

# George Johnson

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**G**EORGE JOHNSON'S focused exploration of shape, line and colour – and the juxtaposition of each – has produced works that are just as relevant to contemporary society as they were when he made his first abstract works in the 1950s.

His unswerving faith in pure abstraction and its ability to move the human spirit has resulted in a body of work of ongoing maturity and sophistication. Few Australian artists have matched his rigour and consistency. He's notched up an exhibiting career spanning 60 years.

Born in New Zealand in 1926, he moved to Melbourne in 1951 and became one of the vanguard of young artists experimenting with abstraction in the late '50s and early '60s. Having already come under the influence of Dutch De Stijl and Russian Suprematist artists, Johnson then spent the greater part of his life exploring a personal language of geometric abstraction. Through a focused and continued exploration of shape, line, juxtaposition and colour, he has produced a family of forms with a syntactical subtlety that continues to be relevant to contemporary society. *Artist Profile* visited his studio to gain insight into the working processes of this unique abstractionist.

**You did not experience a formal art education until after you moved to Australia. What was it, then, that initially led you to art?**

After I left school – which I did not enjoy – I realised that the expression of ideas that came from within was of more importance to me. After rather solitary work in the country I moved to Wellington in New Zealand where my brother was a poet who belonged to an interesting set of poets, artists and thinkers. We shared a flat near the university and were surrounded by people who were discussing all kinds of things. There were new ideas in the air. These were people discovering the world, so to speak. Wellington was a hive of industry and there was a lot of freedom of thought back then.

**Despite the isolation of New Zealand, you came into contact with the most up-to-date ideas about painting.**

I don't think New Zealand was isolated. It was directly after the war and a lot was happening. Many people fled Europe to come to New Zealand and then there were the Dutch who left Indonesia in the aftermath of world upheaval, one of whom was Theo Schoon who became a friend. He introduced me to Bauhaus ideas. Meeting such people was an introduction to a new world and my mind was ready to receive it all. The painter Gordon Walters, who had travelled overseas, also became a friend. He introduced me to the new ideas he had discovered on his travels and we both met up again in Australia.

**As an avid reader, what were the most significant influences and ideas that you encountered through your discussions with other artists in New Zealand and Australia?**

