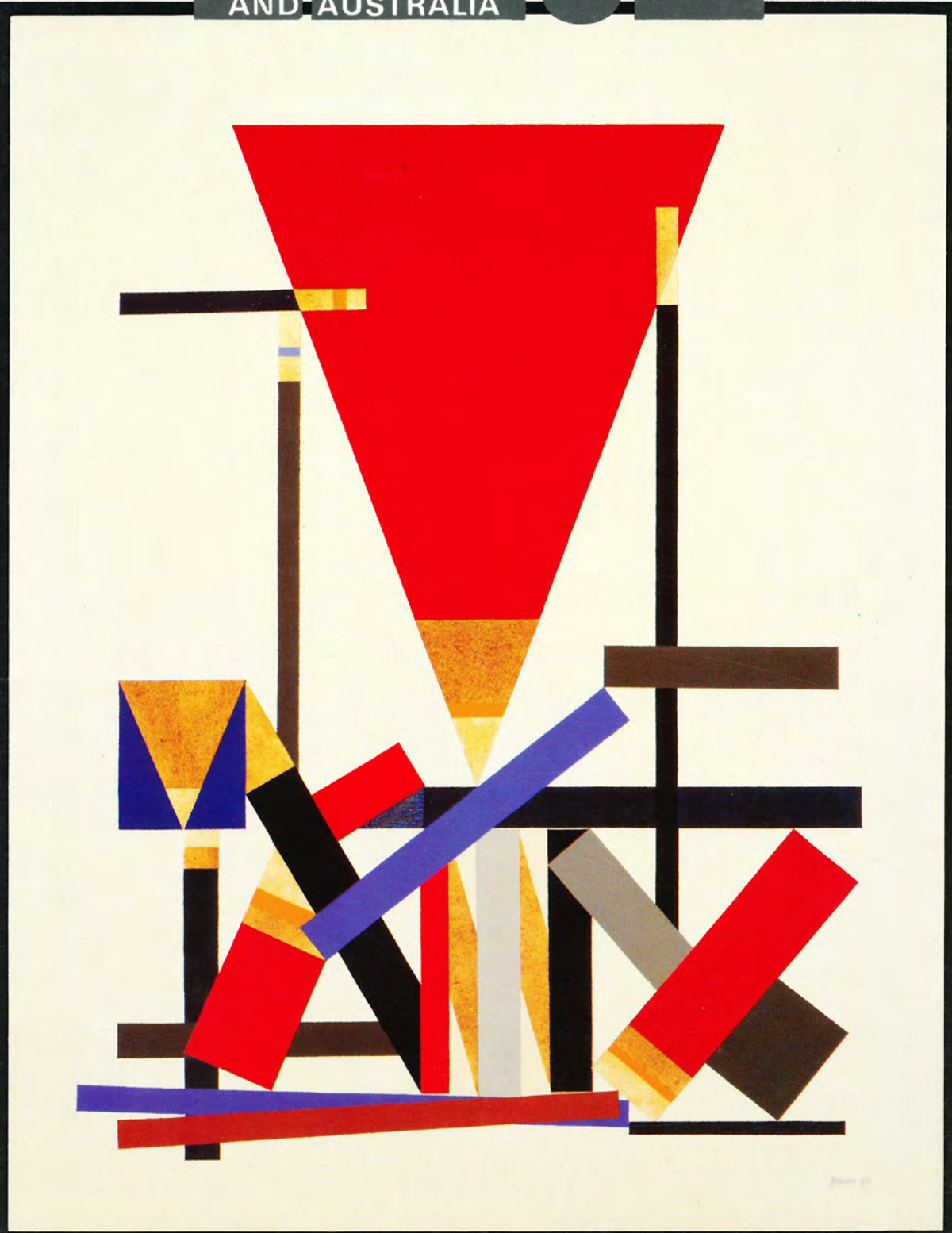


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# George Johnson and ineluctable abstraction

by Jenny Zimmer

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*With an unswerving commitment to formalised abstraction using juxtapositions of geometric shapes and primary colours, Johnson's career of the last thirty years demonstrates how much an artist can grow if he pursues a single direction with integrity and purpose.*

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ALL ART IS abstract but artists who deal in pure abstraction, like pure mathematicians and formal logicians, are few. They attempt to visualize, and then symbolize, the absolute. Pure abstraction disturbs because, whilst not rejecting Nature and her laws, it systematically excludes all reference to the comfortable world of the particular. Beyond the dross and multiplicity of matter, abstraction can seem austere and restricting. Whither Kasimir Malevich after arriving at the white square? What could Piet Mondrian achieve limited to verticals and horizontals? They knew that abstract relationships, like formal logic, aim for the absolute but are capable of limitless exploration.

