in order to not disrupt the image. This is seen for instance in the idealised realism of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres in a painting such as his Portrait of Madame Rivière (1806), where the figure was depicted in such a smoothly modelled fashion as not to draw attention to the painted nature of the object.

There are of course, extremes of this technique and Wollheim did consider that there were exceptions in which the experience of a painting was not twofold in character. As he noted,

...there are certain abstract paintings that are non-representational for the reason that they do not call for awareness of depth, there are also paintings that are non-representational for the complementary reason, or because they do not invoke, indeed they repel, attention to the marked surface.\textsuperscript{79}

He illustrated these distinctions with first, Barnett Newman's Vir Heroicus Sublimis (1951) as one instance of a painting that was non-representational because of its undifferentiated surface and he also drew attention to trompe l'oeil paintings as a genre not characterised by twofoldness, as it repelled the spectator's attention to the marked surface.

Parenthetically however, it should be noted though that there seems to be some underlying restriction of aesthetic awareness in Wollheim. One obvious point to be made is that while Wollheim is unable to interpret Newman's Vir Heroicus Sublimis as having any representational aspect, he seems to have ignored the perceptual effects of the zips on the hard, impenetrable surface of this work, the perception that there is some depth, that his marks of paint do generate an image. Wollheim also makes similar critical remarks about


\textsuperscript{78} Ovid, Metamorphosis, Trs. Mary M Innes (Penguin, St. Ives), Book Three, p. 83-87.

\textsuperscript{79} Wollheim (op. cit. 1998), p. 62.
the painting of Ad Reinhardt in his essay 'Minimalism', in which he claims that the form of a painting like Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting* (c1960-66) is so undifferentiated as to destroy any representational image in that form. However, while it would be true to say of this work, and other works of this kind, that the image is not as complex or differentiated as that of a pictorial scene, it is not true to say that it does not represent, that there is no image to be derived from its form. In Reinhardt's *Untitled Black* (1962) for instance the blocks of colour do stand in relationship with the others, so that there can be perceived a cross formation in which the horizontal band lies across and in front of the vertical one. What Wollheim's comments alert his readers to, is not that there are limits to representation, but rather that there are limits to his own and others' aesthetic awareness in 'seeing' a painting.

Through the phenomenon of twofoldness Wollheim is bringing together two disparate elements in such a way as to draw attention to the subjectivity of the experience of seeing a painting. Where previous commentators had kept the two elements separate, Wollheim draws them together highlighting their complicity in the same experience. Not only does this highlight the 'strangeness' or 'special' nature of 'seeing' visual art, but it does so in a way that also draws attention to the experience as a human one, one that is constructed from our subjectivity, from the imaginative contribution our cognitive faculties bring to the experience.

The twofold nature that Wollheim argues for – for the dual nature of the experience of seeing a painting – binds the formal qualities of the painting to the representational imagery as one integrated experience. It is this that animates his critical investigations and distinguishes his formal analyses from that of his predecessors.

Kenneth Clark was a predecessor who maintained the experience of painting was not a twofold experience, that our perception of any representational features of a painting

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81 'Imaginative' in the Kantian transcendental sense of the word. For Kant the imagination had an empirical and a transcendental function. We can control its empirical function when we use our imagination to conjure possibilities. We do not control the transcendental function of the imagination, which in this instance, is its capacity to generate a figure/ground perception from a flat surface to see a three-dimensional image in a two-dimensional form.
remained separate from our awareness of the physical marks of paint. In his discussion of Velasquez’s *Las Meninas* for instance, he claims that, dependent on his distance from the painting, he will either see it as the representation of the figures and their setting, or, if closer to the painting, he will see the marks of paint. As such the premise for a discussion such as this, is one that is at odds with the dual nature of the experience of seeing a painting that Wollheim draws attention to.

Hubert Damisch similarly claims that representational seeing is unsustainable alongside what he described as ‘material seeing’. He claimed:

...a portrait, a landscape, a form only allows itself to be recognized in painting insofar as we cease to view the painting for what it is, materially speaking, and insofar as consciousness steps back in relation to reality to produce as an image the object represented...

However, that the representational image of a painting is understood to be just that and is not mistaken for the object represented requires a consciousness of the surface qualities of the medium of painting: requires the experience of seeing a painting to be twofold.

At this point I should like briefly to consider some examples, with Wollheim’s twofold notion of the experience of our seeing a painting in mind.

If we look again at his essay ‘On Formalism and Pictorial Organisation’, we find a brief analysis of *The Castle of Egmond* by Jacob Ruisdael. Wollheim’s critical analysis is particularly satisfying in the sense that the discussion he undertakes combines both the representational imagery and the formal features in a way that matches the single, but twofold, experience we have when seeing this work. He relates the formal features of the painting to the representational imagery in a way that binds them together. For instance he claims, “…the spectator will be disconcerted by a strange imbalance in the picture…” an imbalance he describes in terms of a line that “seems to divide the interesting near-half of the picture, which lies to the left, from the uninteresting near-half of the picture, which lies

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82 This discussion can be found in Kenneth Clark’s *Looking At Pictures* (London, 1972), p. 31-40 and in Ernst Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion* (Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 5.
83 Hubert Damisch cited in *Painting As Model* by Yves-Alain Bois (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1990), p. 247.
84 This essay is the updated version of the text *On Formalism and its Kinds*.
to the right.” While he is here noting a formal imbalance, it is one he believes can be corrected by a closer look at the representational aspect of the painting. To this end he encourages the spectator to look closely at the features they ‘see’ within the painting, to take time to sense the constituents as they relate together, attempting to balance, for themselves, the formal imbalance he described.

Jacob van Ruisdael, *The Castle of Egmond* (1650-60).

Wollheim then offers a possible solution: namely, that the initial structural imbalance sensed may be balanced when the representational features belonging to each side are accounted for. He describes a small portion of the painting situated to the right side of the perceived demarcation line, a cottage and rural setting, and asks, “Does this equal the drama of the castle and its stormy setting?” In allowing the viewers to check for themselves whether this is or is not the case, he is encouraging them to bring the two aspects together – the physical or two-dimensional and the representational image – to make use of the twofold experience that they have when they ‘see’ this painting.
In another example, this time Piero della Francesca’s *Brera Madonna*, the twofold nature of painting explains an uncharacteristic lack of symmetry that is at first glance quite puzzling. Kneeling in the right foreground is the figure of Federico da Montefeltro. There is however no figure on the left that balances his form and the painting seems to be structurally weighted to the right. Further investigation of the painting however, reveals a feature that redresses this structural imbalance; that is the representation of the ostrich egg hanging from the tip of the scallop shell ceiling decoration. The egg symbolically represents the cycle of life, and in this instance can be understood to be a pointed reminder of Federico’s recently deceased wife Battista Sforza. With this thought the empty space opposite Federico is now filled with her absence, indicating the void and imbalance that has been created in his life. Again, understanding seeing a painting to be a twofold experience enables a representational feature to explain a formal imbalance.

In the case of seeing abstract art the nature of the experience is the same: that is, it is a twofold experience. For example, consider the experience of ‘seeing’ Milan Mrkusich’s *Journey One (Second Version)* (1986). This work comprises five large differently sized coloured panels, irregularly positioned slightly lower or above those panels on either side. Because of its scale it is not a work that can be easily taken in at a glance, rather it is a work to be physically walked past. Each panel is a different hue, but all have similarly textured surfaces, with suffused and swirling layers of slightly varied tones building up an overall colour. One obvious question arises from this structure, and that is, how to understand the irregular placement of these panels and the resultant destruction of the integrity of edge and threat to the integrity of the object that this poses. Further attention to the colours – as we see them separately and as they relate to the adjacent colours and as they relate to the irregular structure – however suggests that each of these panels take on relatively different positions of depth from each other. For example we perceive the red standing forward of the blue and orange, the white forward of the yellow. The representational image of the entire work takes the eye on a journey, a journey intimated in Mrkusich’s title, in which we visually move in and out of the depths of each colour through
a structural and chromatic journey in which the representational nature of colour maintains
the integrity of edge and thus the integrity of object.

Given that our perceptual capacities and cognitive responses are an integral part of the
experience of seeing a painting, determining what we representationally ‘see-in’ each
painting – all painting, including abstract works – can now be thought to embrace a sense
of the human condition, of our humanity, through the constant referral to and exercise of
our mental faculties. Our ability to perceive a representational image from a two­
dimensional formal structure can be regarded as a highly distinctive and essentially
integrated experience. By drawing attention to the twofold nature of that experience,
Wollheim highlights the perceptual and cognitive contribution we as humans bring to that
experience. In this way he advances an expanded formalism that is a coherent combination
of both the representational image and formal qualities involved in the experience of seeing
a painting; a formalism that will animate the discussion we have of abstract painting, most
particularly for my purposes that produced by Milan Mrkusich.
Chapter Three

Gridlock

One of the most sustained attacks on modernist painting can be found in Rosalind Krauss's essay 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde'. In this work she states it is "from a strange new perspective that we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splintering into endless replication." The 'strange new perspective' proposed in this text is indeed 'strange', based as it seems to me on an unsustainable claim about the modernist grid, located alongside an ideological repositioning of thought about art.

While Krauss argues against both modernism and the aesthetic tradition in her essay, it is her understanding of the 'grid' that provides the initial focus of discussion for this chapter. Krauss's instinct to characterise modernist abstraction in terms of a grid-type structure is right, but the unsustainable feature of her argument is that it is based on the false premise of the 'grid-as-figure'.

Section One of this chapter begins with a discussion of Krauss's conception of the 'grid-as-figure', and how her use of the term 'grid' particularises what is an abstract ordering schema, and that she attempts to evade or neglect all kinds of ordering schemata by transforming the grid into a specific figurational feature of modernist painting. This will be considered in light of some of her other work such as Informe in which she argues against ordering functions in general, even those of human psychology, including the philosophical and psychological schemata of deep concern to both Kant and Freud.

In Section Two my argument will move on from the discussion of the grid, firstly to Krauss's contention of the endless replication or repetition of the grid-as-figure in

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85 Rosalind Krauss, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' in The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, 1986)
87 Krauss (op. cit. 1986), p. 158.
modernist painting and secondly to the associated denial of ‘originality’ that this appears to sustain. While it is patently obvious that both replication and repetition deny any sense of originality, the discussion in Section One will have already shown there can be no repetition or replication of the grid in modernist painting as she claims. Kant however did talk of originality as necessarily being able to serve as a model, and so the discussion at this point will turn to his identification of both this and the notion of ‘original nonsense’ and to what it would mean for humanity to have no ordering schemata, to be formless.

The concluding Section of this chapter contextualises the previous discussion of Krauss’s ‘strange new perspective’, in ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’ making it seem less a proposition of a postmodern position than as an anti-modernist one. Her approach to visual art and the non-visual ideals it proposes will at this point be regarded as beside the point in the face of the phenomenology of modernism. What remains to be said of originality, the grid and ordering schemata will finally turn the discussion toward the characterisation and discussion of the paintings of Milan Mrkusich in preparation for Chapter Four of this thesis.

§ 1. The Grid.

Krauss’s instinct to characterise modernism in terms of a grid seems to be right given the phenomenology of that art. Yet details from her essay ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’ reveal her to be arguing that the grid was a specific figurative feature ubiquitous to nearly all modernist painting: in her words, that there was “One figure, drawn from avant-garde practice in the visual arts... This figure is the grid.”

Krauss makes a fundamental error by proposing the grid to be a figure in modernist painting, as a modernist grid is actually a ‘schema’ that has an abstract ordering function or principle. Contrary to this, Krauss’s conception of the grid is of a single specific formal construct, of an observable element or figure. It is interesting that Krauss’s conception is

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not lexicographically supported. Dictionaries standardly offer definitions of ‘grid’ in terms of its being a schema: an abstract model with an ordering property or function, a general type that has no specific visual properties.

Such definitions of a grid as different types of abstract ordering schemata operate even when applied to the specific terminology of an art such as painting. In painting, perspective is one obvious and straightforward example of a grid that has an ordering function without formal specificity. Consider how the perspectival framework or construction works. It is an organising framework that is not itself represented, is in no way visible; it merely performs an ordering function as it positions the representational content of a painting according to the rules of that framework. When looking at a painting employing a perspectival construction, such as The Ideal City (1470), most recently attributed to Luciano Laurana, it is the representational content of the townscape that is immediately visible; the deep coherent space of the town square surrounded by the solid-looking buildings placed just as the viewer would expect to see them if standing in such a place. There is no perspectival grid or framework that can be seen on the surface of this painting, yet because of the specific way that the representational content is perceived by the eye – that is, the townscape looks right – the viewer can be sure that one was employed in the organisation of the elements or content of this painting in order to represent the human experience of seeing.

To argue for a modernist grid-as-figure required Krauss to see paintings from, in her own words, a ‘strange new perspective’, and it was from this curious position that she attempted to substantiate her claim for the grid-as-figure. She begins by claiming its inclusion in a diverse range of modernist paintings, identifying the grid-as-figure’s “near ubiquity in the work of those artist who thought of themselves as avant-garde – their numbers include

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89 Krauss’s use of the term is at odds with traditional Oxford English Dictionary meanings for the word, for those definitions – and there are eight separate definitions for this entry – do not suggest a singular instance or structure of the kind she suggests rather, the general emphasis is on abstract ordering schema. The definitions range from “an arrangement of parallel bars”, “a network of lines”, “a pattern of lines”, “a framework”, “a diagrammatic representation”. See the entry for ‘grid’ in The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition Volume VI, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989), p. 832-3.
Malevich as well as Mondrian, Léger as well as Picasso, Schwitters, Cornell, Reinhardt, and Johns as well as Andre, LeWitt, Hesse, and Ryman.\

But there is an obvious problem with her identification and claim that the paintings of these artists all incorporate the same visual structure or figure and this becomes saliently clear when looking at the paintings by the artists she listed. The problem with her argument is that there is no observable figure common to all the works of the kind she claimed to identify. While she was not specific about which paintings she observed in making made her identification, each of the paintings produced by this group appears visually unique, as visually distinct from each of the others' paintings in ways that could only be attributed to their employing distinctly different schemata in each. Further to this, within the oeuvre of each individual artist there are distinct schemata that can also be identified.

