

# ENTERTAINMENT

## Artist has built a colourful world based solely on the rectangle

### ART

George Johnson: Paintings.  
Rudy Komon Art Gallery, 124 Jersey Road,  
Woolahra.  
Until June 23.

Margery Edwards: Works on paper, paintings  
and collage books.  
Roslyn Oxley Gallery, 13-21 Macdonald  
Street, Paddington.  
Until June 16.

By SUSANNA SHORT

MUCH modern art is abstract, but it takes a special kind of artist to be completely non-objective.

This is apparent from the exhibition by George Johnson at Rudy Komon's.

Johnson, showing in Sydney for the first time since 1967, is a New Zealand-born artist who, since the mid-fifties, has been the odd man out among Melbourne's figurative painters.

As his pictures show, he is concerned with form, line and colour to the exclusion of all references to the objective world.

At the same time, he builds up his canvases from such positive elements that he seems closer to early twentieth-century Russian constructivism than to the New York school, or even Sydney's abstract expressionists.

Since his first show in Melbourne in 1956, Johnson has been concerned with the language of form, and it is no coincidence that his early paintings contain alphabet shapes, or refer to abstract sign systems.

In a statement about his work he once said: "There is no room for doubt in painting... I hope to know a little and to know it well."

On this principle he has now built a world based solely on the rectangle, in which the only concession to ornament is a little speckled stripe that has the appearance of being almost decorative. The stripe acts as a textural contrast rather than being a strictly structural element.

However, it is the only component of Johnson's art to offend the purist. In his reductive world, even colour is appreciated for its formal properties, as is seen by the titles he gives his works: *Red and Grey Structure*, *Structure with Red*, *Structure Blue and Grey*.

Johnson uses colour in varying degrees of intensity to impart a dynamic quality to his paintings, and in such works as *Structure Blue* he generates a kind of kinetic energy by exploiting the tonal variations within a given hue.

In this painting, Johnson plays off light against dark and dark against light to create an exhilarating counterpoint in which his shapes seem to tap out a rhythm or tune.

He also activates the surface of his canvas by the use of a collage-related technique in which "cut-out" shapes are juxtaposed, seemingly at random, on a perfectly white field.

The same process is repeated, on a larger scale, in such arresting paintings as *Construction No 3*, which are

architectonic rather than playful and recall the Russian avant-garde artist El Lissitzky's synthesis between volumetric and flat space in the revolutionary artworks called "prouns".

In such paintings Johnson, like Lissitzky, expresses a sense of building with form.

For all his cold manipulation of pictorial elements, he rings the changes between shape, line and colour with the result that his paintings look fresh and new.

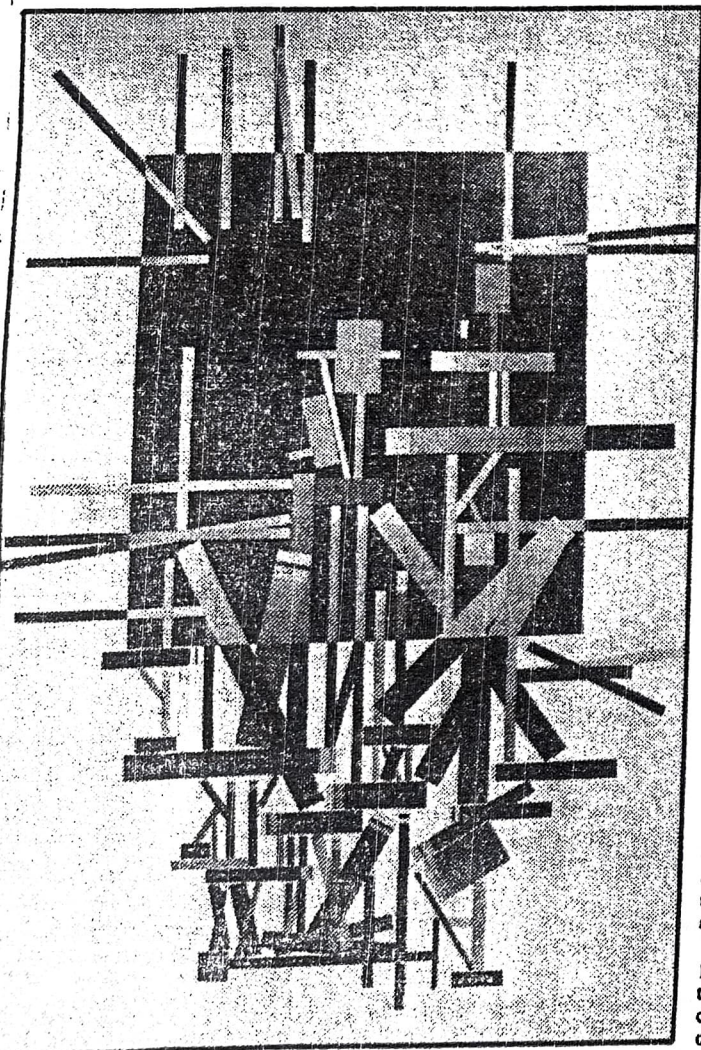
The opposite holds true for Margery Edwards, whose paintings and works on paper at the Roslyn Oxley Gallery may be compared to Johnson's only in so far as they have been purged of all recognisable subject matter, and derive from a reductive world-view.

Edwards is an Australian artist living in New York who works within an already established style.

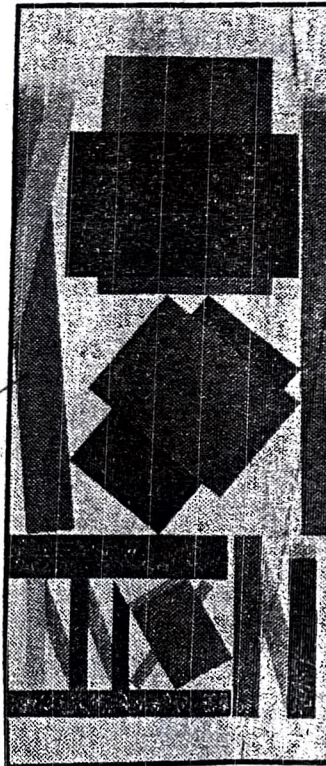
This is apparent notwithstanding the fact that her all-black paintings are recognisably non-traditional, and her mixed media works on paper, which are full of little smudges and scribbles, are textured, not smooth.

Edwards's concern with surface and feel for the inherent expressiveness of materials relate her to the New York scene.

Far from expressing an original vision, however, her subjective works are exemplars of good taste, and could have come out of an academy of the old school.



George Johnson's Structure Blue.



Detail of Johnson's Structure No 14... "There is no room for doubt in painting."