George Johnson is one of Australia's most committed and consistent pure abstractionists.<sup>1</sup> His paintings are tough and uncompromising and possess a forceful clarity that promises those infinite relational variations which are both the essence and lure of pure abstraction.

Johnson's knowledge of pure abstraction was well developed when he arrived here from New Zealand in 1951. He had been associated with Theo Schoon (1915-1985), an Indonesian-born Dutch artist, photographer and anthropologist who had studied in Europe and introduced the programmes of the Bauhaus and the de Stijl, Constructivist and Suprematist movements to his proteges in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup> Malevich's *White square on white* (1917/1918) was initially a source of amusement to the young New Zealanders: Johnson was not to

know then that his own experience would steer him, ineluctably, towards that pure abstraction which Malevich advocated.

Another early motivation towards abstraction was Johnson's instinctive appreciation of the tribal and ancient arts of the Pacific, including those of South America. Today Johnson's studio walls support a collage of photographs of Inca walls, geometrically patterned Peruvian pots and Egyptian and Aztec pyramids. The sketchbooks show how the architectonic qualities of these images have influenced his pictorial construction. In stark contrast, and indicating an emotional dichotomy to be discussed later, there are many pictures of male figurines in stone and clay and Sumerian and Elamite clay seal-impressions featuring the *Gilgamesh* motif. These portray the ritualistic, animistic struggle between man and beast which, in ancient mythology, symbolized the balance between man's animal virility and his instinct towards civilization.

Johnson arrived in Melbourne in what has been described as a crucial decade for the arts and literature. The Melbourne poet and critic Vincent Buckley vigorously denies the charge that the fifties was '... the dullard among decades: McCarthyist, baffled, immobilized, deprived of cultural force ...'

For him, and for many still tentatively emerging modernist artists they were '... the years of excitement, of growth, of learning those lessons which are never to be unlearned'.<sup>3</sup> Johnson's decision for pure abstraction was

made early in this decade and stimulated by the more rigorous intellectual and cultural climate in which he found himself. By 1956 he had exhibited his first series of abstract paintings and discovered that being an abstractionist in Melbourne, then as now, demands strong commitment.

Accepted in Sydney as early as in the 1930s, abstraction was not condoned in Melbourne – apart from isolated and rebellious instances<sup>4</sup> – until the 1950s and then only with dire apprehension. In fact, the fiercest ideological battles were fought in Melbourne. If the 1940s were divided between George Bell's post impressionist-formalist faction and the breakaway socialists, the 1950s saw battle-lines drawn between figurative artists and abstractionists and little guidance or explanation was provided by the art criticism of those decades. Instead, the artists met in pubs, discussed the issues with animation and then returned to chilly, improvised studios in garages and lofts to do further demanding battle with masonite and Dulux.<sup>5</sup>

In that decade, painters made their own varnish, glue-size and gesso-ground and mixed paints from various commercial products. All was applied to standard sheets or off-cuts of composition board. Throughout the mid-1950s Johnson shared a loft-studio in Parkville with Leonard French and together with others, like Leonard Crawford and Roger Kemp, helped to forge a distinctive new abstract direction for Melbourne painting.



GEORGE JOHNSON WORLD VIEW (DETAIL NO. 2)  
(1984) Acrylic on canvas  
213 x 165 cm  
Private Collection  
Footscray Institute of Technology, Melbourne

The late 1950s were dominated by the ferocity of the Melbourne figurative painters' reactions to the new abstract painting. The Antipodean's 1959 exhibition was accompanied by a savage manifesto intent on proving that non-figuration was vacuous and incapable of communicating serious imaginative experience.<sup>6</sup> The prolonged debate lost none of its intensity and in 1967 Johnson's painting *Antipodean nightmare* was intended as a severe rebuttal of their arguments. Visualized as a darkly floating, amorphous and extremely menacing cloud, the *Nightmare* attempted to envelop and smother the cog-wheels and emblems which had become Johnson's distinctive abstract insignia and which were the objects of much bemused criticism in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Many artists who flirted with abstraction at that time subsequently abandoned it (and recent defectors are legion) but Johnson's conviction that abstract forces – physical, conceptual, spiritual and structural – govern life and art has not diminished. He shares Mondrian's perception of the '... great hidden laws ...' lying behind '... superficial aspects of nature ...' and the belief that the pure abstractionist's task is gradually to reveal '... the mutual relations that are inherent in things ...'.<sup>7</sup>