Consider two paintings from the first two painters on Krauss's list: Piet Mondrian's *Tableau I* (1921) and Kasimir Malevich's *Dynamic Suprematism* (1916). The process of looking for commonalities of structure in these paintings for a common visual figure of the kind Krauss claimed to observe is fruitless. There is no visually similar figure in these works. The only kind of commonality that they can be said to have is that there is a sense of order that could be described as schematic, that might be said to be of a mathematical or even geometrical nature. This derives from their both being organised using mathematical elements: the paint is structured to form blocks of painted colour, squares, rectangles or lines on the flat surface. Yet while they can be said to share this broad abstract schema or organising principle, they cannot be said to share a specific visual feature. The perceptually shallow spatial field and tight control of Mondrian's *Tableau I* appears to the eye to be diametrically opposed to the softer infinite space of Malevich's *Dynamic Suprematism*. As such, no claim can be made of a common observable grid-as-figure of the kind Krauss claims to identify even in the paintings of these two artists.

Observing and comparing two paintings even by the same artist delivers a similar conclusion. Consider two works by Ad Reinhardt, *Number 17* (1953) and *Black Painting*...
(1962). While both are square in overall canvas shape and both employ a variety of black tones, they do not employ the same visual grid-as-figure that Krauss claims to be able to identify. Number 17 employs a far more complex articulation of geometric shapes and varying black tones across its surface than the larger square blocks of less differentiated colour of Black Painting. The specifics of the respective visual structures of these paintings are vastly different and they do not share a common visual grid-as-figure. In terms of the grid-as-schema though, these paintings could again be said to both employ the abstract ordering functions of a mathematical schema in their work, with the content of geometrical shapes standing as its evidence.

Clearly, then, Krauss’s observation and claim of an ever-present figure of the grid in modernist painting is tendentious, a feature that becomes clearer with her assertion that, “structurally, logically, axiomatically, the grid can only be repeated”91. Here, the conception of the grid-as-figure is employed by Krauss to undermine the notion of ‘originality’ in painting, a line of argument undermining the traditional concept of art, which has originality as a major premise. Her initial argument is, then, that modernist paintings repetitively employ the figure of a grid and that repetition necessarily denies originality. While it is true that a repetition of the visual elements of a painting – or copying – is inconsistent with the originality of that work, repetition of a grid-as-schema is not inconsistent with originality, since a schema is an abstract, non-visual, ordering system.

To explore this further it is useful to look first at the kinds of repetition Krauss wrote of. She argued that there were three different sorts of repetition: repetition of the physical structure of the painting; a psychoanalytic type of compulsive repetition; and the repetition of traditional kinds of grid. In the way Krauss writes however, there seems to be a conceptual slippage between the two notions of grid; where, for example she means the grid-as-figure but cites examples of the grid-as-schema.

She begins by identifying a repetition of the physical structure of the canvas with the paint applied to it. Krauss maintains that the “canvas surface and the grid that scores it do not

fuse...that the grid follows the canvas surface, doubles it"\textsuperscript{92}. That paint literally follows whatever surface is provided is a logical obviousness, given the fluid or semi fluid nature of paint when applied. There is a further curiosity to this claim though. To be able make this claim Krauss is seeing the painting in only two-dimensions, ignoring the perceptual qualities of paint on a surface, for even with that first mark on the surface the eye no longer regards it as completely flat, since for the eye the mark of paint lies either in front of or behind the expanse around it. Perceptually then, the layer of paint does not repeat the surface it lies on.

From this position Krauss described the painted grid-as-figure lying on the surface as "mapped... onto the same surface it represents, but even so, the grid remains a figure"\textsuperscript{93}. Yet, with this comment Krauss undermines her own argument by describing its character in terms of a grid-as-schema, indicated here by her use of the word ‘mapped’, and then boldly, but incorrectly, asserting it to be a grid-as-figure.

The second identification of repetition comes where Krauss hints at its psychoanalytic meaning. She uses terminology suggestive of a neurotic process, that the “artist engages in repeated acts of self-imitation... that they are condemned to repeating, as if by compulsion, the logically fraudulent original"\textsuperscript{94}. As has already been established, there are no observable grid-as-figure repetitions in modernist paintings on which to base her claim. However, putting that fact to one side and following Krauss’s argument, the inference from her language, is that modernist paintings are the result of the repetitive act of the neurotic, similar to the repeated acts of the neurotically obsessive person who, for instance, repetitively washes his or her hands. This is not quite right.

Though Freud did emphasise repetition as a symptom of neurotic or repressive behaviour, claiming, the neurotic “repeats instead of remembering”\textsuperscript{95}, he does not contend that there is

\textsuperscript{92} Krauss (op. cit. 1986), p. 161.
\textsuperscript{93} Loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{94} Krauss (op. cit. 1986), p. 160.
a difference of structural process between the neurotic and non-neurotic. Freud claimed, "We are all ill... since the preconditions for the formation of symptoms can also be observed in normal people"\(^{96}\), indicating that the structures that generate the neurotic symptoms are common to all of us, to the human condition, but that we make use of those abstract structures in different ways, whether well or unwell in all decision-making tasks. Freud's dynamic structure of mind, a structure that was discussed in Chapter One, was a fundamental but abstract ordering schema that he believed was common to all humans; the repeated acts a symptom of a particular type of functioning of that schema.

Consider for a moment an analogy to this in the example of the abstract schema of a triangle. What is repeatable in the abstract schema of a triangle is the abstract principle that the internal angles of every triangle add up to the sum of 180°. This does not entail that all triangles form the same figure. The triangle could be an equilateral or an isosceles triangle. Similarly, there are repeatable features in modernist painting, and one possibility for what is repeatable is the abstract schema of Freud's dynamic structure of mind: an underlying abstract schema, one that has an ordering function that is repeatable, but does not entail that the paintings have the same visual form or figurative content.

The third example of repetition that Krauss identifies is that modernist works were actually repeating forms that had been employed by artists for hundreds of years: that the modernist grid was a structure that summarised texts and that these texts were repeated in the paintings. She gave as examples, "the gridded overlays on cartoons... the perspectival lattice... the matrix on which to chart harmonic relationships... or the millions of acts of enframing..."\(^{97}\). However in claiming these to be repetitions of the grid-as-figure Krauss is mistaken. The examples she cites are all examples of schemata. She undoes her own argument again by her conceptually slipping between the grid-as-figure and the grid-as-schema.


That Krauss proposes such a strident view of modernist painting in ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde’, requires further consideration. She argues for the grid-as-figure, in which the grid is to be understood as a single fixed visual feature that is repeated in modernist painting. This is an important feature of her argument because by sustaining the position that there is a repetitive figurative feature in modernist paintings, she is able to discredit modernism itself. As she points out, “originality – is the valorised term and the other – repetition or copy or reduplication – is discredited”\(^98\). It is to this issue that I now turn.

§2 Originality

In the aesthetic tradition of art, originality is a philosophically complex notion and Krauss takes up this theme with the claim the “avant-garde artist has worn many guises...[though]...one thing only seems to hold fairly constant in the vanguardist discourse and that is the theme of originality.”\(^99\) She offers a traditional understanding of originality as meaning more than making something new, more than a mere rejection of the past in art, but rather the production of something that “is conceived as a literal origin... a birth”\(^100\), whereby “originality becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to the formal invention as to sources of life”\(^101\). While Krauss is right to indicate that originality is more than making something new or overturning the traditions of the past, there is a problem with her discursive slide from the notion of artistic originality of the painted surface into a discussion of the “self as origin”\(^102\).

In the clearest declaration of ‘originality’, and in what seems to be the basis of her phrase the ‘self as origin’, she claims the avant-garde artist has “his own self as the origin of his work, that production will have the same uniqueness as he; the condition of his own singularity will guarantee the originality of what he makes.”\(^103\) And this seems right.

\(^101\) Loc. cit.
\(^102\) Loc. cit.
Individual styles in painting are easily identified. There are even hints of Meyer Schapiro’s thoughts in what she says, as her comment relates the painting with the condition of humanity.

But there are still vast differences between Krauss’s explanation of originality and originality in the aesthetic tradition. To reveal these it is useful to look once again at the writing of Immanuel Kant, for his thoughts on art arguably initiated the entire discourse in the aesthetic tradition.

For Kant, art was an aesthetic experience, the product of a specific kind of functioning of the mind, where the structure of mind he proposed operated in a particular way producing non-conceptual clustering of thought. This was the structure of mind he put forward in his third *Critique*, and which was discussed in the previous chapters. Of interest here is that it is also a structure that can be thought of as a kind of schema, as an abstract structure that has an ordering function, and once again having no specific visual or otherwise sensible properties.

Kant thought of art as an aesthetic unity that appears as if ordered by a rule of the understanding, but which is actually a cluster of thoughts produced by the imagination. In his words, “By an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. concept being adequate to it”\(^{104}\). With this comment he established a very clear distinction between an aesthetic idea and a rational idea. While he maintained both were generated by the same structure, they were produced by different operations of that structure and are thus completely different in character. An aesthetic idea was that which lies outside the realm of rational ideas while a rational idea was that which is covered by a concept: “an aesthetic idea is the counterpart (pendant) of a rational idea.”\(^{105}\) Those ideas that are covered by a concept or definite rules are able to be discussed in rational terms while those ideas that lie outside the realm of rational ideas, that are not covered by concepts or definite rules, are

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\(^{104}\) Kant *(op. cit. 1952)*, p. 175.

\(^{105}\) Kant *(op. cit. 1952)*, p. 176.
impossible to discuss directly. One way of understanding this structure of mind is to understand it as a kind of schema: that it has a generalised ordering function but has no specific visual properties. An aesthetic unity, such as a painting, can then be understood to be the result of just one ordering process of such a structure.

One way to understand how this structure of mind related to the idea of originality is by looking at Kant’s understanding of genius, in which it was “the talent (natural endowment) which gives the rule to art”\(^{106}\). Kant claimed that “genius is a talent for producing that for which no definite rule can be given: and not an aptitude in the way of cleverness for what can be learned according to some rule: and that consequently originality must be its primary property.”\(^{107}\) What he was claiming was that an aesthetic idea, generated by his proposed structure of mind, was one that was not an imitation of any other idea – that is, the artist does not follow any set of rules – nor can there be a definite rule given to describe the idea completely.

A quasi-proof of originality for Kant was that the product of fine art that has originality as its primary property should be able to stand as a model, as a schema, and it was this ability that makes originality distinct from originary nonsense. He wrote,

> “Since there may be originary nonsense, its products [fine art] must at the same time be models, i.e. be exemplary; and, consequently, though not themselves derived from imitation, they must serve that purpose for others, i.e. as a standard or rule of estimating.”\(^{108}\)

It is a schema that provides the rule for the art-product. Owing to the original character of that product, it is destined to stand as a schema for others.

Contrary to this, originality will not be the primary property of art if there was a throwing off of all restraint of rules, if the art was the product of a process that lacks a schema. That would be originary nonsense. To understand this concept, consider first Kant’s conception

\(^{106}\) Kant (op. cit. 1952), p. 168.  
\(^{107}\) Loc. cit.  
\(^{108}\) Loc. cit.
of the art process: namely, that the ideas of art, the aesthetic unity or what we could call the schema, involved an overall plan for the art product. He stated:

For the thought of something as end must be present, or else its product would not be ascribed to an art at all, but would be a mere product of chance. ... the effectuation of an end necessitates determinate rules which we cannot venture to dispense with.\(^{109}\)

And then consider what Kant believed happened without a schema, without some determinate plan:

that in all free arts something of a compulsory character is required, or, as it is called, a mechanism, without which the soul, which in art must be free, and which alone gives life to the work, would be bodyless [sic] and evanescent.\(^{110}\)

Dispensing with the rules then, dispensing with the overriding schema of art, does not result in art, but in what is described as “originary nonsense”.\(^{111}\) For Kant this becomes the product not of the genius but of ‘shallow-minds’. Consider his claim:

Shallow minds fancy that the best evidence they can give of being full blown geniuses is by emancipating themselves from all academic constraint of rules, in the belief that one cuts a finer figure on the back of an ill-tempered than of a trained horse.\(^{112}\)

With these ideas of the abstract ordering schema of art in mind, I wish now to return to the discussion in which Krauss was arguing for the grid-as-figure, arguing that there is a repetitive figurative feature in modernist painting. This argument would, if true, enable her to overthrow the ideal of originality in those works and as a traditional value of art.

What becomes obvious in her argument is that while arguing ostensibly for the grid-as-figure in modernist painting, she was more arguing against the ordering function of the grid-as-schema per se. For instance, she argues against ordering functions in general in other texts such as *L’Informe: mode d’emploi*, or *Formless: A User’s Guide*\(^{113}\), the text she co-authored with Yve-Alain Bois. In this text they take up an argument proposed early last

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\(^{109}\) Kant (op. cit. 1952), p. 171.

\(^{110}\) Kant (op. cit. 1952), p. 164.

\(^{111}\) Kant (op. cit. 1952), p. 168.

\(^{112}\) Kant (op. cit. 1952), p. 171.

century by the Frenchman Georges Bataille in which he argued for a different direction to that of traditional academic thinking on art, setting up a system of declassification in which informe became “a term that serves to bring things down [déclasser] in the world”\textsuperscript{114}, to level the hierarchy of objects.

