

Robert Owen  
*the text of light*

# Robert Owen *the text of light*

*on the tip of each eyelash  
peacocks' tails against the sun*

Lines of poetry written by Robert Owen, while living on the Greek island of Hydra in the early 1960s, lyrically, yet succinctly, identify concerns that would subsequently preoccupy the artist and become consistently manifest in his creative output. Throughout a sustained practice of more than four decades, Owen has worked across a range of media, moving between painting, drawing, sculpture and installation in the articulation of his research into space, light, colour, structure and the profound interconnectedness of these fundamentals.

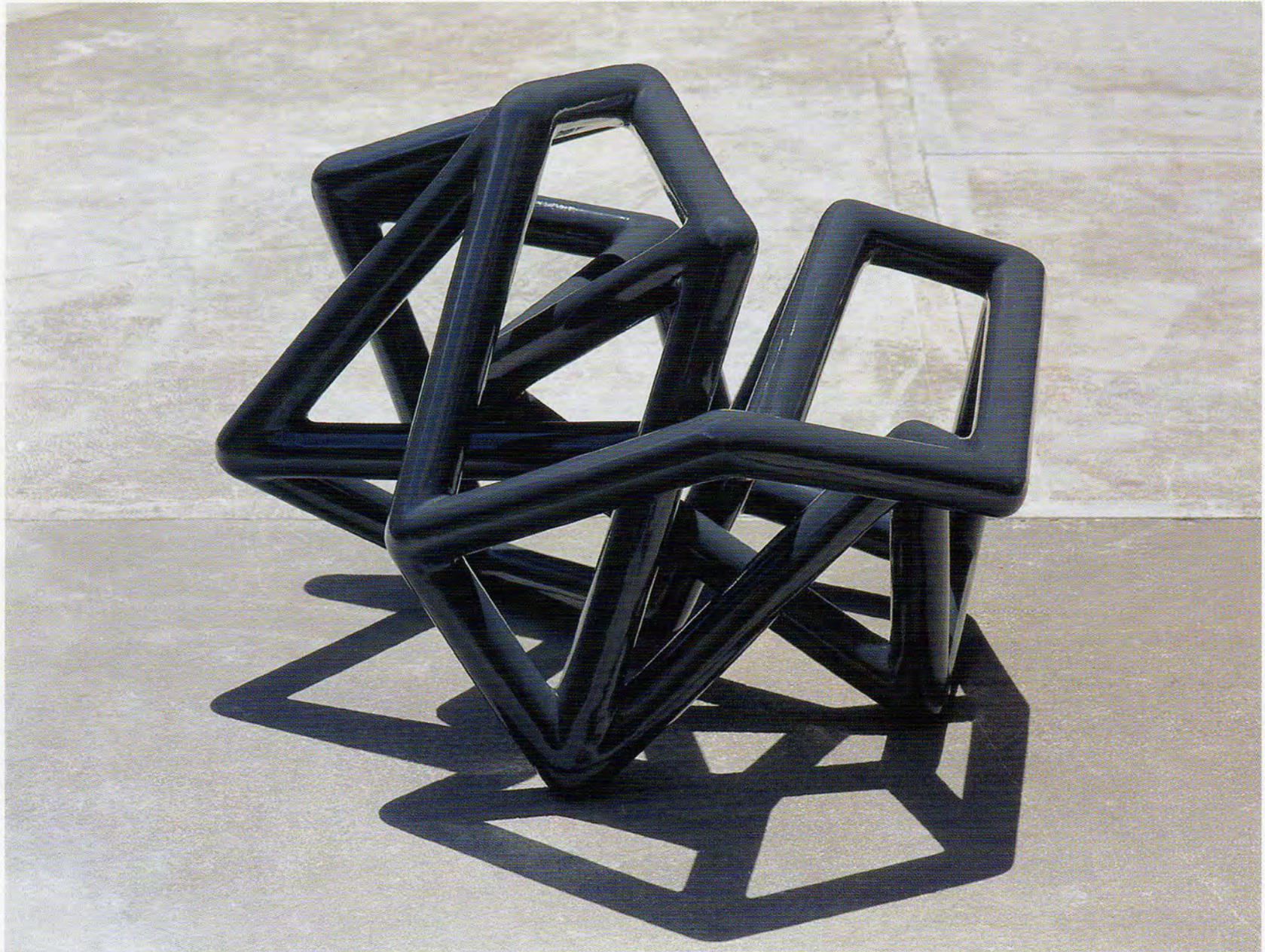
The Roman architect Vitruvius, in his *De Architectura* of ca. 28 BCE, devised three principals of aesthetic consideration; namely, *eurythmia* (proportion), *symmetria*, and *décor*. He defined *symmetria* as the appropriate harmony arising out of the individual components of the work itself; the correspondence of each given detail among the separate details, each contributing to the form of the design as a whole. Vitruvius was referring, of course, specifically to classical engineering but the term might be applied equally to any form of artistic production, wherever an aesthetic outcome is presented to us either in space or in time. While we have come to expect that whatever is audible is presented in time, and that which is visible is presented in space, Owen offers a more integrated approach in his work. He confounds time and space so that the rhythm of a work becomes the overwhelming sensation. We apprehend space and time, or painting and rhythm, as one thing. This is particularly explicit in his large four-panelled painting *Cadence #1*, which Owen denotes as 'a short span of time'.