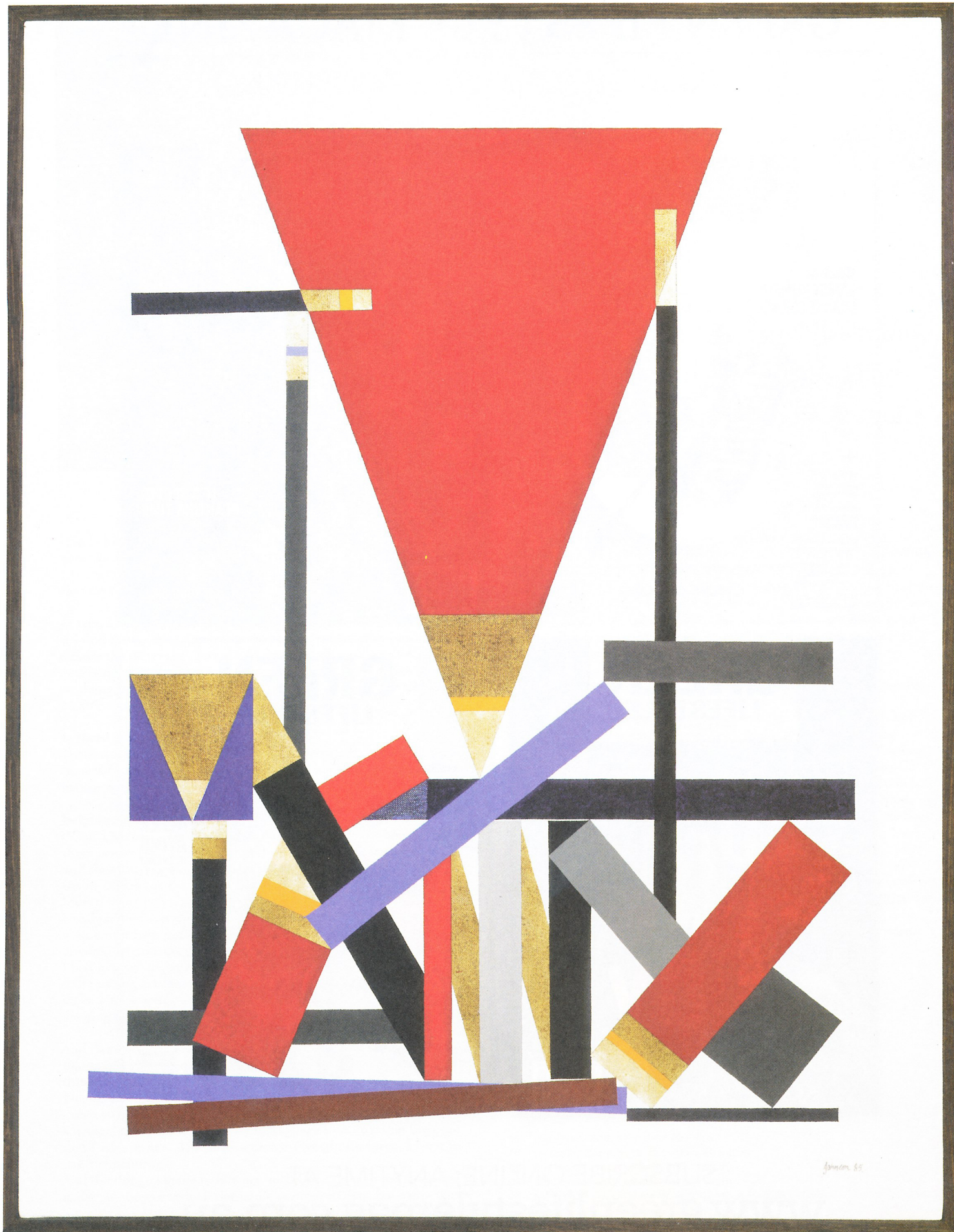
Everything was discussed: poets and poetry, art and artists and the major literary works of the day. Gordon Walters showed me an issue of the French magazine *Art d'aujourd'hui* that introduced us to the American abstract expressionists. The art of people like Pollock, Klein, Rothko and Ad Reinhardt was a revelation. Theo Schoon was documenting Maori art and introduced me to the expressive power of primitive and tribal art. The influence of this has been a driving force throughout my life and something I have never forgotten. It led to my interest in Peru and the stone structures at Machu Picchu, where I later travelled.

In Melbourne, everyone used to meet regularly at the Swanston Family Hotel on Friday nights and discuss their ideas about art. Melbourne was a wonderful place, full of activity. It was bohemian.

**You have chosen to use angular geometric forms as your vocabulary for picture making. What was the reason for this?**

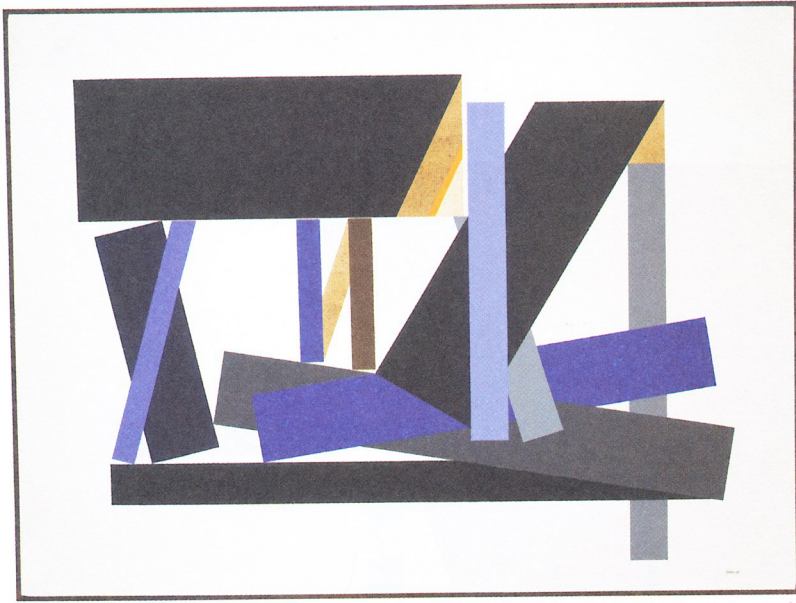
It started with my studies of the Bauhaus and European abstraction