Krauss’s thoughts parallel those of Bataille. She stands against abstract ordering functions in general. With regard to the visual arts her arguments lead to an idea of a visual system of objects unfettered by any structure. Her discussion of this system as it related to the notion of entropy took this to a level that denoted a visual system that denied any difference in the classification of objects, even of those objects traditionally considered as art objects, with entropy here representing the disorder or randomness or chaos of the objects included in the visual system: a system without any hierarchy, in which no object was considered in a way that was different from any other object. An instance of this is found in the way Bois was to de-classify a work by Jean Fautrier, claiming his art-object to be the same as an ordinary object of daily life, to be “kitsch in the same way that the snake-skin shoes the artist sported at the opening of his show [were kitch]”.\textsuperscript{115}

Further to this though, and of even greater concern, is that Krauss is arguing against subjective schema in order to achieve a goal of formlessness. She claimed:

\begin{quote}
The entropic, simulacral move, however, is to float the field of seeing in the absence of the subject; it wants to show that in automatism of infinite repetition, the disappearance of the first person is the mechanism that triggers formlessness.\textsuperscript{116}
\end{quote}

What becomes clear at this point is that the ‘strange new perspective’ that Krauss proposes for art is even stranger than initially thought: it is no longer a subjective perspective. Rather her approach is for a visually undifferentiated system of objects, one that turns away from what Kant called the ‘soul’ of art, denied the feeling of life experienced when looking at art, was no longer interested in the human qualities of thought and feeling like those Meyer Schapiro wrote of.

\textsuperscript{114} Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind E Krauss (op. cit. 1997), p. 18.
\textsuperscript{115} Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind E Krauss (op. cit. 1997), p. 21.
\textsuperscript{116} Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind E Krauss (op. cit. 1997), p. 78.
§3 Conclusion

Krauss’s approach to art is a good example of postmodernist thought, with her position, and by implication that of postmodernism, considered as a position contrary to that of modernism. However this perspective is beside the point of the phenomenology of modernism. The character and meaningfulness of modernist painting as a visual art was not within the focus of her writing or thought: it lay outside the ‘strange new perspective’ she promoted and thus did not bring anything useful to the task of unravelling these works. Paintings such as those produced by Milan Mrkusich would not profit from her discussion. The visual character of such paintings could not be explored using her construct, for their protean nature is concealed by it.

Observing the visual qualities of Mrkusich painting and identifying the variety of ordering schemata employed in their production is the task of the second part of this thesis. In order to avoid the ambiguity surrounding the word ‘grid’, the word ‘schema’ will henceforth be used in its place, specifically indicating an abstract ordering system that has no visual qualities. The observation and identification of the schemata in his paintings will stand as evidence of the protean nature of modernism, as a changeable, non-repetitive and humanised artform. It is this exploration on which I now embark.
Milan Mrkusich (Photograph by Marti Friedlander, 1981)
Chapter Four

The Surfaces are not DEAD

The contention of this thesis, as outlined in its title ‘The Protean Grid: Mrkusich, formalism and change’, is that the body of Mrkusich painting reveals the employment of an ever-changing or protean grid. Evidence of this claim comes from surveying a chronologically broad selection of his paintings in order to identify the different grids or (less ambiguously) schemata. This process will involve descriptions and analyses of the paintings of the kind established in the previous chapters of this thesis, informed by ideas prompted by Meyer Schapiro’s notion of the ‘humanity of art’ and by Richard Wollheim’s expanded formalist account of the representational seeing of all paintings and the discussion of the grid-as-schema, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the kinds of internal compositional relations and coloration Mrkusich achieves in the paintings of his oeuvre.

Chapter Four of this thesis then examines a selection of Milan Mrkusich’s paintings from 1983 to 2003, discussing how they appear individually and as they relate to each other, for, as Rodney Wilson claimed on the occasion of the Auckland City Gallery exhibition in 1985, “All of Mrkusich’s painting is best understood in the largeness of his whole production”\textsuperscript{117}. The discussion will take the form of a chronological catalogue, as it is this format that will reveal formal and stylistic change over time, of the kind denied by the approach promoted by Rosalind Krauss. The objective of such scrutiny is to identify the schemata of the individual paintings and to compare them with others of Mrkusich’s oeuvre.

Most of the words that have been offered on behalf of Mrkusich painting have generally discussed a small selection of his paintings at one time: for instance, the texts written on the occasion of an exhibition of recent works or \textit{per occasionem} newspaper or magazine reviews. These do not offer an account of change within his oeuvre \textit{per se}, focused as

they are on just a small selection from it. There have been three notable exceptions to this in which a broad understanding of Mrkusich’s oeuvre of painting was given; one in the chapter entitled ‘Mrkusich’s Maculae’ in Laurence Simmons 2002 book, *The Image Always Has The Last Word*\(^\text{118}\), and two catalogue essays written to accompany the major retrospective exhibitions of Mrkusich’s paintings; Michael Dunn & Petar L. Vuletic’s ‘Notes on Development’, accompanying the 1972 retrospective\(^\text{119}\) and Peter Leech’s essay ‘Painting, Object, Relation: a decade of Milan Mrkusich painting’ written to accompany the exhibition of 1985.\(^\text{120}\)

In his essay Simmons gave a clear characterisation of Mrkusich’s oeuvre as a whole, claiming,

> Mrkusich’s paintings are concerned with problems of address and are implicitly self-critical: that is, they raise fundamental problems inherent in painting or in painterly representation itself; they make evident representation itself through the very processes by which they are produced. In the presence of painting they re-present painting’s presence.\(^\text{121}\)

In these terms Mrkusich’s oeuvre can be understood to be unambiguously modernist, a characterisation that takes account of the processes and traces of his painting activity, the brushed gesture and the variety of surface texture, colour and form he employs.

Simmons offers this characterisation in response to commentators from the past that had resorted to descriptions of his paintings as ‘minimalist’\(^\text{122}\), a characterisation that Simmons rightly pointed out did not fit the paintings. Like Frank Stella, these commentators seemed to want to deny a humanistic focus for Mrkusich’s painting, assuming them to be purely visual artefacts, devoid of any representational properties. As Simmons indicated, “this

\(^{118}\) Laurence Simmons, *The Image Always Has The Last Word: On Contemporary New Zealand Painting And Photography* (Dunmore Press, 2002)


\(^{121}\) Laurence Simmons, *The Image Always Has The Last Word: On Contemporary New Zealand Painting And Photography*, ‘Mrkusich’s Maculae’, p.117.

linking of Mrkusich's art to minimalism is an association that is both insensitive to the processes at work in his painting and glosses over the wider complexity of the relationship between abstract expressionism and minimalism itself.\(^\text{123}\)

The essays that accompanied the two retrospective exhibitions were also instances when Mrkusich's paintings were viewed as part of a broader body of works, each painting considered not only for its individual character but also for its relationship to other paintings within that body. Such identification and cataloguing within that chronologically broader selection builds up an understanding of the character of an artist's oeuvre, revealing at once the consistencies and affinities of their particular approach to painting as well as the protean character of the paintings within that oeuvre.

In both the retrospective catalogues evidence of the protean character of Mrkusich's painting can already be found. In the 1972 exhibition catalogue Petar Vuletic and Michael Dunn surveyed the paintings from 1946 to 1972 and in the 1985 catalogue Peter Leech surveyed those from 1974 – 1983, viewing and discussing each selection of paintings, highlighting changing forms and schemata and prompting discussion of the development of artistic ideas within an artist's oeuvre.

Vuletic and Dunn in their combined essay in the *Milan Mrkusich Paintings 1946-1972: Essay on Development* catalogue made it clear that revealing artistic development was the primary purpose of their work. As this and their essay title 'Notes on Development' suggests, and as Dunn wrote in the introduction, they intended to identify change across the paintings, in order to "produce a wider understanding of Mrkusich's development"\(^\text{124}\) as an artist. And they did so by studying groups of paintings produced in specific periods of time: the divisions from 1946-54, 1954-61, 1962-64, 1965-67 and 1968-72. The chronological sectioning broke up the twenty-six year span covered by their catalogue into manageable passages of time in order more easily to identify and chart the changes they discerned.


\(^{124}\) Michael Dunn cited from his introduction in Michael Dunn & Petar L. Vuletic (*op. cit.* 1972), p. 28.
noting under each dated section the various schemata employed by Mrkusich during that time.

They commented on specific features of a selection of his paintings, first discussing each work individually and following with discussion of how that particular painting related to the other paintings in his oeuvre. For instance we find Dunn writing, “If *Painting On Red Ground* brings one phase to a close, *City Lights* 1955, leads on to a series of sensitive, atmospheric paintings in which small touches of colour take new prominence.” Alongside this type of discussion Dunn and Vuletic also contextualised the paintings within the New Zealand art world of the time, offering general information about the difficulties of painting abstract works in New Zealand during the times when other New Zealand artists were striving to form a sense of local imagery.

The method used by Dunn and Vuletic certainly outlined the diversity of schemata in Mrkusich’s early painting, classifying the paintings in a way that usefully identified and explained the form of each. Part way through their essay they began more distinctly to group together those paintings that they believed had a similar schema, describing the groups as ‘phases’, inserting subheadings to indicate these within their essay. Their discussion of ‘phases’ recognises those paintings that display in the similarities of schema an intensity and focus of Mrkusichian thought and painting process. This catalogue enabled the early paintings to be understood in light of their position in the overall oeuvre of Mrkusich’s painting.

Peter Leech’s essay ‘Painting, Object, Relation: a decade of Milan Mrkusich painting’ was written to accompany the second major retrospective exhibition in 1985. In this he discussed the nuances of Mrkusich’s paintings, but not before he had put forward ideas on how to manage the notorious difficulties of viewing and understanding abstract art. He began his essay with an initial claim, saying “To confront painting is, or ought to be, to confront inflections of humanity, projections of mind and feeling figured in the objects of

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126 Michael Dunn & Petar L Vuletic (op. cit. 1972), an example of this type of discussion is on p. 8.
painting”\textsuperscript{127}. While such a comment brings to mind the ideas outlined in Chapter One of this thesis, his emphasis of thought was on the \textit{dispositional} operations of the structures of mind discussed. To this end he expanded and clarified his opening statement by way of a distinction between objecthood and relationality and of Michael Fried’s “feeling of deep intensity - a feeling expressed in conscious animosity to theatre and theatricality.”\textsuperscript{128}

Leech elaborated on the idea instantiated by Fried’s intensity of feeling for objecthood, as ‘one inflection of humanity’, as one possible human response to the options of objecthood or relationality. By referring to Piero della Francesca and Paul Cézanne in whose work this intense feeling for objecthood was also manifest (a feature that the critics Bernard Berenson and Adrian Stokes both identified and celebrated in their writing), Leech was able to show that the intensity of feeling was not particular to Fried, but was a shared sensibility. Exploring the shared intensity of feeling experienced by Fried and the others further, in terms of psychoanalytic theory, the deep-seated feeling can be understood as a dispositional structure of mind that patterns the thought of the individual in all aspects of life.

By making the connections between an intensity of feeling and psychoanalytic theory in this way Leech was able to “accumulate to the feeling wider allegiance and significance”\textsuperscript{129}. His contention was that the intensity of thought expressed by Fried was the result of a particular kind of disposition, one that could be shared by others with a similar intensity of feeling. The response to a particular circumstance, such as the viewing of an abstract painting, would be directed according to that dispositional structure. This parallels the response of the artist when painting and undertaking the decisions made during the creative process, as these are also determined according to his or her dispositional structure of mind.


\textsuperscript{128} Leech (op. cit. 1985), p. 18.

\textsuperscript{129} Leech (op. cit. 1985), p. 22.
To return to Leech’s initial contention with these thoughts in mind, the approach to art that he promoted, even the notoriously difficult process of looking at abstract art, can now be understood as a process of recognising inflections or dispositions of mind, of both the artist and of ourselves. The confrontation with a Mrkusich painting becomes an opportunity to be aware of qualities of thought and feeling and the allegiances of thought they instantiate, both of the artist and of the viewer themselves.

Before turning directly to the Mrkusich paintings, Leech responded to the remaining practical difficulty posed by abstract paintings: namely that of just how to see them, what to see in them and what to see them as. Leech’s response to these difficulties was to confirm their status simply as objects, albeit objects of a particular type, having “a surface with edges, with colour, with surface form.” He also points out that the complexity of form of each painting – the particular articulation of surface and the perceptual qualities of colours – could create a particular inflection of these simple facts of painting.

When Leech turned directly to the Mrkusich paintings it was with these thoughts in place, looking at them from “within this matrix formed by the two simplicities of painting – a matrix placed against the ground of feeling.” He did so by identifying five distinct phases in the decade covered by the exhibition and talked generally about the decade of paintings within this exhibition, reinforcing the theme of painting as a surface with edges, of the objecthood of the paintings before particularising his comments to identify each discernible phase. In each phase he assessed the changing schema of surface form while at the same time commenting on the overall intensity of feeling for the integrity-in-object he believed Mrkusich paintings to instantiate.

Milan Mrkusich once asserted, “Art is an idea made visible.” When considered in relation to the ideas of the humanity of art prompted by Meyer Schapiro in Chapter One alongside Leech’s emphasis on psychological allegiances, we can understand his comment

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131 Loc. cit.
more clearly. Each visible aspect of the painting – from the particular structure he employs, the initial brushstroke, the choice of colour and carefully planned perceptual qualities, to the finishing touches – can be understood as the manifestation or the concretion of the artistic idea, it acts as the guiding framework or schema for that painting. We recognise in Mrkusich’s paintings qualities of thought and feeling and his individual allegiances employed in what Meyer Schapiro claimed recalled “the drama of decision in the ongoing process of art”. These are what Leech identified as Mrkusich’s feeling for the integrity-in-object, a psychologically integrative process which attempts to preserve the wholeness of the object.

Leech clearly outlined this particular feature of Mrkusich’s painting in his discussion of the Phase Two paintings. He wrote of the artistic challenge of this particular schema that, given the rectangulations that articulate the surface form schema, “the challenge is to avoid, in their clear delineation from the body of the painting, the falling away or separating of the rectangulations from the painting as a whole, and thus the disintegrating or partializing of surface”. In short, it was his contention that the surface form presented a challenge to the homogeneous nature of the painting. However, he claimed the disintegration did not occur, that there were other features of the painting in play that avoided this consequence.