Theirs is the powerful modern proposition that representational art should be abandoned because it is more genuinely creative to construct a world view using non-referential abstract elements than to imitate natural forms. Malevich went further: 'The artist can be a creator only when the forms in his picture have *nothing* in common with nature.'<sup>8</sup>

Measured by degree of reference to nature, the purity of Johnson's abstraction has fluctuated. The current paintings are completely non-objective abstract inventions but earlier decades were spent arranging his idiosyncratically crenellated and emblematic forms in ways which suggested organic phenomena such as landscapes, cloud formations, earth strata and family groups. Titles like *Earth rhythms* and *Birth symbol* reinforced the visual allusions and gave Bernard Smith an opportunity to suspect him of being an '... Antipodean in disguise ...'.<sup>9</sup>

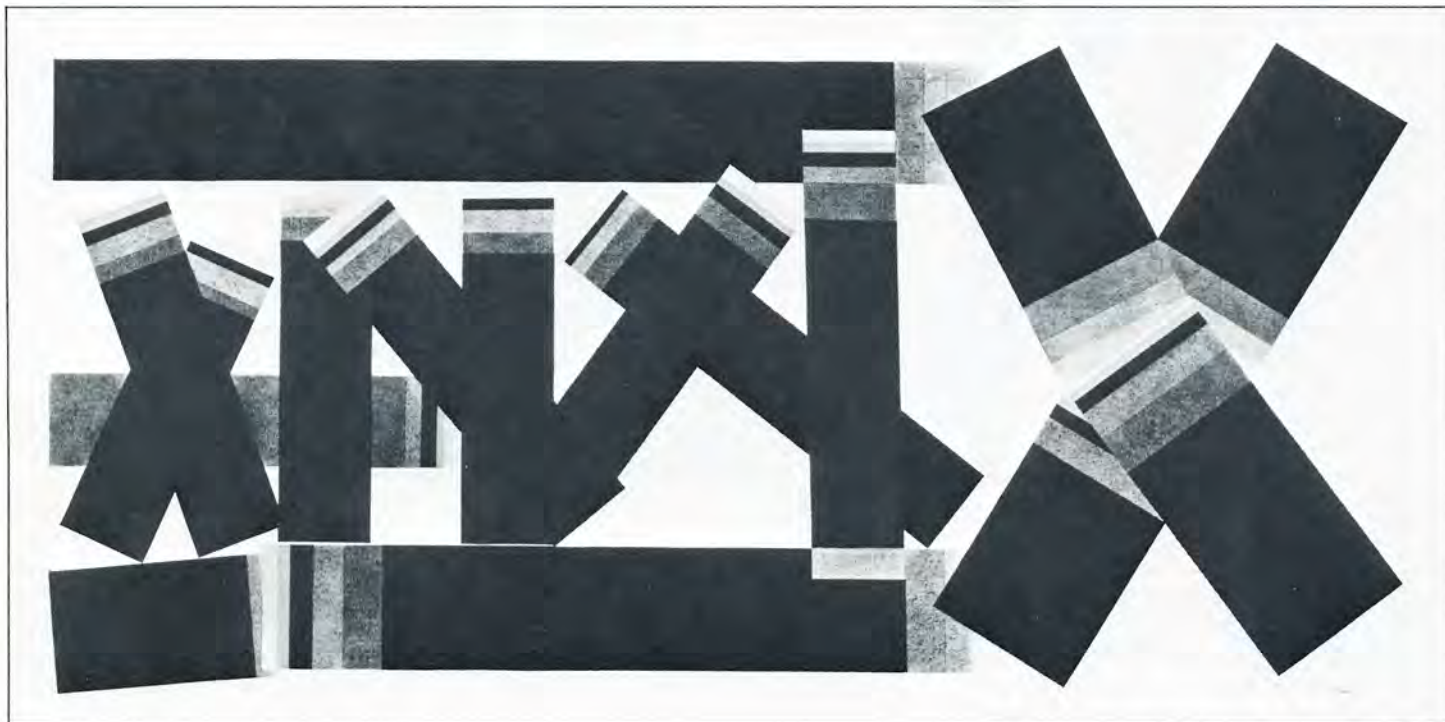
By the later 1970s Johnson had mastered the ability to construct and relate abstract elements without the immediate suggestion of known phenomena. He maximized and exploited tensions between figure and ground, between line and space, between complexity and simplicity and between the chromatic and the achromatic. The recent *Constructions* cannot

be read associatively and titles such as *Red triangle construction no. 1* and *Blue triangle construction no. 2* simply classify the images systematically.