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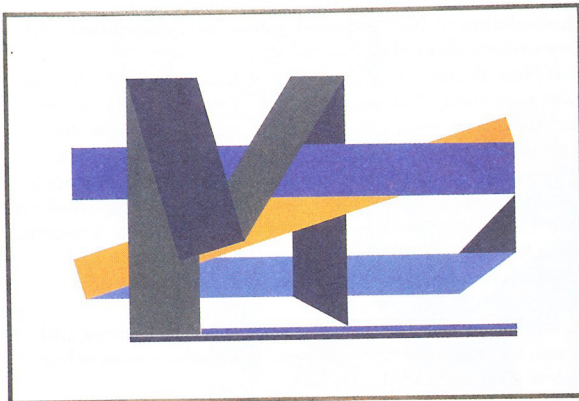
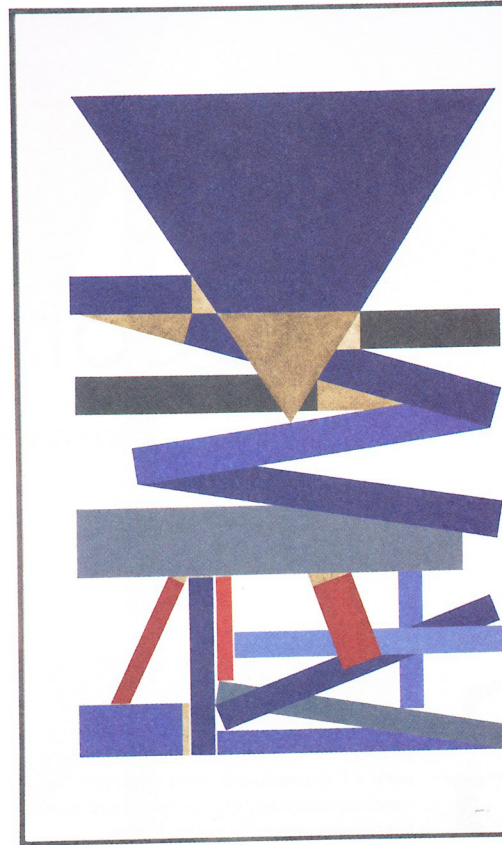


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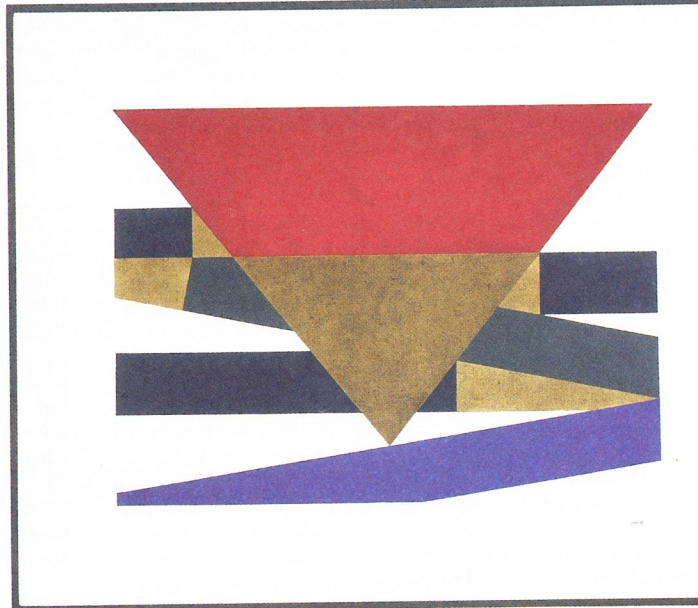