The point of note here is that while the Mrkusichian oeuvre can be categorised identifying particular schemata in the way that Vuletic and Dunn and Leech identified them in their respective catalogues, placing them into groups of paintings that share a common artistic idea that is made visible in the form of a distinct schema, it is also possible to see another more instinctual force directing Mrkusich’s artistic decisions. This is an intensity of feeling that is manifest in his characteristic allegiance to the homogeneous nature of painting: to the ‘integrity of object’. It is this characteristic mode of artistic endeavour which Adrian Stokes identified with the carving tradition, as was discussed in Chapter One, in which their were no divisive qualities, no structures or colours of greater emphasis than those around them.

134 Leech (op. cit. 1985), p. 27.
It is this intensity of feeling for the integrity in object which guides the geometries of surface form and the perceptually expansive complexities and subtleties of colour of each of Mrkusich’s paintings, that guides the material facts of his artistic endeavour. It is in these combined elements, imposed on each of the individual schemata he employed in his paintings, that reveal them to be very human forms of abstraction.

Looking at the comprehensive work undertaken in both of the retrospective catalogues, the identification and categorisation of Mrkusich painting by Dunn, Vuletic and Peter Leech, it is possible to list the various schemata they identified in a mostly chronological fashion.

To begin with the broad categorisations identified in the essay by Dunn and Vuletic. In the early phases listed below it is only a general description that identifies the schemata, alongside an example, while those in quotation marks were explicitly named by Dunn and Vuletic:

- Constellation e.g. *Constellation with Yellow* 1946
- Early geometries e.g. *Composition on White* 1947
- Gouaches (organic) e.g. *Gouache* 1948
- Crystal Structures e.g. *Structures No. 4* 1948
- Rectangles and Circles e.g. *Painting C-48* 1948
- Fusion of geometric and organic e.g. *Painting B49* 1949
- Square grids e.g. *Composition on Red* 1954
- Colour relations on square grid e.g. *City Lights* 1955
- Colour patches on square grid with lines e.g. *Landscape No. 1* 1957
- Staccato touches and elliptical curves e.g. *Painting No. 4* 1958
- Freer patches e.g. *Painting 60-I* 1960
- Freer strokes e.g. *Painting 61-13* 1961
- Soft organisation e.g. *Painting 61-24* 1961
- Soft with geometric lines e.g. *Painting 62-21* 1962
- ‘Emblems’ e.g. *Emblem IV* 1963
- ‘Elements’ e.g. *Golden Passive Element* 1965 - 1970
- ‘Diagrams’ e.g. *Contemplative diagram 1965 / Seven Elements in Combination (Blue)* 1966
- Transition e.g. *Ambient Gold* 1967
- ‘Diagrammatic Corner’ e.g. 1968
- ‘Corner’ e.g. *Painting Red* 1968
- ‘Meta Greys’ e.g. *Meta grey No. 3* 1969
- ‘Chromatic-Meta Grey / Light-Meta Grey’ e.g. *Untitled* 1970-71
- ‘The Coloureds’ e.g. *Painting Red* 1971
Peter Leech’s observations take over at this point. He identified five distinct schemata, which he described as phases, in the decade subsequent to that covered by the Dunn/Vuletic catalogue, and categorised them by phase number, with dating followed by an example:

- Phase One (1974-1976) e.g. *Painting Purple* 1975
- Phase Two (1977-79, 1983) e.g. *Achromatic Grey* 1977
- Phase Three (1978-79) e.g. *Monochrome Blue* 1978
- Phase Four (1980-81) e.g. *Two Areas Yellow Orange* 1981
- Phase Five (1982-84) e.g. *Arches and Lines on Maroon (diamond)* 1983

What follows is my own observation and suggested identification of schemata in the paintings subsequent to those represented in the two retrospective essays, dating from 1983 to 2003, categorised by schema number, date and example:

- Schema One (1983) e.g. *Study Red* 1983
- Schema Two (1984-5) e.g. *Untitled Dark* 1985
- Schema Three (1980-85) e.g. *Untitled Red* 1985
- Schema Four (1986-89) e.g. *Journey Six (achromatic)* 1988-89
- Schema Five (1990) e.g. *Chinese Element Wood, Version II* 1990
- Schema Six (1984-92) e.g. *Progression II* 1984-92
- Schema Seven (1991) e.g. *Achromatic with Cadmium Yellow Deep* 1991
- Schema Eight (1992) e.g. *Blue Achromatic* 1992
- Schema Nine (1992) e.g. *Chromatic Primary Suite* 1992
- Schema Ten (1992-4) e.g. *Three Part Painting (Alchemical) II* 1993
- Schema Eleven (1995) e.g. *Two Areas Green Purple with Yellow and Red* 1995
- Schema Twelve (1996) e.g. *Chromatic Light No. 1* 1996
- Schema Thirteen (1997) e.g. *Achromatic Primary* 1997
- Schema Fifteen (1999-2000) e.g. *Painting VII Blue Light* 1999
- Schema Sixteen (1999-2000) e.g. *Painting I Silver* 2000
- Schema Seventeen (2001) e.g. *Painting Achromatic with Yellow* 2001
- Schema Eighteen (2002) e.g. *Untitled IV* 2002
- Schema Nineteen (2001-2003) e.g. *Painting Dark* 2001
This is by no means an exhaustive list as there are some paintings that have not been included. There was for instance a distinct phase discerned in 1985 in the works *Achromatic with Yellow Red and Blue* (1985) and *Untitled Indigo* (1985). These paintings are however a recurrence of a phase first observed by Peter Leech in his essay ‘Painting, Object, Relation: a decade of Milan Mrkusich painting’ as occurring between 1977 – 78, in *Achromatic Grey (linear series)* of 1978, re-occurring again in 1983. There is no need for me to repeat Leech’s work as in that essay he clearly described the phase and its place within Mrkusich’s oeuvre.

For the purposes and argument of this thesis, it is not necessary to discuss every schema and every painting ever produced by Mrkusich, merely to represent a chronologically broad selection that stands as evidence of the protean nature of Mrkusich’s painterly and aesthetic formulations. With this in mind I have focused on one schema per year. While the list of schemata is longer than is required to show the protean nature of Mrkusich’s oeuvre – this could have been achieved with a much shorter chronological selection – it seemed necessary to complete the task started by Vuletic, Dunn and Leech.

The following section of this chapter comprises a chronological catalogue that identifies each schema. This will take the form of a short discussion of the nuances that particularise each schema, each assessed in terms of colour and surface form. Included in this is discussion of the characteristic intensity of feeling for the integrity of object that guides Mrkusich painting.
Schema One

Study Red 1983

Study Blue 1983

Study Green 1983

Study Achromatic 1983
The first schema identified occurs in 1983. Some of the paintings using this schema are titled with the word 'study' followed by a colour, while others are titled with the word 'painting' followed by two or three colours.

These paintings are all vertically orientated rectangular canvases, with the surface form taking on the appearance of a simple geometric division of surface, through the formation of a larger squared section above two smaller squared sections. There is a singularity of hue maintained across the surface of these paintings.

The paintings of this group entitled 'Study' alongside a colour name, such as Study Red (1983), have an atmospheric quality most noticeable in the upper and larger square, a quality that becomes more dense with the darkening of hue. In Study Red (1983) the atmosphere has a swirling soft character, reminiscent of earlier paintings such as in Painting Purple (1975), with areas of lighter and darker tones blending together to create a softly open atmosphere of indistinct depth. In Study Blue (1983) and Study Achromatic (1983) this atmospheric quality has been appreciably condensed, an effect of both the colour used and in the way the paint has been applied to the canvas, the application no longer the openly brushed technique used in Study Red (1983). Rather these paintings have smaller speckled areas of paint layered across the surface achieving a more closed, perceptually calmer atmospheric quality.

The lower squared sections of the 'study' paintings appear to offer the extremes of hue used in the formation of the larger squared section and in doing so provide the work with a sense of balance and weight. In Study Red (1983) these squares hold the swirling atmosphere in place by appearing to anchor it firmly to the surface of the canvas while at
the same time emphasising its swirling nature by revealing the colour range involved in its formation. The stabilising character of the squares in the more densely atmospheric paintings like *Study Achromatic* (1983) is generated from a more solid weight of colour. In all of these paintings, it is the lower right square with lighter tone that appears as if hard against the literal canvas, while the darker tone on the left perceptually offering the greater depth. With this feature the surface form becomes an exploration of squareness and colour, which is more noticeable in a more densely atmospheric like *Study Achromatic*, a feature that becomes more apparent still in the paintings employing Schema Two.

In *Painting Green with Blue and Black* 1983, the same surface form as the ‘study’ paintings is followed. However in this painting there is a uniformly dark-layered hue covering the entire surface of the canvas: a dense hue that does not have the soft spatial atmosphere of any of the ‘study’ paintings, and one that is applied in a way that allows the canvas texture to be part of the surface interest. Two lines define the surface form of the painting: a blue horizontal line two-thirds of the way down the canvas, with a dark vertical line leading down from it to the lower edge. While drawing attention to the literal surface, the blue line also perceptually expands the darkness beyond it, pushing it further in to the representational depths, rendering the line as a reference point with which to assess the position of the darkness while simultaneously acting as a physical barrier to those perceptual depths. The vertical line increases the tension between surface and represented depths by appearing to split the darkness, as if revealing the limit of the darkness by showing an underlying region through that vertical incision. The only tension experienced in trying to reconcile the point at which the two lines meet.

In all of the paintings of this schema there is, in the demarcation of separate areas, a threat to the integrity of the object. Yet despite being geometrically carved apart the eye sees the separate areas drawing together through the continuity of colour over the surface. In all of the paintings of this schema the colour maintains the integrity: in the ‘Study’ paintings the colours weave between the separated areas, the tonal variations of the larger square pulled tight to the smaller the eye seeing a continuity as if the smaller areas were both slowly seeping colour into the larger, its colour an amalgamation of them. In *Painting Green with*
Blue and Black (1983) it is the uniformity of colour across the canvas that maintains the integrity of the painting as a whole object.
Schema Two

Untitled Dark I 1984, (1600 x 1600 mm)
Untitled Dark II 1985, (1600 x 1600 mm)
Untitled Dark II 1985, (2270 x 1510 mm)
Untitled Dark II 1985, (1600 x 1600 mm)

Schema Two occurs between 1984 and 1985, with the titles of the paintings all starting with the word 'Untitled', followed by a colour and sometimes also by number. The paintings using this schema are a natural progression from the surface form of those guided by Schema One, as there are similarities in the straightforward geometric division of
surface that creates squared areas along the baseline. Modifications to the earlier schema appear in changes to the shape of the canvas, which is now squared or rectangular; in the surface structure by continuing the colour from the large upper area to the baseline; and by a focus on the darkness of hue. In some paintings, it is all of these features that change as in *Untitled Dark I* (1984), while in others such as *Untitled Blue* (1985) it is only one feature that changes. There is a consistently reductive character to the paintings employing this schema which is not so apparent in the paintings of Schema One. This results from the artist’s restricting his employment to very dark and achromatic hues and also in the immaculate and refined paint surfaces showing none of the swirling and gestural brushwork and resulting atmospheric qualities like those of the ‘study’ paintings.

In *Untitled Dark* (1985) for instance it is the similarly straightforward squared format of Schema One that guides the surface form of this iconic dark painting, an uncomplicated geometric structure of colour and form. Yet it is the square shape of the canvas and the darkness and concentration of hue that distinguish it from the previous works as a painting in which the enveloping darkness shadows the formal relations of squareness. Peter Leech, when discussing Mrkusich’s dark paintings in *Art New Zealand* 39, said of them, “In the dark, of course, formal definition and outline blur. The eyes see only the vaguest relations of intensity and saturation of darkness.” And so it is in *Untitled Dark* (1985): the tones are all variations in the dark and consideration of them is confined to darkness (for instance in this painting, of their being more of a blueish darkness, a brownish and a charcoal darkness).

Colour has always been a focus and source of vigour in Mrkusich’s painting. From the start of his career, colour structures and our perception of them were an important feature of his work. And so it is with the paintings employing this second schema, even within the restricted and darkened palette and mathematically restrained structure. Mrkusich here explores colour relations within the limits of darkness, in which the eye can discern only very subtle distinctions, and thus only gently vivify the surface. In a work such as *Untitled Dark* 1985 it becomes clear that even under such constraints there is still a representational

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expansion to the formal structure of paint, a perceptual to-ing and fro-ing of juxtaposed colours even within these darkened limits. In this particular case the heavily saturated lower right square lies perceptually in front of those around it, while the large upper rectangle more recessively distant. The eyes perceive a draining of darkness alongside the saturated weight of the lower right square and to a lesser extent alongside the lower left square, as if there were a luminosity that escapes from the border between the tones.

In *Untitled Dark* (1985) the surface presents squared forms, referencing and echoing the overall canvas shape in an *en abyme* fashion that Francis Pound drew attention to in his discussion of the paintings of Gordon Walters, in this particular case the internal squared forms present as smaller instances of the overall painting’s shape.Alongside the connectiveness of the darkened colours, the mimicking of shape also maintains the artistic challenge posed to the integrity of the painted object. Each area is not seen as distinctly separate from the others, as much as an instance of the whole.

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Schema Three

Blue Achromatic 1980
Untitled Yellow 1984
Untitled Red 1985

The third schema first appeared with Blue Achromatic in 1980 and then occurred again in 1984 and 1985. The canvases guided by this schema are all vertically rectangular in shape and the surface form is more complex than those employing Schema Two, each has an achromatic band defining an upper and larger squared area, while the remaining area below the band is divided into two, with the colour of one identical to that above the band.

In the earlier painting Blue: Achromatic (1980) the surface is divided into seven distinct areas, the surface cleanly defined but without being hard-edged. A large square fills the upper region, with the band divided into four – two elongated rectangles and two small squares - while below the band there are two horizontally-orientated rectangles.