For those to whom it is credible that the essential and invisible forces, which mystics believe are responsible for life and creativity *can* be made tangible by the artist, Johnson's paintings are reassuring. He animates the significant play of lines, rectangles, squares, triangles, primary colours, textures and tones across an uniformly off-white ground.<sup>10</sup> While the orchestration must be absolutely correct, the dramatic counterbalance and variety of arrangement are akin to those displayed in musical composition and performance – a fact noted by the Sydney critics when he showed at the Rudy Komon Gallery in 1984.<sup>11</sup> Undersandably, Johnson favours chamber music for its poise between compositional complexity and clarity of instrumentation.

New themes, like the *Hanging triangles* of 1984–85 only appear after prolonged investigation. The largely intuitive process of generating suitable forms and introducing their complementary colours is extremely protracted

GEORGE JOHNSON BLACK CONSTRUCTION (1976)  
Acrylic on canvas 122 x 244 cm  
Possession of the artist courtesy Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.





left  
 GEORGE JOHNSON BLUE TRIANGLE CONSTRUCTION  
 NO. 2  
 (1985) Acrylic on canvas 106 x 91 cm  
 Possession of the artist, courtesy Charles Nodrum Gallery,  
 Melbourne

below  
 GEORGE JOHNSON STUDY NO. 1 (1985)  
 Acrylic on canvas 61 x 46 cm  
 Possession of the artist, courtesy Charles Nodrum Gallery,  
 Melbourne



and after assimilation it may be years before they are superseded. This is characteristic of pure abstraction which Johnson realized more than twenty years ago when he wrote:

'Painting is to me a slow, logical and organic development. I realized that art was not something separated from life but was a vital part of it – that art was the expression of man's most conscious moments . . .

' . . . I do not wish to use in painting anything I do not understand. Things that have not been sorted out are of no use, to my way of thinking, there is no room for doubt in painting . . . I do not want to use everything in painting. I hope to know a little and to know it well, and, on this principle, build the world I believe in.'<sup>12</sup>

Johnson's constructivism is unlike the abstraction of minimalist or colour-field paintings because his are not intended to temporarily rearrange the beholder's perceptual expectations, nor are the most recent works surrogates or relational models for natural and man-made phenomena. Instead, they are absolute and

unyielding abstract statements about the fundamental nature of things arrived at through the tenacious application of intuition and experience and an innate sensitivity to the potentialities of non-objective, essentially geometric, elements. Reviewing the 1984 exhibition in Sydney, Elwyn Lynn wrote: ' . . . *World view, detail 1* indicates the geometrical emotional diversification of themes.

