

Resounding crash of symbols

Anna Claburn appreciates the human elements in George Johnson's abstract world

George Johnson
Ballarat Fine Art Gallery;
ends September 8

BY a stroke of unfortunate fate, senior abstract painter George Johnson was having a hip operation on the day his exhibition opened to the public at Ballarat Fine Art Gallery earlier this month. Despite the handicap of his absence, the event was honoured with a fine speech, penned by the artist and delivered by the exhibition's curator Jenny Zimmer.

Amid the jocular art-world banter, one of Johnson's observations stood out as particularly pertinent to both his method of working and to the plight of contemporary painting in general. He suggested that art is like a relay game rather than a race and went on to describe making art as a communal effort, involving handing on the baton of creativity from one generation to the next.

Such humility and breadth of perspective are rare today. It is refreshing to find a senior artist advocating himself as a stepping stone to younger painters, less common still to find one who upholds the ideal of creativity as an activity with spiritual significance beyond the individual.

It is easy to see why Johnson's work is popular with contemporary architects and other conjurers of our domestic environments. His palette often errs towards communist austerity, and his compositions exude a finely honed understanding of how form functions in space and in relationship with human dimensions.

Despite its expansive social agenda, Johnson's work is surprisingly simple in its methodology, perhaps partly because of where and when he emerged as a young artist.

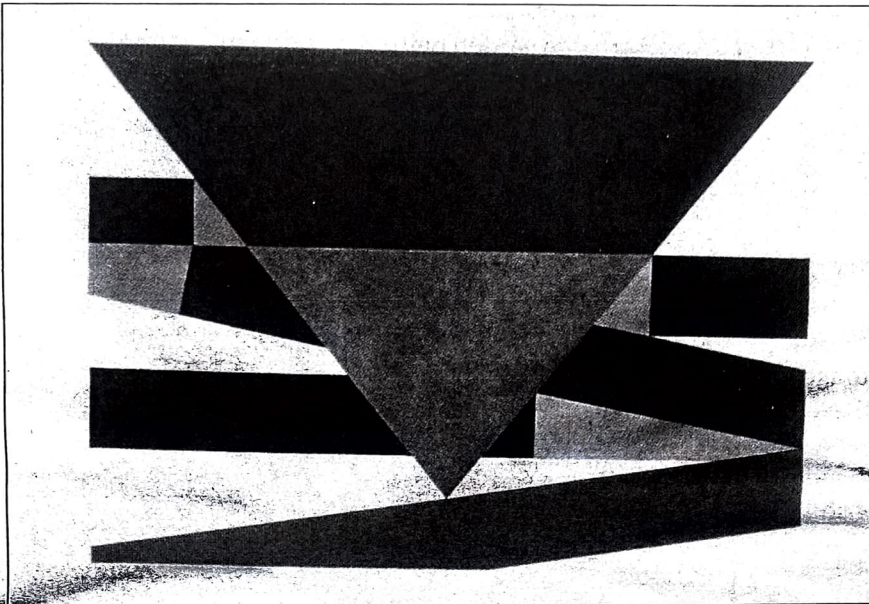
Johnson was born in New Zealand and came to Melbourne at the genesis of abstract art in this country. The 1950s was an adventurous time for painters.

In the years leading up to the city's hosting of the Olympic Games in 1956, aesthetic battles raged between figurative artists and the newly emerging strains of abstraction filtering in via foreigners, such as the charismatic US colourist James Doolan.

A clue to just how exciting these early decades of Australian abstraction must have been lies in the fact of Johnson's unquestioning dedication to a single style of painting. His peers are other noted lovers of geometry and symbolic form — Leonard French, Roger Kemp, Syd Ball, Alun Leach-Jones — and it is a worthwhile exercise comparing Johnson's output with the energetic experimentation of these cohorts through the '50s and into the '60s.

Can any artist working today in this world of rapidly evolving images and ideas imagine being so impassioned by a particular style that they would continue with it for the rest of their life? Johnson the youngster did just this. After some years of exploring semi-abstract symbolic form, his work gradually became more hard-edged and minimal until, in the late '70s, it reached its zenith and stopped.

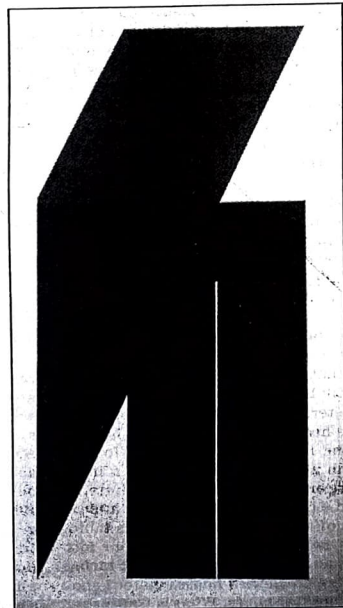
In many ways, his bold combinations of geometric shapes and subdued colours are



Hieroglyphs: Red Triangle Construction No. 4 (1987), left; Personal Symbol (1999), below

the same today as 30 years ago. Yet this impression of stasis is misleading. Johnson's work contains an endless cyclical dance between different permutations of form, angle, and opaque colour tone. "I hope to know a little and to know it well," says the artist in Zimmer's informative introductory essay.

As a visual story about an artist's body of work, Zimmer's selection offers a quiet but solid lesson in how to appreciate high quality painting. On first impression walking into the wide spaces of Ballarat's new gallery, Johnson's large-scale canvases around the walls appear cool, repetitive and rather dispassionate. However, despite their apparent formalism, allowing time to sit with these images yields a rather uncanny sense of the artist's quirky humour and innate talent for alluding to human themes through combinations of basic form. Many of the compositions, such as Ballarat's own *Mount of the Blue*



Triangle, are curiously anthropomorphic. Their precariously balanced colour rods have the same psychological impact as musical interludes or conversation.

It is this distilled sensory observation that aligns Johnson's work so readily with early European modernists such as Mondrian, Malevich or Kandinsky. Like these artists, Johnson's abstraction evolves from an essentially human origin. Although hard-edged, it is not the product of cool intellect but holds an underlying organic quality that also invites comparisons with more recent artists such as Louise Bourgeois, in particular her totemic renderings of strong emotional experiences and memory.

Australia's eminent art historian Bernard Smith once called Johnson a symbolist — a master of iconic equivalents. It is perhaps this aspect of his work that allows its seemingly unchanging style to remain pertinent to viewers over time. The few early works from the '50s to '70s included in this selection reveal a lot about the organic origin underlying Johnson's slick aesthetic.

Pictures from the early '60s such as *Earthgrowth* and *Harbour* are realised through arrangements of rough-edged cog or Lego-like shapes, arranged in sequences to resemble aspects of the landscape pared back to its raw form and character.

Among the more intriguing early works are several small canvases hailing from Heide's permanent collection. These include the attenuated interpretation of place, *Peruvian Twilight* of 1956. However, the most inspiring example from this period is an elongated panorama painting, *Symbols of Life*. Painted in 1965, this work brims with Johnson's fascination with terrestrial and celestial energies. There is something proto-Mambo in the soft pop aesthetic of this ecological portrait: the floral shapes pushing through hilltops resemble machine parts in a giant engineer's diagram of the earth's living systems.

Recognition of Johnson's work on this scale is long overdue. Ballarat's show is the artist's first major solo retrospective for 50 years so it is a pity that there is no plan, as yet, to tour the show. While it is a coup to see this number of monumental canvases in a regional context, city audiences would also gain from an encounter with Johnson's giant hieroglyphs.

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