Art in Australia has a history of conflict between the Figurative and Abstraction. This arises largely from a perceived need to construct some sort of National Identity; what Bernard Smith called “our own Mythology.”

Debate raged in the 1950s and 60s even coming to blows. The Abstractionist saw the Figurative artists as parochial and in turn the Figurative artists accused the Abstractionists of vanity, elitism and trickery and used the well known story of the Emperor’s New Clothes to make their point.

The Exhibition we have come to see today is entitled Vibratory Fields and Surfaces. An exhibition exploring the abstraction of territory and space.

(new work by Celia Gullett, Ian Jones, Jennifer Keeler-Milne and Gordon Waters)

But what do all the heavily laden terms mean?

Well, our territory is the area in which we feel comfortable, familiar; it’s a comfort zone. Territory implies an area of knowledge, interest or perhaps activity. Territory also implies boundaries.

Space, on the other hand denies boundaries; space is what you have when the boundaries are removed.

Abstraction challenges both.

The territory in question here is that of art making

- we all have a little knowledge of it
- we certainly have an interest in it
- and some of us have a go at it from time to time

So, what is it about art making that sets it apart from other activities? What are the characteristics of art making? Why do people get steamed up about it?
I am going to bite the bullet and construct a framework for what I think is going on here.

The process of making art in its pure, essential, abstract sense such as we see in this exhibition, cannot be other than free, open, progressive and humanist.

- Humanist because, as far as I know, we are the only species that engages in this kind of activity for no reason other than that defined by the activity itself. Making a mark is one of the first things a human being does. It is a celebration of our humanity.

Free, because it requires a suspension of all figurative association and representation, belief and dogma. It demands an unencumbered journey through experimentation, learned processes and technical effects. As Gordon Waters reminds us “a journey laden with risk and doubt” but a journey in which we are free to take those risks and to harbour those doubts.

Open because once enquiry is closed art making ceases to be art making. When we stop asking questions we stop finding out things. Art making is a form of questioning, a form of play. Art poses questions to which there is never only one answer.

Progressive because the vibrations set in motion by art making, on the surface of the world and of thought, are fragile yet positive, life affirming pulses, evidence of a fine mind at play. And at the end of all this something more exists, something good and fine.
Celia

French Abstractionist pioneer, Denis Serusier famously wrote “a picture, before it is a war horse, a female nude, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a particular order”.

The truth of this observation is clear in Celia’s work, in which she traces the nature and behaviour of pigments and surface on an almost forensic level. She has been able to control and manipulate these behaviours by mixing encaustic with pigment to give a milky softness to the colours in some instances, and an intensity of colour through layering in others. Control and manipulation are probably unfortunate terms because what is created is more a dialogue between, or a coming into being of the spiritual and physical properties of colour and surface. In this way colour and surface become the subject of the picture. Celia describes the relationships which she sets up between colour and surface, in terms of songs, of dialogue, of calling out and of speaking, and indeed the pictures have a musical, theatrical quality. They do call out to us, they do sing, and occasionally they startle us with their power and simplicity. Space is defined by the needs of the subject. Territories overlap. The boundaries of music and drama are blurred with the qualities of colour, pigment and surface.
Ian

Territory and Space in Ian Jones work are complex constructions which draw upon the visual static of oppositional marks, the organic against the grid. Both sets or series of marks agitate and tickle the surface. The grid slides to and fro refusing to be held down, while the organic marks dance and jostle one another. Although the varieties of marks which make up these pictures seem to have some ancestral origins in the natural world, they are at the same time, themselves, outside of their familiar territory, called upon to function entirely in pictorial terms.

Ian’s explorations of the territory of mark making has resulted in the development of an “abstract language” in which gestural drawing is juxtaposed with the grid and with remnants of other disturbances and the processes of layering and erasure, adding and eliminating. Putting it on and rubbing it off, as Mike Birtchnell liked to call it,

Jennifer

Jennifer’s work explores the characteristics of light. Not so much a language of marks here but rather, it is as if light is her palette and her brush. Colours are diffused, constantly moving, merging and re-emerging, dissolving into luminous surfaces.
Gordon

Discovery was the key impulse in Gordon’s art making. There was always a chance that the next corner could lead to something new, something important, something beautiful, something more beautiful.

He became fascinated with line.

In the little works, the variety and energy of his lines deserve to occupy the whole field. They are important and they are beautiful.

The white of the paper does not just hold the lines and colours, it is part of the picture.

The synthesis between the organic and the geometric qualities of the lines evokes the essential humanist quality of the activity which produced them.

In the larger works, the same vitality is captured and the lines become surface, surrounding and seducing the viewer. In the Morning picture, “Walk Into My Morning”, colour and line shift to and fro, back and forth creating a luminous golden atmosphere that can be smelt and heard as much as seen.

I was once told by a teacher that every line or mark in a picture was important; that if you blocked out a line and the picture didn’t work anymore then it was a perfect picture.

I doubt if Gordon would have settled for perfection in this way. I think he would have preferred to go on exploring and discovering. To Gordon “the
resolution, after all, was never as important as the journey”.

Before I conclude I want to offer a re-reading of The Emperor’s New Clothes. In my version of the story:

THE LITTLE BOY is the enquiring mind of the artist/observer; the voice that asks the important questions. He is off on his journey of discovery. He’s OK

THE EMPORER well, he is a little bit thick perhaps but he is comfortable in his own skin AND he is willing to believe that something exists that is so fine and so beautiful that it can’t be seen, it can barely be imagined.. WHAT’S WRONG WITH THAT?

THE DECEITFUL TAILORS end up with just their own artifice and malice. (sometimes they also end up with the money, unfortunately)

In this beautiful exhibition we are treated to four very different was of going about the exploration of surface, of colour and the endless variety of line and mark but also and importantly, we have taken the chance to step back and revisit our understanding of the territory of art making. Our reward is this mass of evidence of four very fine minds at play.

I commend the work to you and have much pleasure in declaring the Exhibition open.