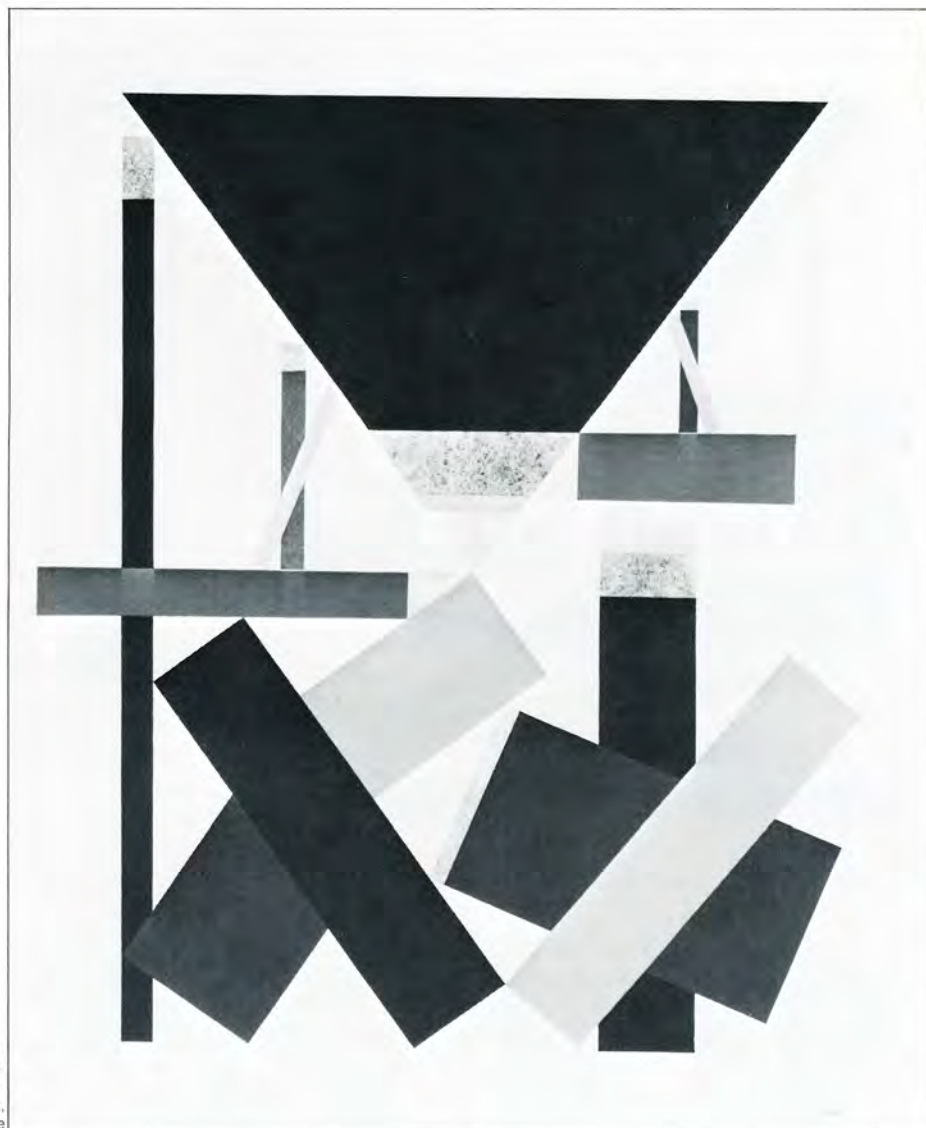
'Here, strips and bands are folded with origami skill to enhance the notion of continuous starting and stopping. The forms are striving to make connections, but elsewhere they attract and repel one another as in the splendid *Construction 8* where oblongs have a cautious restlessness as though walking a tightrope.'

At the same time the artist does not wish to inhibit the spectator's private inclination to project particular meanings into them. In fact, he indulges in this activity himself, seeing the tensions created at the point of a triangle, or the orientation of one shape or colour to

another, as symbolic of the success or failure of human relationships.

Charges of aestheticism levelled at some abstract painters – that their appeal is too reliant on gratification of the senses through pleasing colour and design – cannot be applied here. It is clear that since the 1910s there has been a tradition of abstraction that was unpainterly with unseductive surfaces. These are tough paintings and if accessibility to their content is difficult we should bear in mind Malevich's remark, 'People always demand that art be comprehensible, but they never demand of themselves that they adapt their mind to comprehension.'<sup>13</sup>

Given the subsequent development of non-figurative painting in Melbourne it would be rather unproductive to compare Johnson's paintings with those of the artists with whom he started his career: Leonard French, Roger Kemp, James Meldrum, Ian Sime and Leonard Crawford. It is more appropriate to compare him with European modernists like Mondrian,



GEORGE JOHNSON  
 BLUE TRIANGLE CONSTRUCTION (1984)  
 Acrylic on canvas 183 x 152 cm  
 Possession of the artist,  
 Courtesy Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne

Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky. Although geographically and chronologically separated the lives of all four are unified by their obsessive pursuit of non-objective vision and their absolute conviction that pure abstraction is capable (under somewhat unrealistic, idealist circumstances) of producing a universal language of signs. But there are also major dissimilarities. Malevich's Suprematism was underwritten by politics and polemics.<sup>14</sup>

Johnson, although properly concerned about the plight of humanity, could not be described as a zealot intent on the alleviation of misery.