It is the colour that manages to maintain the integrity of surface in this painting, to draw the separate areas together. The atmospheric blue of the upper square continues below the band to the lower right rectangle. Both areas of blue are enhanced by the dark, heavily saturated
rectangle on the lower left, a darkness resonating from it across the canvas, creating a continuity in a web-like darkness that draws the separate areas together. The horizontal band and the square blocks within it offer the opposite tension, acting to maintain the shape of the canvas and stopping the implosive action of the colour.

At the same time the achromatic band and blocks and dark rectangle also have the same perceptual effect as the blue line in the schema one painting, *Painting Green with Blue and Black* (1983), drawing attention to the phenomenologically twofold nature of painting: the two possibilities - the painted surface and the representational depths – are emphasised, reinforcing the representational nature of the remaining blue, where perceptually its blue darkness is regarded by the eye as lying somewhere in the representational space between them.

*Untitled Yellow* (1984) and *Untitled Red* (1985) are guided by this same schema, but with slight modifications. The surface form of these painting is without the band divisions, and the lower section has only a vertically orientated band’s-width dark block down the left edge. These slight changes lessen the tensions of *Blue: Achromatic* (1980), insofar as the geometrical simplifications create a more subtle variation of the earlier painting. It is as if the challenge to the integrity of object that were presented in *Blue: Achromatic* (1980) were too great, and the modifications to the schema an attempt to lessen the tensions somewhat.
Schema Four

Journey One (second version) 1986

Journey Two (second version) 1988

Journey Three 1986

Journey Four 1987

Journey Five 1987

Journey Six (Achromatic) 1988-1989
The fourth schema occurs within 1986 and 1989 and all the included paintings have the title 'journey' followed by a number and sometimes a version.

It is in this schema that there is a notable innovation and expansion of Mrkusich's dialectic of the integrity of object. Once again he is using the representational nature of colour to maintain a sense of wholeness, but it is no longer pitched against the internal divisions of surface like those of the previous schema: this time it also involves working against the destruction of the integrity of edge that Mrkusich introduces with these 'journey' paintings by his variation to the conventional rectangularity of painting. In these paintings, Mrkusich places multiple panels of different sizes and hues side by side, aligned in, to use William McAlloon's words, an "apparent irregularity of arrangement". The challenge for Mrkusich in these paintings is to maintain the integrity of the object in face of the destruction of the integrity of edge.

These multiple-canvas works consist of four, five or six panels joined together in a way that Ian Wedde considered "incorporated the approach of the Area paintings". The 'area' works to which he refers were amongst those presented in the 1985 retrospective exhibition 'A Decade Further On', such as Two Areas Blue-Green (1981), and had the straightforward schema of two large but identical sized rectangular blocks of different hue placed alongside each other. What Peter Leech claimed in the catalogue essay for that exhibition was that in the 'area' paintings "everything was now given over to simple seeing and the perception of colour and tonality... in these works surface form (except in image of form in colour)

137 William McAlloon, Milan Mrkusich: Six Journeys (Auckland Art Gallery, 1996)
ceases to have an active role.” While directed specifically at the ‘area’ paintings these observations are just as relevant for an understanding of the ‘journey’ paintings, for in these paintings it is representational seeing of colour that has the dominant role: Leech’s ‘simple seeing’ and ‘perception of colour’ is again the focus of attention, emphasised through the continuity of surface form across each panel and its unique alignment to those around it.

In the catalogue essay that was published on the occasion of the ‘Milan Mrkusich: six journeys’ exhibition, William McAloon quotes Mrkusich as claiming, “Colour is not mine alone. Colour just exists. Achromatic and chromatic colours are material facts.” Yet looking at these paintings, Mrkusich is doing more than just presenting the material facts of colour. This is more the focus of the Chromatic Suite paintings of 1992 that will be discussed as Schema Nine. Rather, in the ‘journey’ paintings he is emphasising the material facts of colour, by employing the representational perception that we have of colours juxtaposed together: those recessive and projective qualities with which we perceptually expand them, that maintain perceptually the integrity of edge and thus the unity of object.

In a letter to Edward Hanfling, Mrkusich confirms the perceptually expansive quality of colour by writing, “My painting method achieves a result which is beyond the materials used. The surfaces are not DEAD.” And this is what we see in the ‘journey’ paintings. Mrkusich’s method, his understanding of the perceptual qualities of colour in these works is used to neutralise the physical shift and apparent misalignment of the individual panels. The line of panels in each of the ‘journey’ paintings physically differ in both size and alignment in what Ian Wedde claimed as “a kind of calculated disproportion”, a calculation that was determined to draw attention to the representational quality of colour.

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139 Leech (op. cit. 1985), p. 28.
141 Milan Mrkusich, quoted from a letter to Edward Hanfling, dated the 4th May 1998 — emphasis as used in the Gordon Walters / Milan Mrkusich: works form the 1950’s catalogue essay by Hanfling (Sue Crockford Gallery, 2000), p. 3.
Close up, each of the panels of the ‘journey’ paintings has a quality of surface that is reminiscent of the Phase One category (1974-1976) paintings described by Peter Leech, like that of Painting Purple (1975): paintings that have a deeply atmospheric surface produced by the overlaying of a variety of hues, with the expansive atmosphere defined by triangulations of a much denser tone at each corner. The panels of the ‘journey’ paintings are without the defining corner triangulations and there is between panels a variation of atmospheric quality: some have the soft open hazy atmosphere in which the overlying layers of colour reveal those below, enabling the eye to access the hazy representational depths of indefinite space, while others show the more densely packed, closely woven and heavily saturated surfaces that defy the eye access to any but the shallow areas close to the canvas. Each of the panels offers the eye a particular quality of perceptual depth through the variation and density of hue used in the formation of each individual surface.

In the middle ground viewing there is a simple juxtaposition of colours similar to that presented in the ‘area’ paintings. This echo occurs because the sheer scale of the ‘journey’ paintings is so vast that they are paintings to be walked past, with the eye unable to take the paintings in their entirety at close range or in the middle ground. It is as if Mrkusich had prepared his viewers for these paintings in advance, as the close and middle ground views of them are familiarly reminiscent of earlier paintings.

A distant view of the ‘journey’ paintings is not always achievable within an imposed gallery setting, yet it is this view that offers the opportunity to see the painting as a whole. From a distance the eye has to come to terms with the effect of the four, five or six closely juxtaposed panels of colour and the way that these colours react with those around them. In Journey Six (achromatic) (1988-89), even given the restriction of hue to a selection of dark and light achromatics, the representational effect is startling. For the panels perceptually lift off or sink into the wall, creating an effect somewhat like a set of overlapping screens.

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143 When the Dunedin Public Art Gallery exhibited Journey One (second Version) 1986 it was in a corridor location. Consequently it was impossible to see this work from a distance.
Starting on the left of this painting, the first softly dense and darkened panel appears to the eye to be in front of that next to it, a perception that Mrkusich has emphasised by aligning the panel lower than that next to it. This second panel, a luminescent atmosphere of light over darkened earthy tones characterised by large soft sponge-like gestures appears, in relation to those adjoining panels, to lie further back, and Mrkusich encourages this sensation by placing this panel higher than both its adjoining panels.

The third panel from the left has a surface character that places it somewhere in depth between the two. Much lighter in overall hue, an overlaying of ever lighter and brighter pale tones that are more dense than the second panel and less dense than the first and the eye places it between the first two, a perception reinforced by the alignment of the panel, lying as it does, between them.

The fourth panel, a silvery-grey atmospheric hue that has warm undertones, appears to the eye as if lying in a position behind panel three, similar to that of panel two, a position reinforced again by its alignment. Yet looking at panels two and four separately this does not seem logical: the colours are different and it is as if one ought to appear more dominant than the other. However the width of the interposing panel, at 1675mm, bars this response, achieving a separation between the two adjoining colours that interrupts and minimises that reactivity. It is this that allows the alignment of panel four to rest easily on the eye.

Panel five is an elongated rectangle of a densely-packed darkness that dominates the others, its hue clearly defining its edges and forcing it forward to the eye. The alignment of the panel again emphasises this perception: this time the panel is higher and lower than those around it. It is as if perspective is the grid of choice in ‘fixing’ this panel in position, as perspectively objects closer to the eye will appear larger, while objects further away appear smaller. The difference here is that it is a colour which is perceived, and not an object depicted.

The sixth and final panel of this work has a densely atmospheric surface that picks up darkened tones from the previous panels, with the variety of hue and the loosening of
surface gesture ensuring a softness of atmosphere. With less height than the harsh dense character of panel five and aligned slightly lower than midway between its confines, the eye positions the soft darkness of this last panel back into representational space; again the alignment strengthens this understanding of position. It is the perceptual response of the eye that maintains the integrity of object in these works, as the expansive understanding of the colours perceptually realigns the panels, neutralising the threat posed to the integrity of edge – an integration that maintains the integrity of object.

Looking at other schemata in Mrkusich’s body of paintings it is interesting to note that the innovation of the ‘journey’ paintings appears to stem from the later ‘progression’ paintings, such as Progression II (1984/5-92) in which the alignment and integrity of edge was not disrupted in view of the fact that the canvas is a horizontally-orientated very conventional rectangle. Lewis Mrkusich maintains that before the ‘journey’ paintings were produced, his father had already fixed on the ideas for the later ‘progression’ works.\textsuperscript{144} While this information goes some way to explain the dating of Progression II (1984/5-92), it is also of interest in terms of the formation of ideas, as it seems that on the occasion of this particular painting Mrkusich is dating his artistic idea more than the painting itself. The idea for the ‘progression’ paintings is in this way to be understood as preceding the idea of the ‘journey’ paintings.

\textsuperscript{144} Lewis Mrkusich, in a telephone conversation to the author on the 3/10/2004.
Schema Five

MILAN MRKUSICH

CHINESE ELEMENT SERIES

S U È C R O C K F O R D G A L L E R Y

The fifth schema is observed within the 1990 paintings and has two branches; those paintings titled with the words ‘alchemical spectrum’ along with a colour and those entitled ‘chinese element’ alongside an element. All of the ‘version II’ paintings with this schema are on a much smaller scale than is usual for Mrkusich paintings.

As with the ‘journey’ paintings of Schema Four, the threat to the integrity of object posed in the ‘alchemical spectrum’ and ‘chinese element’ paintings stems in part from the destruction of the integrity of edge. In the Schema Five paintings, though, there is a more apparent internal divisiveness that seriously threatens the integrity of object.

In the paintings produced on hardboard or card Mrkusich has been able to exploit the particular character of that surface, one in which the literal surface of the board can be reinforced by the paint. In some instances it is as if the paint is denied any depth by the board, forced by it to lie upon it in pools of varying type. In these instances the materiality of surface refuses the eye any understanding of representational depth, the physical paint structures are seen by the eye as just that. In these surfaces Richard Wollheim’s ‘twofold’ understanding of painting appears to be revealed as having limits other than those he was aware of or had himself experienced. This unique material quality of surface adds to the difficulty of viewing abstract art and, in Mrkusich’s oeuvre, when added to the change in scale that these paintings also instantiate, it is as if they could be templates for the much larger works of this schema, such as Alchemical Spectrum White (1990).
In all the paintings employing Schema Five the sense of unity of object is maintained through a delicate balance of colour and form. The disruption of edge in this schema is enormous, with each painting engineered in such a way that each separate geometric element presents at least three of its own edges to the overall edge of painting, while the separateness of these internal elements is emphasised by their being physically produced on separate pieces of card.

In Chinese Element Wood, Version II (1990) for instance, there are four geometrical elements placed together: a large mottled blue-green square positioned almost midway above a pale grey rectangle and dark band into the corner of which is positioned a smaller grey vertically-orientated rectangle. It is as if the painted elements of the Schema Three paintings, encased in their rectangularity like that of Untitled Red (1983), had been disturbed, further disrupting elements of the surface form. The separateness of the elements in these paintings is strong, but the opposing forces are equally strong – not in terms of a perceptual rectangularity, as was observed of the ‘journey’ paintings, but rather in terms of a perceptual balance and harmony of the elements.

The balance of Chinese Element Wood, Version II (1990) could appear to hinge on the lowest grey block; however, the weight and saturation of atmospheric colour in the upper square counteract this perception, as the eye perceives it to be a stabilizing element. As well, the fixed materiality of the pale rectangle binds the surface form together as if the indeterminate depths of colour of the other elements were pinned in place by the literal surface of pale paint. It is this combination of features that stops the surface structure from disintegrating and maintains the harmony of the object.

In the larger canvas painting Alchemical Spectrum White (1990), the tensions are much the same as those of Chinese Element Wood, Version II. There are however in this painting additional squared forms on the two lower squares. These, while having the effect of lessening the severity of the geometries of this particular painting structure, also have an integrative action within the painting: the eye draws the elements together. In character they also refer to painting schemata of both the past and those of the future; for instance, in
their references to the ‘untitled’ paintings of Schema Two and the ‘chromatic suites’ of Schema Nine.
Schema Six

Progression II 1984-92

Progression IV 1991 (610 x 2300mm)

The sixth schema can be observed in the titularly identified ‘progression’ paintings dated (curiously) from 1984 and 1992. As was mentioned in the discussion of the Schema Four
‘journey’ paintings, the idea for these ‘progression’ paintings was “the culmination of an idea that had beginnings in 1985.”145

In this schema there is a conventional continuity of edge and canvas shape in that these are horizontally orientated rectangular canvases. It is solely the internal divisions of colour that endanger the integrity of object. In the simplicity of colour and structure these paintings instantiate, they can be regarded in the same way that the ‘area’ and ‘journey’ paintings were: that is, as a more concentrated focus on the representational seeing of colour. The schema identified in the progression paintings is one of alternating colour across a canvas, more complex than that observed in the ‘area’ paintings yet without the complexity of edge of the ‘journey’ paintings.

This schema presents less of a threat to the integrity of object than the ‘area’ or ‘journey’ paintings. The obvious tensions of the ‘area’ paintings – the pull of colour relations that perceptually split these paintings in half – are reduced in Schema Six by the simple alternation of colour, while the calculated edge disruption of the ‘journey’ paintings is not a feature of these paintings.