*Cadence #1* reveals a physics of time and colour created, and designed to be read, over a period of time. The precise period designated in the work is sixty four days, with four panels divided into sixteen coloured strips, each one a pictorial description of the

artist's feelings of time spanning twenty four hours. Cadence, the beat of something that follows a set rhythm, is customarily applied to music, or sometimes poetry. Owen, however, appropriates the term to describe an interior meditation of time to reveal a singular emotional response to his environment. The work is perceived as one resolved whole, though a complex, multiple, divisible, separable whole, made up of its parts – both the result of its parts and their sum. Somehow, harmonious.

Certainly, there is a strong sense of visual harmony, or unity, in all of these works. However, the open-ended associations that we bring to them (do we see light glimpsed through a forest of trees in *Cadence #1*, can we detect flattened landscapes in the *Flickering Light* series?) rest upon more than just visual pleasure for their effectiveness. There is an inherent logic, a natural impulse to these paintings. Colourful, intense, and often as perplexing as it is pleasing, Owen's art intuitively rather than reproduces. This work offers, not geometries or abstracted formulas, but an instinct found in the motioned patterns of space and time, perhaps as though perceived through the tips of our eyelashes.

David Batchelor in *Chromophobia* argues that throughout history and, particularly, throughout art history, colour has been subordinated to the more intellectual concerns of form and structure; that a hierarchical ordering exists within painting, which describes a descent from invention through design to chiaroscuro and, finally, to colour. However, he proffers a modern reading of the artist's use of colour, which, devolving from the introduction of the readymade (or 'digitised') colour chart (in opposition to the prescribed 'analogical' artist's palette) presents an alternate position. 'There are no hierarchies, only random colour events. The colour chart divorces colour from conventional colour theory and turns every colour into a readymade. It promises autonomy for colour.'



Despite their harmony, there is a sense of utter randomness retained in these paintings, a lack of any continuity underlying the colour choices, which never mix or unify. This absence of logical progression is reinforced by their genesis, as the works result directly from computerised colour sketches. Yet, they seem sheltered from the dematerialising effect of computer technology and the very act of painting becomes an act of reclamation in this increasingly digital age. Addressing the proposition of why anybody in 'this hip and modern world' would persist with painting, Janet Bishop concludes that 'paintings stand apart from the blur of images we see when we surf [the internet]. Well suited to eliciting reflection rather than consumption, they work a sort of magic, holding a singular place within the pace of life now.'<sup>2</sup>

The works combine jarringly disparate hues alongside colours so close in value they are sometimes hard to differentiate. Each work gives the impression of a partial view onto something overwhelming and endless; not a glimpse of awesome and destructive Nature, rather Owen's endless tracking, recording and documenting of it. It is impossible to read these works as purely abstract forms, but the desire to inspect the works' surfaces, and to project meaning onto them, is as much aroused as it is confounded. The colouration in Owen's work is certainly not the result of accidental process, rather it reveals knowing and effective artistic instincts throughout. Although bright colours predominate, they are at moments countered with softer hues to set a meditative mood. The colour selections, and the subsequent manipulations and collisions, owe as much to an authentic rendering of nature as they do to a contrived, technologically generated, synthetics.

