

THE GREAT AND THE GOOD: AN UNBROKEN LINE

“The emotion of beauty is always obscured by the appearance of the object. Therefore, the object must be eliminated from the picture.” – Mondrian

“All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.” – Walter Pater

In Aotearoa New Zealand, modernist painting tends to conjure up images of scriptural texts on black backgrounds and modestly stylised hills. In the midst of this, however, was a small oasis of painters who were more interested in the sublime transcendence of colour and geometry liberated from all the nationalist birds, bush, and narrative at a time when the country’s most lucrative art award was the Kelliher art prize for realistic landscape.

In the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, abstract painters Milan Mrkusich, Ian Scott in his lattice phase, Geoff Thornley, Phillip O’Sullivan and Gordon Walters fell into the orbit of renowned Auckland art dealer Petar Vuletić. The rest of the art establishment didn’t know what to make of them and Vuletić, at least for a while, gave them a home.

West Auckland-based Roy Good was also part of that group and remains the most significant living representative of New Zealand’s flirtation with late modernist abstraction. His has been an interesting life and career.

Born in Timaru in 1945, Roy studied at the School of Fine Arts in Christchurch in the early 1960s. He quickly worked out that Auckland was where the energy was and found his way into working in the design department for NZBC TV, which became TVNZ in 1980.

In Roy’s psychedelic-lite set designs for pop music television shows *C’mon* in the 1960s and *Happen In* in the 1970s display the artist’s enduring interest in Op Art, the work of Bridget Riley in particular. In the 1980s and 1990s he was a high-profile graphic designer, responsible for many well-known New Zealand logos – TVNZ, South Pacific Television, the Sesquicentennial 1990 kōtuku white heron, two New Zealand Expo pavilion logos and many more.

Perhaps this explains Roy’s strong graphical sensibility that once caused Auckland artworld doyen Hamish Keith to decry of his work in a 1969 review, “These aren’t paintings. These are designs and they shouldn’t be in an art gallery!”

But, of course, they *were* paintings, and some of the most innovative and vibrant paintings on view in any New Zealand gallery at the time. Public taste hadn’t quite caught up yet, though an informed elite of connoisseurs appreciated this pioneering art.

SCOTT ■ LAWRIE

Roy kicked against the stylised figuration of the prevailing popular regionalism and its cloying sentimentality. His heart was with the Bauhaus, Mondrian, Malevich, Frank Stella, Frederick Hammersley, and of course, Riley, as he ambitiously strove for international contemporary standards.

Unlike his good friend Walters, Roy chose to eschew the allure of a motif that could be interpreted with a message. Instead, he turned directly to the Pythagorean mysteries of geometry itself, the division of flat space, applying something approximating the scientific method to discovering the aesthetic possibilities of basic forms in all their variations.

That is not to say there aren't hints of a narrative. There are definite allusions to real world inspirations in some of the more poetic titles, playful and humorous. This is by no means sterile or overly intellectual art. On the contrary, it is full of lively spirit and humanity, implication, suggestion and mystery.

This purity of space and form is counterpointed by sensitively painterly colour fields that have an echo of another friend, Mrkusich, to them, working with the weave of the jute in a tactile way in a dry-brushed scumble, letting the odd flaw catch the paint. Like the ambiguous background to a Chardin still life. Sometimes the paint is thick and shiny.

Roy's shaped canvases recall Frank Stella's experimentation with turning the painting into a kind of sculpture that occupied space in its own right. They are inevitably exciting, enlivening any wall they are hung on. They fulfil the role of being decorative, but at the same time full of wit and élan. Never has minimalism felt so chock full of things going on. Roy's imagination keeps pace with his consistent technical virtuosity.

When attention shifted to the eclectic narratives of postmodernism and identity in the 1980s and 1990s, Roy kept on trucking with the infinite possibilities of geometric abstraction, the epitome of non-objective art, and continues to demonstrate that it has something important to say and nothing to prove.

Even in the twenty-first century when the idea of pure abstraction has the musty taint of the museum about it, Roy's paintings shock us out of our complacency with their freshness, presence, and contemporary relevance. He remains true to the original igniting energy of the movement.

Freed from the expectations of representation and meaning, the audience is invited to experience Roy's paintings as objects, share space with them, rather than attempt to peer through them into some illusionary space beyond or imagine them to be representations of some real life object.

Reputations have a habit of following the twenty-nine-year long orbit of Saturn. In 2007 Lopdell House Gallery (now Te Uru Waitākere) in Titirangi held the survey exhibition *In Good Form – the Abstract Art of Roy Good, 1967-2007*. This was accompanied by a book of the same title.

SCOTT ■ LAWRIE

A decade later in 2018 Te Uru Waitākere hosted another survey exhibition, *Parallel Universe – The Art and Design of Roy Good*, again accompanied by a book of the same title. The following year the show toured to Christchurch at CoCA the Centre of Contemporary Art.

Even now after five decades Roy shows no signs of slowing down or running out of ideas, nor is his abstract aesthetic anywhere near played out yet. His work continues to astonish and seduce, still discovering novel facets to form in an elegant and compelling argument for the utility and sublimity of modernist abstraction.

No contemporary PoMo zombie formalism cycling though the here, folks. This is the authentic real deal, an unbroken line of paintings straight to the source of non-representational geometric abstraction. The years have only refined and polished their splendour.

Andrew Paul Wood, July 2022