In Progression II (1984-92) for instance, there are three achromatic blocks of colour, one a central light grey, flanked on both sides by a darkened hue. The first two blocks are equal sized squares of colour, while the third band appears to be half their width. Yet it is this smaller band that holds the elements of the painting together, with the eye seeing its darkness as a continuity of colour across the entire length of the canvas – a continuity merely masked by the over-painting of the lighter tone. The alternation of colour across the canvas rationally ought to interrupt the integrity of surface yet, unexpectedly, it appears as a perceptual continuity underpinned by the darkened hue. It is this effect that integrates the separate geometric structures, thereby maintaining the sense of unity in the painting.

145 Lewis Mrkusich, Biographical information: With an outline of the history of Mrkusich paintings, information handout, revised in 2003. There is a discrepancy between the date he offers and the date of Progression II (1984-92), even so, the idea pre-dates the ‘journey’ paintings.
Schema Seven

Achromatic with Cadmium Yellow Deep 1991 (left)
Achromatic with Cadmium Red Medium 1991 (right)

Achromatic with Cadmium Yellow Deep 1991 (1676 x 2133mm)
Achromatic with Cadmium Red Medium 1991 (1676 x 2133mm)
Achromatic with Cobalt Blue 1991 (1676 x 2133mm)

Schema Seven occurs in 1991. All the paintings employing this schema begin their title with the word ‘achromatic’ followed by a descriptive account of the particular colour used.

In the paintings of this schema the conventional rectangularity of edge is disrupted once again jeopardizing the integrity of object, the same as was identified as the prime tension in Schema Four and Schema Five. Mrkusic’s method of opposing this tension in the Schema Seven paintings appears as a perceptual reassurance of rectangularity – an effect produced by the surface form and relations of colour – rather than purely through the colour relations employed in Schemas Four and Five.

In Achromatic with Cadmium Yellow Deep (1991) the surface structure is formed through a large horizontally orientated rectangle painted with unmodulated cadmium yellow. This is
flanked across most of its upper edge by a pale elongated rectangular band and, down the left side, by a dark band extending below the yellow rectangle. The position, shape and achromatic hue of the bands produce a perceptual framing of the large expanse of yellow, that area receding from the eye in relation to the achromatic bands. The framing guides the eye into the representational depths produced by that hue an effect similar to that offered by an elaborately framed old master landscape. At the same time, in direct opposition to these perceptions, the horizontal and vertical orientation of the bands draw the eye’s attention to and reinforce the surface nature and geometry of the yellow rectangle. Once again these two modes of seeing this painting instantiate the ‘twofold’ process of seeing described by Richard Wollheim. The harmony is maintained despite the disruption of edge in this painting by the strength of the rectangularity of structure.
Schema Eight

Achromatic II 1992
Schema Eight appears in 1992, with the titles of the paintings using this schema beginning with the colour employed in the central block of the painting followed by ‘achromatic’.

These canvases relate back to those identified in Schema One such as Painting Green with Blue and Black (1983): the modification in the surface form is an elaboration of the colour of the earlier schema. Each of the paintings in Schema Eight is a vertically orientated rectangular canvas of three well-defined areas: the upper a rectangular band, with a central square below, while the lower area is a colour band divided into two squares by a thin vertical line.

In these works there is a greater threat to the integrity of object than was identified in Schema One, as the uniformity of surface colour that had been the homogenising agent in the earlier paintings has been replaced by the bold use of different hues. Neither has the repetition of colour – identified as the homogenising agent in the Schema Six ‘progression’ paintings – been employed to offset the divisive articulation of surface form that is identified in these large canvases.

Mrkusich adopts a solution to counteract the threat in two ways. Firstly, he minimises the problem by posing no threat to the integrity of edge. Then by enclosing the central square with the achromatic light above and darkness below, as he does in Yellow Achromatic, Red Achromatic, Green Achromatic and Achromatic I, the splitting effect is counteracted, the squeezing action on the square emphasized by the representational quality of its dominant colour. The echoes of squareness emanating from the lower band reiterate this action, while also acting to stabilise the painting as a whole by the density and saturation of its dark colour.
In the two remaining paintings listed, slight variations of colour present as subtle explorations of the schema, the depth and saturation of hue in Blue Achromatic and the achromatic hues of Achromatic II perceptually appearing like a negative of the others. In these paintings the projective qualities of the yellow square in Yellow Achromatic are replaced by the recessive darkness in Blue Achromatic, the central dark achromatic area of Achromatic I replaced by the light area in Achromatic II.
This ninth schema occurs in 1992, in the paintings of *Chromatic Primary Suite* and *Chromatic Secondary Suite*.

The paintings employing this schema offer an exploration of the limits of pure colour. Each canvas is a straightforward presentation of one unmodulated hue characterised solely by the sheer density and saturation of that colour. It is the intrinsic nature of colour that is at stake — not the integrity of object — for in these canvases colour presents without emphasis or modulation and without the distraction of relativities or the complexity of delineation or disruption to the canvas edge. In the simple geometrical rectangularity of each canvas, the interest of these paintings lies purely in being undifferentiated surfaces of colour.
Each homogeneous surface really does present Mrkusich's 'material facts of colour'. The large unambiguous expanses of red, blue and yellow, in the *Chromatic Primary Suite*, and orange, green and purple, in the *Chromatic Secondary Suite*, all present the eye with the opportunity to see and understand the composition of colour through very specific colour relationalities. In *Chromatic Primary Suite* the colours echo between the canvases: the red has tones of blue and yellow in its depths, the blue seen as having undertones of the red and yellow, while the yellow reveals in its make-up the tones of both red and blue. Even the immaculate surfaces do not disrupt the seeing of colours in this way as its purpose is purely to maintain the twofold process of seeing, to see the colour both as surface and representational depth.

According to Lewis Mrkusich these paintings were personal: "paintings the artist had thought about and wanted to paint for a long time". They reveal the intense affinity and commitment of Mrkusich’s feeling for colour, a feeling that, while heralded throughout his entire body of painting, had never before been instantiated in such a singularly focused manner.

It is a focus identified at the beginning of his career as an artist in a painting such as *City Lights* (1955) in terms of an exploration of colour relations, one that Mrkusich himself noted on the back of this canvas as the "STUDY OF THE ADVANCING + RECEEDING QUALITIES OF COLOURS". At that time Wystan Curnow considered this use of colour as engendering in the viewer "the feeling of seeing real colour as if for the first time, colour brought naked to the threshold of the eye." The focus and intensity of thought continued throughout the Sixties and Seventies, past the descriptions of Mrkusich painting as “colourfield” painting, and into the Eighties. Peter Leech at this time described the intensities and feelings for colour in these terms, that the “colouredness of surface in

146 Milan Mrkusich, “Colour is not mine alone. Colour just exists. Achromatic and chromatic colours are material facts”, from the undated letter to Rodney Wilson, held at the Auckland City Art Gallery Research Library.
147 Lewis Mrkusich, telephone conversation with the author on the 3/10/2004.
148 Verified by Jane Davidson, Assistant Curator, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.
150 Michael Dunn & Petar L. Vuletic (op. cit. 1972), p. 28.
Mrkusich's paintings comprises... the metaphysics of his art: the substance of his built
colour-worlds"^{151}. While colour is co-existent with surface form in all of his other painting
schemata, the Schema Nine paintings – with their uniformity of surface, the epitome of
unmodulated and un-moderated colour – present the intensities of thought and feeling for
colour in the purest terms.

Three Part Painting (White, Black, Red) 1992

Three Part Painting (Alchemical) II 1993 (3 panels, total size 762 x 2456 x 23mm)

Three Part Painting Achromatic/Yellow with Blue and Red (& Gold) 1993 (3 panels, each 1067 x 1067mm)

Three Part Painting Achromatic/Blue with Yellow and Red 1993

Three Part Painting Achromatic/Blue with Yellow and Red (& Gold) 1993 (3 panels, each 1067 x 1067mm)

Three Part Painting Achromatic/Red with Blue and Yellow 1993 (3 panels, each 1067 x 1067mm)

The tenth identifiable schema appears in 1993 and is signified by the words 'three part painting' in the title. *Three Part Painting (White, Black, Red)*, however, appears as a kind precursor to this schema in 1992, fulfilling only some of the demands of the schema.
The paintings of this tenth schema each present as a horizontally rectangular formation of three equal-sized square canvases equidistantly placed beside each other. The alignment of each panel in relation to the others forms a strong sense of rectangularity, almost as if created on a single canvas stretcher. The surface form of each panel is painted in a single modulated colour, each different from those around it. There is additionally, in all but Three Part Painting (White, Black, Red), the unusual feature in which Mrkusich has painted the sides of the canvas as they fold around the stretchers.

In these works the enormous surface-form threat to identity of object stemming from the separateness of the panels is literally pushed to the sides of each individual panel, with the coloured side-surfaces attempting to counterbalance the threat created by that divisive formation. Yet the disrupted and complex surface form and edge that jeopardises the integrity, also presents two separate forces that act to defend against the divisive threat.

With the first force, the eye works to complete the sharp rectangularity of the overall composition, to fill in the gaps left undefined by the disrupted edge. Similarly, Avenal McKinnon had recognised in the ‘segmented arc’ and ‘construction’ paintings of the early Eighties, a disruption in the painted geometries. Her claim was that “the stability and harmony of his finely-drawn divisions were undermined by their occasional subliminal disappearance”\(^\text{152}\), with the eye perceptually filling in the gap. In the Schema Ten paintings the continuity of edge is maintained similarly, through a perceptual expansion of what is there: the eye, historically used to recognising rectangularity in painting, and used also to recognising shapes, identifies the rectangularity despite the disruptions to it.

The second force comes from the coloured sides of the panels and the panel placement. Each panel is as thick as the stretcher and this portion of the canvas has been painted in a colour that is different from, but in some way related to, that of the central surface. In walking past these paintings, the coloured sides appear and disappear. From an oblique angle a coloured side fills the distance between the panels, the disruption to edge momentarily eliminated: the rectangularity of shape now real, not a perceptual expansion.

Further on, the colour fades and is no more than a stain on the gallery wall, with the eye unsure whether it is or is not there – whether it is a literal reflection or perceptual after-image. Meanwhile, shadows created by light falling on the panels take on a bridging function: their darkness fills the gap.

*Three Part Painting Achromatic / Yellow with Blue and Red (& Gold)* (1993) appears to the eye in this way. The achromatic panel on the left painted an atmosphere of light over dark – with a dark blue coloured side that links it to the under-painting of the central panel beside it. The centrally placed panel is a dark achromatic atmosphere made from the over-laying of darkened hues of black, blue and red, edged with a clear red that emphasises the red tones in the central surface. The right panel is a dense square of yellow, the atmosphere of which glows with green tints, this time surrounded by gold edging.

There is no sheen emanating from the central surfaces of this painting: panels demand attention to their respective hues, with their surfaces reinforced by the texture of canvas and offering – as it did in the *Chromatic Suites* – a surface quality from which it was possible to understand the recessive or projective qualities of colour. Surrounding the panels there is the aspect that originates from the coloured sides of the canvas: that quality at once a colour staining and shadowing that maintains the harmony of the painting by minimising the dividing forces of their three-part structure.
The eleventh schema is identified in paintings produced in 1995 that have titles beginning with the words ‘two areas’.

There is no possibility of understanding these two-part paintings in the same geometrical terms as those of Schema Ten, in which the forces working to destroy the homogeneity of the object are neutralised by the sharp rectangularity of the overall shape. In Schema Eleven the destructive force is more complex, as the two canvases that make up each of the paintings are purposefully asymmetrical: the panels on the left taller than those on the right, and the internal articulation of surface form is different in each. The left canvas – a straightforward vertically orientated rectangle of colour – is bordered on its far left by a stripe of what is usually a contrasting hue. The right canvas – a shorter vertically orientated rectangle – has a small, squared area of colour on the lower right which is a familiar geometric structure in Mrkusich’s oeuvre, evident for instance in Untitled Blue (1984) in Schema Two.

The paintings which characterise Schema Eleven do not have the sharp and concise geometric quality of edge of the previous multi-panel paintings like those of Schema Four, Five, Seven and Ten, or indeed of the more recent multi-panel paintings that will be identified as Schema Thirteen. Rather, the edge of these paintings is rough and frayed, a feature that draws attention to the materiality of the painted surface and canvas. It reinforces the integrity of object by asserting the literal canvas and painted surface of each painting: bringing to mind notions of the production processes involved in such objects and their status as human artefacts.
However, at the same time, this feature also provokes the opposing tension, challenging the unity of the object by drawing attention to the asymmetricality of the two canvases. The eye is drawn to the edge of these paintings by the disturbance and disruption, naturally tracking the inconsistencies of the external parameters of the painting and highlighting the asymmetry between the two canvases.

This feature is seen in *Two Areas Purple/Blue with Red and Blue Light* (1995), where the fraying of thread along the upper margins of canvas draws the eye to the unequal heights: a misalignment that threatens to put forward the canvases as separate entities. Yet the tension imposed by the internal surface form minimises this divisive effect as there is, in this schema, a geometric proportionality that binds the canvases together. The squared surface form on the right canvas is a proportion, not of its own shape, but rather of the left canvas. It is this feature that maintains the integrity of object as the eye draws the two canvases together relating the surface form geometrically from one to the other, perceptually harmonising them.
Schema Twelve

Chromatic Light Series 1996, Numbers 1-5 (consecutively from left to right)

Chromatic Light No. 1 1996
Chromatic Light No. 2 1996
Chromatic Light No. 3 1996
Chromatic Light No. 4 1996
Chromatic Light No. 5 1996
Chromatic Dark No. 1 1996
Chromatic Dark No. 2 1996
Chromatic Dark No. 3 1996
Chromatic Dark No. 4 1996
Chromatic Dark No. 5 1996

The twelfth schema is identified in the paintings of 1996 and is signified by the words 'chromatic light' or 'chromatic dark' followed by a number.

