

For more than three decades, Roy Good's art has integrated shape and form to charm and challenge the eye. WARREN FEENEY meets the architect of pure geometricism.

These aren't paintings. These are designs and they shouldn't be in an art gallery!" declared Hamish Keith in a 1969 review of an exhibition of Roy Good's geometric, shaped-abstract paintings.

Keith's response was more than just harsh criticism. In the late 1960s, he was the country's pre-eminent arts writer and champion of contemporary New Zealand painting and its accompanying agenda of a search for a national identity. Hard-edged figurative paintings by artists such as Don Binney, Michael Smither and Robin White ruled in New Zealand's best contemporary public and dealer galleries. Good recalls that although Keith made some positive remarks about his work, he felt marginalised by his response.

Unlike the contemporary regionalism of Binney, Good had no interest in paintings that interpreted or represented the real world. His work had its origin in international arts practice and Russian artists such as Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin and the pure abstraction of Piet Mondrian, Max Bell and Frank Stella.

The reality of Good's minimalist work resided in the experience of paintings that operated within their own laws of colour, space, shape and form and their ability to charm and challenge the viewer with their very existence as objects of contemplation.

Good, born in Timaru in 1945, attended the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts from 1963, graduating in 1965. Like many of the art school's graduates in the early 1960s, he pursued a tentative modernism, caught between the representational and the manners and gestures of European abstraction. However, Good observes that his interest in painting had always resided in abstraction and, when he moved to Auckland in 1966, a firm ideological shift in his conception of what a work of art could be took place. By the early 1970s he had developed his signature shaped, minimalist paintings of triangles, octagons and lintels and become part of a small group of abstract painters associated with Auckland art dealer Petar Vuletic. It was a stable that included Gordon Walters, Phillip O'Sullivan, Milan Mrkusich, Geoff Thornley and Ian Scott.

Commenting on Good's retrospective 2007 exhibition, *In Good Form*, J B Trezise noted that, "unlike Gordon Walters, who hit upon an abstract form that New Zealanders could interpret as koru-like, Good's work utilises

pure geometricism, leaving no room for viewers' projection."

Good is a friend of Walters and admirer of his art. His painting may be more overtly international in its iconography, but in its consideration of space and form, it shares much in common with Walters. Good modestly acknowledges that Walters, as well as Mrkusich, Stella and Max Bill, "were masters".

His current exhibition at the Centre of Contemporary Art highlights three seminal series of work from 1972 to 1974, and also includes new paintings from 2003 to 2009 based on conceptual drawings from this earlier period. The idea of shaping a painting in a form other than a rectangle was fundamental to the early abstract work of Malevich and reached maturity and prominence in the work of Stella in the 1960s.

The colour, shape and spatial concerns of Good's minimalist paintings are described by the artist as "an integration of shape and form". On the painted surfaces that he creates, advancing and receding plans evolve and transform, voids become solid and colours move between controlling and complementing the spaces that they occupy. As shaped objects that inhabit and engage with the environment of the art gallery, Good also acknowledges that he is equally comfortable with the description of his work as architectural in its intentions.

However, if Good's art is so connected to a familiar experience of the world in which we live, why is it so difficult to believe that his minimalist abstract paintings and those of his contemporaries have been ignored and misunderstood by the majority of arts commentators and curators in New Zealand for more than 30 years?

Good notes that those artists associated with Vuletic were criticised for "copying the Americans". At the heart of such comments resides a lingering post-war faith in the misguided notion that abstraction was somehow irrelevant to New Zealand. Good maintains it was only in 2003, with the survey exhibition *Vuletic and His Circle: 1972-76* at the Gus Fisher Gallery, that serious recognition of the presence and influence of internationalism as a vital force in this country has begun to take place, opening "a door to further consideration of pure abstraction in New Zealand".

He also observes that Vuletic may have inadvertently contributed to the challenges facing abstraction. Vocal and forthright in its defence, Vuletic was never shy of pointing out to the arts fraternity that

international abstraction was marginalised, often at the expense of questionable advocacy policies in the arts in New Zealand. Opening an exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery, Vuletic proceeded to castigate gallery staff and those attending over the debatable construction of a "Colin McCahon mythology".

In 2011, Good's shaped abstract paintings from the 1970s still look as he hoped they might, "as though they have been painted today". Paradoxically, like the work of his contemporaries and the European and American traditions that have informed and inspired his practice, Good's refinement of painting to its essential elements has given expression to the orchestration of a rich body of work that is potentially as infinite as it is a return to a point of beginning. Good's art engages the viewer in the complexities of the act of painting, shifting attention away from the experience of representation to an awareness of the physicality, tangibility and spatial truths and deceptions of the painted surfaces in front of them. These are great paintings, perfectly located in the environment of an art gallery.

□ *Roy Good: Triangles, Octagons and Lintels*. Centre of Contemporary Art till February 12.