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during those days debating with Theo and Gordon. I responded to the Bauhaus ideas about the elements of art and these became a major influence in my life. I wanted to return to the basic elements – line, shape, ground and colour. The geometric is ordered but its possibilities are endless.

I think it was Mondrian who said that once you invest any shape with a philosophy it becomes endless. I have used the triangle in this way. It is a shape made of three points joined by line. For me, the three points represent the life-force of man, woman and child. My geometric abstraction is used to express ideas about human existence.

**So, even though these shapes are geometric, there are certain meanings that you equate them with.**

Yes, that's very true: once you invest the elements of your art with a philosophy, the means of expression become inexhaustible – at least I've found this to be so.

**Your work has a visual rigour suggesting a substantially rational working process. Is intuition important for you and, if so, to what extent does it come into your creative process?**

Yes, I think intuition, which comes mysteriously from inner instincts, and ideas prompted by observations made during the day work well together. I have recently been cutting out and looking at crossword puzzles that appear in the press. I recognise in them geometric arrangements of great interest. There are many beautiful combinations in these that I have not registered before. When I take a number of shapes that exist within these patterns and put them together in different ways they can make very beautiful images. What I am trying to say is that art is everywhere. It is out there ready to be discovered in unexpected contexts. As an artist you have to take what you need from any number of sources.

**The 'World View' paintings, an important series within your work, seem to be more schematic in composition. How do you see these?**

Well, I'm not necessarily thinking of the actual physical world. I think the whole process of painting is a way of taking a world view, and I am painting my own world view. One painting leads into another and this becomes – over time – my world view. If the paintings find resonance, I have shared a world view with others.

**A formal aspect of your work that you have retained, with few variations, since the 1950s is the use of a white background or field. What is its purpose?**

I work with collage, with paper shapes. My work table on which I move the shapes around is essentially the background for these collages. They have been for many years, and still are, for me a means of drawing. Discarded paper randomly thrown on the table

has sometimes become the basis of new work. Of course I also draw in the more conventional way and have sketchbooks full of abstract compositions.

**So, you use the white background because it reads like a collage and also gives the elements a greater clarity?**

No, I don't aim to have the work read like a collage. For me the background is like the world, full of potential and waiting for the elements to find their place within it.

**Over the past decade you have begun to use a greater range and higher key of colour, and circular elements. What has caused this? Is this evolutionary?**

It started when I made small paintings on paper for inclusion in an artists' book featuring my brother Louis Johnson's poetry. This was quite a departure because, apart from drawing, I had always worked on a larger scale. It was also an opportunity to introduce the circular element which then began to appear in the larger canvases.

**These are interesting because they have an optimism about them.**

Yes, they are optimistic and I'm enjoying the expanded use of colour. It seemed time to bring more colour in, after the '80s and my limited use of colour in that decade.

**It has been said that you and others believed in the possibility of creating non-objective structures capable of communicating universal ideas. Is this still possible?**

Oh yes, that's what it is about. While I live and can paint I hope to communicate ideas relevant to the human condition by creating compositions using geometric elements that have been lodged in the human psyche since antiquity and are universally understood in an intuitive way. ■

- 01 Red Triangle Construction No 1, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 112 x 84cm
  - 02 Structure 1, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 152 x 213.5cm
  - 03 Blue Triangle No 2, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 106 x 91cm
  - 04 Construction with Orange Diagonal, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 183cm
  - 05 Red Triangle Construction No 4, acrylic on canvas, 126 x 155cm
- Courtesy the artist and Macmillan Art Publishing, Melbourne