With this schema there is the return to single panel painting, in which the integrity of object is threatened by an articulation of surface form not unlike that observed in the much earlier
Chromatic Meta Grey No 1 (1969). There is, however, in the paintings of this twelfth schema a refined quality of colouredness of surface and surface form not seen in that earlier painting.

Each painting has a geometric division of surface into squares across the upper margin with another square on the far right descending toward, but not touching, the base. The sharply defined surface and squares of distinct colour act together as a force against the integrity of object. There is however a quality of interrelationship in the colouredness of surface – almost a continuity of colour – that undermines the destructive force of the surface form, with the colours acting to reveal their own particular connection to those around them and in this way managing to assert the integrity of object as the overwhelming quality.

In Chromatic Light No. 4 (1996), for instance, there are, across the top of the canvas, dark and light green squares followed by a square that is congruent in colour with the larger expanse of grey below. A red square lies on the right toward the base of the painting. It is the colour of this square that prompts a connection to the larger expanse of grey, as the eye sees the expanse in terms of that red, as though it were stained or the expanse glowing with what appears to be an under-layer of it. It is through this conjunction of colour that the eye returns to the upper squares of green, ready now to attempt just such a connection, looking for and finding a green under-layer – a kind of perceptual after image.

The colour connections and continuities identified in these paintings have a homogenising effect on the representational depth of the contrasting colours. The continuities of colour maintain the harmony of the object by their connectedness, while the colour relativities revoke the divisive qualities of surface form by lessening the recessive and projective possibilities of them. This is not a new technique, but its use in these paintings stands as evidence for the intensity of feeling for the whole object Mrkusich has. Piero della Francesca in the fifteenth century for instance, typically presented chromatically homogeneous surfaces, even though they comprised a variety of hues, by choosing to use de-saturated tones, like that seen in the Madonna del Parto (c1459), and reducing the conflicting dynamism of the colours. Mrkusich has achieved this same homogenising effect
of surface in the paintings of Schema Twelve in which the apparent conflict of colour is limited by the perceptual continuity of colour.
Schema Thirteen

Achromatic Primary 1997

Achromatic Blue with Yellow 1997

Achromatic Primary 1997 (1677 x 1892mm)
Achromatic Blue with Yellow 1997
Achromatic Secondary 1997
Achromatic Red with Green 1997
The thirteenth identifiable schema occurs within 1997 with the titles of these paintings beginning with the word ‘achromatic’.

The paintings with this schema return to a multi-panelled format. However, while there are echoes of the previous multi-panelled paintings in this schema, they are distinct from them in both size and articulation of surface form. Each of the Schema Thirteen paintings comprise either three or four separate, vertically-orientated rectangular canvases of varying heights and widths, spaced apart in the same manner as the Schema Ten and Eleven paintings.

The difficulty in seeing Schema Thirteen paintings as whole objects is more pronounced than in the earlier multi-panel paintings, as each panel of this schema asserts its separateness with the gallery wall taking its place between them. Opposing this though is the strong unifying qualities of the surface form schema: the relative proportionalities and scale of the panels and the alignment and colour relations of the squared areas on them.

The surface form of each of the individual panels is different from the others, comprising either a single undifferentiated achromatic colour, or a division of surface into geometric sections. *Achromatic Primary* (1997), the most complex painting within this group, has four panels. The first on the left is a single light achromatic hue. The second panel is shorter but wider, and the colour is a dark achromatic that has two squares located together centrally on the left edge of the canvas. The third panel is the same height as the second but is half the width and is divided into equal squares the same size as those on the second. The fourth panel is larger in height and width with one square placed with its upper margins in alignment with those squares in the two central canvases.

It is the calculated positioning of the panels and the squared internal surface definition and interrelationship that stops the panels from being regarded as separate paintings. As Edward Hanfling rightly points out “the gaps between the panels are small enough to allow
them to be seen as participating within the whole rather than as separate entities\textsuperscript{153}, and in this sense the eye understands the wall to be an achromatic or neutral feature of the painting, a ground for the painted colours to lie on.

Hanfling makes an interesting connection between the Schema Thirteen paintings and Mrkusich's \textit{Festival Painting} of 1954.\textsuperscript{154} He notes visual similarities of surface form between this painting and the Schema Thirteen paintings, with the distribution of colour in columns of varying heights and widths in both. Yet as Hanfling points out \textit{Festival Painting} has a blue ground and is a single framed canvas, with vast differences of surface form to that of the open, unframed panels of the Schema Thirteen paintings.

The eye does not perceive these paintings to be as vastly different from \textit{Festival Painting} as a formal understanding of the ground and framing disparity would rationally suggest. The blue ground acts in the same manner as the neutral wall of the gallery as a ground for the colours to lie on, with the eye assessing the colours and their representational depths, and seeing the columns as taking up different positions in relationship with those around them without the interference or limits imposed by a framing device. The eye provides the ground and framing in a less obtrusive manner than could be achieved by formally imposed devices.

There are though, several evident differences between \textit{Festival Painting} and the Schema Thirteen paintings. There are in \textit{Festival Painting} ambiguities of seeing that are not a feature of the Schema Thirteen paintings. The eye processes the numerous colour reactivities in \textit{Festival Painting}, understanding the areas of colour to be at times in front of as well as receding from those around them: the variable perceptions a product of whichever reactivity is dominant in the eye at the time. This visual ambiguity is replaced in the Schema Thirteen paintings by a secure visual understanding that comes from the clarity of surface form, from the straightforward geometries of colour and the separateness of the panels.


\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Loc. cit.}
However, the clarity gained in employing separate panels, increases the artistic problem of maintaining the cohesiveness of the painting. In *Achromatic Blue with Yellow* (1997), the varying heights and widths of the panels create the perception of all but the light achromatic panel on the right progressively receding into representational depth. This phenomenon of seeing is not new and was outlined by Leon Battista Alberti in his text *On Painting*. He wrote of it when offering evidence for the perspectival schema he codified in his discussion of the proper depiction of the human form in painting. He claimed,

"men depicted standing in the parallel furthest away are a great deal smaller than those in the nearer ones — a phenomenon which is clearly demonstrated by nature herself, for in churches we see the heads of men walking about, moving at more or less the same height, while the feet of those further away may correspond to the knee-level of those in front."\(^{155}\)

While he is obviously discussing the human form the visual phenomenon applies equally well to abstract forms of the kind in these Schema Thirteen paintings: the smaller forms appear to the eye to be further away from it, while the larger forms appear closer. The lack of a painted ground does not detract from the recessive and projective qualities of colour: rather, as already suggested, the neutrality of the wall becomes the ground into which the columns of colour are able to recede.

This understanding of surface form is similar to that identified in the Schema Four paintings in which the placement and proportional relationship of the canvases to each other encouraged a representational understanding of colour and surface form that parallels the recessive depth experienced in the proportionalities of a perspectival schema. In *Festival Painting* the perceptual depth of the colours is aided by the frame, with the historical conventions supplied by its rectangularity encouraging the eye to concertina the columns backward into representational depth in a fashion similar to the objects depicted in a perspectival painting.

\(^{155}\) Leon Battista Alberti (op. cit. 1991), p. 58.
As Hanfling pointed out, there is no framing device in the Schema Thirteen paintings, nothing to hold the separate panels together as one entity. To achieve the sense of unity Mrkusich introduces in this schema a particular articulation of surface form, in which there is an alignment of the top edges of the squares of colour: the eye forming a perceptually continuous horizontal line across the separate panels. This feature has the effect of linking the separate panels and surface elements together as one, while the neutral ground of the gallery wall aids this sense of unity, helping to fuse the separate elements together as one entity.
Schema Fourteen

Meta Grey Yellow 1998

Meta Grey Red 1998 (762 x 1524mm)
Meta Grey Yellow 1998 (762 x 1524mm)
Meta Grey Blue 1998 (762 x 1524mm)
Meta Grey Green (Dark) 1998 (762 x 1524mm)
Meta Grey Purple (Dark) 1998 (762 x 1524mm)
Meta Grey Orange (Dark) 1998 (762 x 1524mm)

The fourteenth schema occurs within 1998 and the paintings with this schema all begin their titles with the words ‘Meta Grey’.

The schema identified in these horizontally orientated rectangular paintings incorporates the straightforward geometric division of surface form identified in Schema Two, in which two squares are arranged below a rectangle, next to an undifferentiated square of colour, juxtaposed in a manner that recalls the area paintings of 1980-81. The threat to the integrity
of object stems from the apparent separateness of the painted colour areas and the tendency for these forms to break apart the painting and to be regarded as individual elements rather than as elements of a single entity. The colours that make up these paintings intensify this sensation especially in Meta Grey Yellow (1998), Meta Grey Red (1998) and Meta Grey Orange (Dark) 1998, in which the contrast between the yellow, red and orange squares and the achromatic colours around them is striking.

There are, in Schema Fourteen, two subtle unifying features that maintain the integrity of object. First, the colour has a harmonising effect in these paintings. This was observed by T. J. McNamara in his claim that the “arrangements of squares and rectangles harmonised with one rectangle of intense colour”\textsuperscript{156}. In these paintings the eye interprets there to be one hue underlying the entire canvas: a hue only revealed completely in the smaller central square. This provides a constant feature in each separate area, regarded as a tonal variation of the constant hue, as if it were modified by the application of additional layers of paint. The separate areas of the painting are held together by this deliberate use of colour. They are bound together by the constancy of colour, the divisive threat posed by the separateness of the surface form elements minimised. This was also a feature of the Schema Twelve paintings.

The second unifying feature in the Schema Fourteen paintings stems from the internal geometries of surface form. There is in this schema an unfolding geometry, as if there were a mathematical rule governing the surface articulation. In this way the whole canvas surface can be seen to be repeatedly halved, a process in which the separate areas produced are seen as integral parts of that total surface area - as either a half of it, or as a combined total of two halves. This geometric relationship functions like that of a Fibonacci sequence, the harmony of which can only be seen in terms the whole. It is this harmony, along with the harmony of colour that reinforces and maintains the integrity of object in this schema.

While the harmonising devices of this schema appear more complete in the darker hued paintings, it is in the paintings with the stark contrasts of colour that the schema has the

\textsuperscript{156} T. J. McNamara, 'Heroics from the Pacific edge', \textit{Weekend Herald}, 9-10\textsuperscript{th} October 1999.
greatest effect, as it is in these paintings that the assertive and destructive tendencies of the bright yellow, red and orange are restrained by the harmonies of both colour and geometry imposed by this schema. *Meta Grey Orange (Dark)* (1998) illustrates this: the darkness of the large square on the right, halved in shape in the form of the pale rectangle on the left, its appearance halved again in the form of the pale square below. The eye understands the shapes and colours as spiralling recessively toward the orange square. The process reverses with the intensity of orange spreading across the entire canvas, the dark colours stained by its hue, and the integrated harmonies across the canvas releasing the tension posed by the separateness of the stark colour.
Schema Fifteen

Painting IV Purple 2000

Painting VII Blue Light 1999
Painting VII Grey Light 1999
Painting II Yellow 2000
Painting IV Purple 2000
Painting V (date unknown)

A fifteenth schema is identified in paintings from 1999 and 2000 that have titles beginning with the word 'painting' followed by a Roman numeral and colour. This schema heralds a shift in the geometries incorporated in the paintings, a shift that is marked by the dominance of rectangular bands in an atmospheric field, one connected to the organisation
of surface form identified in the paintings of schema seven from 1991. This was a structural shift also identified by Edward Hanfling. In the essay accompanying the 2004 exhibition at the Sue Crockford Gallery he wrote, “there are earlier precedents for the structural basis of the current set of works. The 2001 – 2002 paintings relate back to paintings from 1991 such as *Achromatic with Cadmium Yellow Deep*”.\(^{157}\) There is however a major difference in the structural form of the earlier paintings from those that belong to Schema Fifteen and beyond, and that is that the earlier paintings were formed from three adjoining panels that did not describe a complete rectangle. The later paintings are all on a single rectangular canvas, with the rectilinear bands internal shapes on a coloured field.

The schema that articulates the surface form of these paintings imposes a strong horizontal band across the bottom edge of the paintings with a large atmospheric square of colour above, in which floats a single square or pair of squares. There is a contrast in the surface textures of each area: the lower band is a highly saturated darkened area of uniformly modulated colour while the large square above is an area in which the consecutive layers of paint loosely merge to form a soft atmosphere that the eye can sink into. The square or squares placed in the upper reaches of this atmospheric colour appear sharply defined against its softened quality, yet reveal the underlying textures of the colour that surrounds them as a trace beneath its thin layer.\(^{158}\)

The challenge to the unity of this schema comes with the sharply divisive geometric outlines of the base rectangle and small squares above. It is Mrkusich’s colourist tendencies that avert such a destructive event, as there is in this schema a melding of colour and surface texture and echoing of surface geometries that provide the opposing tension to minimise the separating effect. These devices were also a feature of Schema Fourteen also and hold the surface form intact in the subsequent schema just as effectively.


\(^{158}\) While not discussing the grid *per se* in ‘Animating Abstraction’, (Sue Crockford Gallery, 2003) Edward Hanfling made much of the floating squares in these paintings, using their form to initiate discussion about the paintings functioning as ‘eyes’, in what seems to be a reinterpretation of Ian Wedde's thoughts in his 1984 newspaper article, 'Observer Scrutinised by Mrkusich works'. In writing of the squares of colour in this way Hanfling takes the animation of surface beyond a simple perceptually expanded formalism.
*Painting IV Purple* (2000) illustrates the harmonising effects of the geometries and colour of this schema. In this painting there is a stark divisive contrast between the rectangular band of densely saturated darkness at the base of the canvas and the simple geometric square of red against the loosely-textured purple hue. This effect occurs as the dominance of the geometric elements enables their forms to be seen as separate elements rather than as contiguous with the soft atmosphere beside them.