Mondrian and Kandinsky were motivated by

spiritualism – a fact clearly expressed in their writings.<sup>15</sup> Johnson has no spiritualist manifesto – his is the exploitation of a gift for giving visible form to abstract forces; what follows is beyond his control. In this respect he is an artist of his own time. His concerns are primarily those of art and the investigation of that of which art is capable. Whilst sharing a methodology and rationale with his European brotherhood, fate has placed him in an era in which it would be anachronistic to share their enthusiastic visions of human happiness ultimately achieved via the political and technological progress of the modern world.<sup>16</sup>

What can be compared, however, is the poignant expression of personal emotions within the disciplined solitude of pure abstraction. Mondrian's retiring personality and deliberative stance were eventually able to encompass his passion for jazz and change his New York paintings dramatically.<sup>17</sup> Malevich's personal trauma lay in the irreconcilability of his early enthusiasm for the communist state with a troubling awareness of God and art.<sup>18</sup> The human-cross images record his tragic inner conflict. Where does Johnson's painting reveal something of the artist as an individual human entity?



left  
 GEORGE JOHNSON  
 STUDY (1982)  
 45.7 x 38 cm  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 Possession of the  
 artist, Courtesy  
 Charles Nodrum  
 Gallery, Melbourne

far left  
 GEORGE JOHNSON  
 STRUCTURE NO. 7 (1983)  
 183 x 152 cm  
 Possession of the  
 artist, Courtesy  
 Charles Nodrum  
 Gallery, Melbourne

Johnson's 'Achilles' heel' is his emotional attachment to people and places. The tensions created within the formal arrangements are as potent and animistic as those of the animal-human struggles in the Gilgamesh seal-impressions. The relationships inherent in the compositions carry the forces of opposition, collision, cohesion and integration which exist in powerfully felt identification with people and places. He speaks of curved lines as feminine, of straight lines are masculine – of some paintings, like *Structure no. 7* (1984), as being mothers. These are big, generous, creative fields from which he selects details to be developed into new beings capable of independent existence. Sometimes, as in the series of *Brown relationships* or *Spirit of place* paintings, completed in 1973 after his South American travels and from a new found aware-curved shapes predominate. The forms are fecund, sexually potent.

Since 1977 Johnson's paintings have become increasingly masculine and assertive through his exclusive exploitation of the straight line. Each big picture has become the progenitor of others. The imaginative process of pictorial construction becomes a metaphor

for the mystical processes of life-creation. A sense of virility presides in the overlapping and connecting of forms and in their multiplication and elaboration. The spaces between the forms are as taut and powerful as the forms themselves.

Sometimes the composition is absolutely definitive. This could be said of *Structure no. 7* which exhibits the calm grandeur and monumentality of classic art. Elsewhere the fluid play of shapes and colours seems almost Baroque. *Studies no. 1* and *no. 2* are details snatched from other paintings and given a full life of their own. If Malevich's business was revolution, Johnson's is evolution. However, Malevich would not have disowned him; it was he who wrote: 'Evolution and revolution in art have the same, aim, which is to arrive at unity of creation — the formation of signs instead of the repetition of nature'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jenny Zimmer, 'A Late Argument for Abstraction', in *Abstract Art in Australia*, RMIT Gallery, 1983. pp.41-73. Traces Johnson's career and surveys the criticism.

<sup>2</sup> Including Gordon Walters, New Zealand abstract painter.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Buckley, *Cutting Green Hay*, Melbourne, 1983,

p.183.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Sam Atyeo's *Organized line to yellow*, 1934.

<sup>5</sup> J. Zimmer, op.cit., *Memories of Dulux and Masonite*, pp.9–26, summarizes abstraction's development in Sydney and Melbourne.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Smith *The Antipodean Manifesto*, Melbourne, 1976, pp.165–167.

<sup>7</sup> Piet Mondrian, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*, 1937 and *Other Essays*, 1941-1943. New York, 1951, p.54.

<sup>8</sup> K.S. Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915–1933*, Vol. 1. London, 1969, p.24.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Smith, *Age*, 15 September, 1965.

<sup>10</sup> Malevich, op.cit., pp.125–127, on the white world of creativity.

<sup>11</sup> Elwyn Lynn, *Australian*, 9 June, 1984. Susanna Short, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June, 1984.

<sup>12</sup> Statement written for John Reed, 29 June, 1962.

<sup>13</sup> Malevich, op.cit., p.95.

<sup>14</sup> Malevich, op.cit., p.103, writes of liquidating and pulverizing the previous culture.

<sup>15</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art — and Painting in Particular*, 1912, New York, 1947.

<sup>16</sup> Malevich, op.cit., pp.168–169, 170–171, 174–175 on non-objectivity and communism.

<sup>17</sup> Mondrian, op.cit., p.47.

<sup>18</sup> Malevich, op.cit., pp.180–223.

<sup>19</sup> Malevich, op.cit., p.94.

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All photographs in this article by Michael Woods.