There are however, forces which hold the areas of colour together as one entity, that stop the eye from swinging the purple hue back and away from the darkened rectangular band, as well as holding the red square within its purple confines. The base of this large canvas acts, that is, as a stabilising ground for the eye, one that appears to take its place on the surface of the canvas. Its darkness is echoed across the purple hue in a mesh-like fashion, maintaining a consistency of colour across the canvas. The red square promotes its own sense of continuity, with its colour reflected throughout the atmospheric purple hue as if alerting the eye to its composition.

Similarly, the geometries of surface form also echo across the canvas of *Painting IV Purple*. It is the connection of squareness to rectangularity – a simple expansion from the red square through the purple expanse to the over all shape of the canvas – that again bolsters the strength of the integrity of object.
Schema Sixteen

*Painting IV Gold* (1999)

*Painting IV Gold* (1999)
*Painting I Silver* (2000)

This schema is identified in paintings from 1999 and 2000. The titles of these paintings begin with the word 'painting' followed by a Roman numeral and a named precious metal.

This is a related variant of Schema Fifteen and in these paintings there are similar forces at work. There are, however, different internal structures driving these forces. Both *Painting IV Gold* (1999) and *Painting I Silver* (2000) are square canvases, rather than the rectangular shape of the preceding schema, with a band extending fully along the lower edge and partially down each side of the canvas. The right band does not connect with the base band, as does the band on the left, nor does either reach the upper margins of the canvas. In the
manner of the late seventies *Achromatics* there is a continuation of colour into these areas from the larger central expanse.

The unity of these objects is again maintained through congruence of colour, but it does so without the geometric complicity of the others. In these paintings, prompted by the apparent discontinuity or disruption of the bands, there is instead the sense that the central colour continues right to the edges of these canvases — the sense intimated by the small squares of continuous surface in the upper corners and the lower right. From this the bands appear to lie on top of the large central square, enclosing the central colour in a further effort toward preserving the homogeneity of object.
This seventeenth schema appears in 2001, with the titles of these paintings all beginning with the words ‘painting achromatic’ followed by a named colour, or colours.

In these paintings, slim rectangular bands that are vertically orientated lie on the canvas in close proximity to a square and a triangular component. Unlike the preceding schema the placement of the slim rectangular bands on the expanse of colour is more central and no longer encloses the entire canvas. Because of this, the threat to the integrity of object in
these paintings is stronger. Added to this, the colour of the separate elements has a divisive quality, especially in the more vividly coloured elements, a feature that further jeopardises to disturb the integrity of object with its dominance.

Yet the eye identifies in these geometric planes an architectural quality, in which each geometric element is seen as a coloured structure that relates to the others, as elements of a building ideally relate. This quality is reinforced by the large expanse of achromatic surface surrounding the geometric elements, as it provides a soft neutral ground that does not disturb the recessive and projective qualities of coloured forms it surrounds. Its continuity across the canvas holds the elements together as one, the achromatic field maintaining the integrity of object. As with the paintings of Schema Fourteen, the divisive quality of the vivid hue is overcome by a perceptual continuity of colour, with the achromatic field revealing in its depths an echo of the vivid hue.

In Painting Achromatic with Yellow 2001, a strikingly pale rectangular band is placed vertically toward the left, its position held away from the edge of the canvas by a yellow triangle and from the lower edge of canvas by a small dark square. A dark band of the same size as the first is positioned perpendicular to it, describing by its position an achromatic band below and rectangle above. The colour of the pale vertical band dominates the others, forcing itself closer to the eye, while the other elements lie perceptually beyond it.

The vertical band threatens to divide the canvas into two areas, yet against this the artist does two things. First, he disrupts the pale band: it does not reach the lower edge of canvas, and a dark square takes its place instead. Secondly, the position of the yellow triangle and the dark band are such that the eye connects the yellow triangle with the dark horizontal band behind the dominant pale band: the sense of continuity of form is secure despite the threat.

The subtle echoing geometry of the rectangular surface forms reinforces the sense of representational depth perceived and, paradoxically, the wholeness of the painted object
itself, since the smaller area acts as an inserted echo of the entire canvas, emphasising the wholeness of that canvas shape.

The vividly coloured geometric shapes in this schema provide are disruptive elements to the harmony of the painting, most obvious in *Painting Achromatic with Blue and Red* (2001). In this painting the achromatic field takes up the vivid red in its composition such that the red hue is reflected across it, thus homogenising the entire surface of the canvas.
Schema Eighteen

This eighteenth schema occurs within 2002. All the paintings employing this schema begin their titles with the word ‘untitled’ followed by a Roman numeral.

In each painting using this schema there are three or four rectilinear bands positioned horizontally and vertically. These are placed internally on a coloured field, the shapes threatening to be seen as separate elements, breaking apart the surface: an appearance exaggerated in those geometric shapes that are more vividly coloured. In opposition to this the congruent colours in each painting have a harmonising effect across the surface, the relationships of colour holding them together on the field. The position of the geometric forms also stand against the danger posed to the wholeness of object, as the rectilinear forms relate to the edge of the canvas assuming its enclosing form and character.
Untitled I (2002) illustrates these dialectically opposing effects. This painting is an achromatic field on which are placed four separate bands. Extending from the top right corner, a pale grey rectilinear band follows the upper edge of the canvas to its midpoint; below it a smaller blue band stretches upward from the base of the canvas its own width away from the canvas edge. A dark horizontally orientated band touching the left edge of the canvas continues two-thirds of the distance across the canvas and has a light band extending perpendicularly from it. In each instance, these bands relate directly to one edge of canvas, reinforcing the nature of the canvas as an entire entity – as a single rectangular surface with edges.

In Untitled I the field appears to the eye to be made up of all of the hues of the geometric shapes that lie on it. They are melded together in a manner which leaves each colour accessible to the eye. There is a constant sense of the red, blue and achromatic hues in the field: yet without the obviousness of brushmarks of the ‘colour field’ paintings such as Painting Purple (1975), or individual specks in the hardboard panels of a painting such as Project II Blue (1982). The formation of colour in these works is infinitely more subtle and it renders the individual geometries of the surface form as elements of a unified whole, unified by the colour harmonies.
Schema Nineteen

Painting Orange 2001

Painting Dark 2001 (608 x 508mm)
Painting Green 2001 (608 x 508mm)
Painting Blue 2001 (610 x 508mm)
Painting Red 2001 (761 x 610mm)
Painting Orange 2001 (762 x 610mm)
Untitled Dark Series Red 2003 (990 x 762mm)
Untitled Dark Series Blue 2003 (990 x 762mm)
Untitled Dark Series Green 2003 (990 x 762mm)
This nineteenth schema appears in the paintings from 2001 and 2003. Those painted in 2001 have titles beginning with the word 'painting' followed by a named colour while those painted in 2003 are on slightly larger canvases and have titles beginning with the words 'untitled dark series' followed by a named colour.

This schema again incorporates the rectilinear bands employed in the preceding four schema. Schema Nineteen though has a simpler definition of surface form: the artist chooses to place only two horizontal geometric bands in each field of colour. In that feature these paintings recall the schema of a much earlier painting, *Blue Area* from 1974, and even *Ambient Gold* from 1967, the difference being that the Schema Nineteen paintings are without the linear triangulations of corner employed in the earlier paintings, and there is an increase in the colour variation between the bands and the field.

There is a noticeable variation within this schema, a difference in surface between the heavily textured surfaces of *Painting Green* (2001) and *Untitled Dark Series Red* (2003) and the smoother, more refined surface of *Painting Orange* (2001). As well, there are two variations of rectilinear band identified within this schema, a deeper band that stretches across the entire width of the upper reaches of the canvas, like that in *Painting Red* (2001), or alternatively an upper band that is narrower in depth and stops short of the left edge like that in *Painting Blue* (2001). In the variations that occur within this schema, Mrkusich reveals the vast array of potential treatments of painted surface he has at his disposal.

The nineteenth schema is identified by a coloured band lying directly across and in contact with the upper edge of the canvas with another stretching across the lower reaches of the canvas a band's width away from both the base and right edge of the canvas. The remainder of the vertically orientated rectangular canvas is a continuous colourfield of varying texture. The threat to the integrity of object is similar to that posed in the previous four schemata, as the surface form of this schema is also that of a colour field marked by the placement of rectilinear bands. In this schema the danger is posed by the placement of
the rectilinear forms on the otherwise contiguous field of colour, at once strengthened and muted by the colour of these forms.

These forces are apparent in *Painting Green* (2001). Here the dark almost black band placed next to the upper edge of the canvas is striking in its dense saturation of hue, its shape next to both the edge of canvas and the soft complex of the green field sharply defined by the eye: its separation from the field a substantial tension. The blue band below appears softer to the eye, its form posing less risk to the unity of the object. It is in seeing the colour of this band that these tensions start to disperse as the eye moves easily between the blue band into the green-hued field, the underlying colour responding to it.

The texture of paint on the field is not smooth nor is it a single unmodulated hue. Rather, its form reveals the traces of the artist’s brush, and hints at under and over-layers of colour. Its very form harmonises with the geometric elements: making their colour contiguous with it. The surface of the field then is not merely green: it is a surface colour that is green, blue and almost black because in the process of building up the coloured surface the application of green was left to lie fully saturated in places, dragged to a translucent quality in others, revealing the continuation of blue and black below. That the bands do not extend completely across the canvas only aids an understanding of continuity: the eye sees in their place a continuity of the field.

Mrkusich’s skill with colour is revealed in the way he modified the texture and modulation of colour within this schema and maintained the balance of the integrity of object in the different variants. In *Painting Red* (2001), for instance, the colourfield has minimal variation, has none of the suggestion of brush or paint that characterises *Painting Green*. Yet the field appears to be contiguous with the geometric elements that mark is surface, its subtle composition and the barely perceptible modulations within it prompt the same perception of the wholeness of object.
There are two central preoccupations in this thesis. The first appears in Chapter One – in the form of an idea initially based around Meyer Schapiro’s notion of the humanity of abstraction, in which he draws attention to the qualities of thought and feeling recognisable in it. As Meyer Schapiro once said, “It is primarily in modern painting and sculpture that such contemplativeness and communion with the work of another human being, the sensing of another’s perfected feeling and imagination, becomes possible.” Endeavouring to understand such recognition led to the consideration of two fundamental dispositional structures of mind: Immanuel Kant’s tri-partite philosophical structure and the dynamic psychological structure of mind put forward by Sigmund Freud. These structures, dispositional in their operations, offer a way of thinking about art which accounts for the affinities and intensities of feeling Schapiro recognised in the colours and forms of abstract art and that are recognisable in the painted abstraction of Milan Mrkusich.

The reappraisal of the process of looking at painting, which is the focus of Chapter Two, involves consideration of the specialised type of representational seeing which we enact when looking at paintings – what Richard Wollheim claims draws on the two-fold nature of our experience of seeing a painting. With representational seeing the viewer employs those same dispositional structures of mind put forward by Kant and Freud which the artist employs in the production of a painting. What the reappraisal draws attention to is just what is denied by formalist approaches that ignore the representational features of the experience of looking at painting. They provide a less than satisfactory account of the visual experience we have, and deny the complex humane psychology of paintings such as those produced by Milan Mrkusich. Chapters One and Two offer the tools for understanding and seeing abstract painting with what is described as an expanded formalist approach, which brings into being a humane psychological understanding of what is experienced when looking at modernist abstraction.

It is with this approach that the character of Mrkusich's paintings is best identified. Meyer Shapiro once wrote, "The work of art is an ordered world of its own kind in which we are aware, at every point, of its becoming". In our commerce with the painted abstraction of Milan Mrkusich employing the expanded formalist approach – when looking at the controlled order he imposed in each of his each of his paintings – we are aware of qualities of thought and feeling made concrete in that painted order. It is the accumulation of accounts of the individual ordering schema, like that undertaken in the work of Dunn, Vuletic and Leech, and in Chapter Four of this thesis, which most clearly reveals the protean character of Mrkusich's entire oeuvre.

The humane psychology of Mrkusich's painting is further captured by this approach: recognisable most especially in the integrative psychological processes that guide the outcome of each of the paintings. These were the processes illuminated by their connection to the intensities of feeling demonstrated in the critical writing of Adrian Stokes and in his correlation of those intensities with the psychoanalytic ideas of Melanie Klein: to an explanation of the paintings in terms of their being the product of a dispositional structure of mind. In Mrkusich's abstract paintings, this is exhibited in his characteristic allegiance to the sense of integrity in each painted object he produces. In each painting any divisive qualities, such as the geometric breaking up or variation of colour across the surface is countered by a painted feature that acts to maintain the sense of unity, of the wholeness of that object.

Considering the humane psychology of Mrkusich's modernist abstraction this way elicits the question whether Rosalind Krauss – and post modern thought generally – may not have overlooked the phenomenology of modernism and the complexity of such a case as Mrkusich. It is my puzzlement concerning Krauss's work on modernist painting that prompted the initial thoughts for this thesis: in particular, her argument for the repetition of what she contends to be the grid-as-figure. Is it perhaps that Krauss argues as she does in

order to ensure “the death of abstract painting”? 161 Apocalyptic declarations of the death or end of painting are ubiquitous in twentieth century discussion, since at least Dada and Duchamp. My contention however is that Krauss’s claims – which might lead to such a conclusion – are falsely premised.

The protean character of Mrkusich’s grids alongside his colourist expertise reveals this to be so. Furthermore, it is this same changeable character which presents a source of endless fascination for those viewing his abstraction. The variations of ordered and serene surface form and colour, plus his allegiance to the unity and wholeness of the object produces what seems to be an unlimited number of possible combinations: with the catalogues of Dunn, Vuletic, Leech and myself identifying only a selection of them. From this ground of constant change there is no stasis or repetition of the kind Krauss would have us believe, only a continuous diversity of form and colour. Characteristically it is a protean grid in Mrkusich’s abstraction, and in an accumulated account of the formal qualities we see evidence of that change.

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