The chromatic progression of these works is maintained within the formalism of their grid formats, yet titles (*Afternoon Glow #2*, *Slippage*, *Blind spot*) describe light or, rather, a temporal perception of light. Both literally and symbolically, light has the

power to transform mood and meaning through the emotive and the transcendental. Light acts as a moral force, as the antithesis of darkness, and it locates the space between any object and the act of perceiving that object.

Much contemporary art is concerned with the moment when temporal and spatial propositions of light are skewed by the intervention of the subjective, often engaging a light source as the focus of the work. Owen, however, does not seek to illuminate space, rather he engages the viewer with the nature of light. The work is not so much illuminant as luminary and, as viewers, we are encouraged to look at, not for, light. This notion parallels Paul Klee's famous dictum that 'the task of art is not to render the visible, but to render visible.'<sup>3</sup> Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and other artists from *Der Blaue Reiter* group, active in the second decade of the twentieth century, shared a deep-rooted impulse to transform nature into a spiritual and pictorial equivalent. An equal and independent importance was allocated to colour, light and space in their work, and this is precisely how Owen's work is oriented. He is not interested in reproducing or inventing forms *per se*, but in capturing the forces that inform them.

Just as light is transformative, whatever light avoids is cast into the shadows and often overlooked, as if it can only exist in a different realm. Light, with its presence or absence in art, becomes 'the subjective tool *par excellence*'.<sup>4</sup> And it is the spatial moment where light and darkness intersect that forms the basis of the sculptural works Owen presents here.

These works from the series *Different lights cast different shadows*, are a kind of shadow themselves (and a shadow of their previous selves), each a different shade of warm grey as imagined by the casting of its own shadow. They devolve from earlier sculptural projects, such as *Ghost tantras and coloured spaces* (1995) and *Axiom* (1999), which operated like complex drawings in space. Previous works attempted to articulate impossible three-dimensional

objects, which ultimately disappeared, leaving only minimal steel frames to define their forms. In a sense, they have been almost obliterated by this new work which seeks to re-animate space. New forms emerge from the use of new materials. In this instance, Owen employs foam encased in M1 composite acrylic and fibreglass to allow for a particularly high tensile bending strength, while contradicting the density of the structures with a surprisingly light-weighted outcome. Less complex geometrically than earlier works, these are thicker grounded forms; organic, cell-like objects with a distinct materiality and process. Colour is intrinsic and the surface reveals the process of their making. Paradoxically, they are both dense and devoid of density.

Each sculpture is within the space it inhabits and at the same time it creates its own space. One piece anticipates the next through repetition of form, but a place of contradiction is created in the differing orientations, and from our changing vantage points. When we move, we glimpse something unexpected but, ultimately, we are brought to a place of contemplation both within ourselves and within the wider context of the world in which we live. There is a sense of infinite meaning in these pieces yet it is contained entirely within a certain, very limited, form, comprising nothing more after all than a kind of drawing in space.

Like drawings, though, we interpret them as denoting outlines and, as such, they inevitably establish forms. Although seeming to react to forces that impinge upon them from the inside or the outside, the material they outline is air – which is neither visible nor palpable. As such, these sculptures contain a substance that is literally immaterial. Instead, they activate the gallery and change the nature of space. Situated in natural sunlight as well as illuminated by gallery lighting, they cast constantly changing shadows that become an integral part of the sculptures themselves. By blurring the conventional boundaries of spatial

structure, support structure and interior space, they are able to offer a continuous topology of space and time.

Continuance and juncture, presence and absence, light and shadow. Owen's projects, from early optical works of the 1960s through to painting and sculpture comprising *the text of light*, mediate these polarities and create a meditative space from which we might consider our relationship with the world around us.

## Vikki McInnes

<sup>1</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, London, 2000

<sup>2</sup> Janet Bishop, 'Old-fashioned forms in newfangled times or, why would anybody in this hip and modern world bother making paintings?' (catalogue essay), *Art in Technological Times*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2001, p. 75

<sup>3</sup> Paul Klee, 'Creative Credo' of 1920, published in *The Inward Vision: Watercolors, Drawings and Writings by Paul Klee*, New York, 1958

<sup>4</sup> Roy Exley, 'Art of the Luminous', in *Contemporary Visual Arts*, Issue 25, London 1999

Robert Owen wishes to express personal thanks to Hillary Jackman, Jeph Neale, Luke Adams, Ingrid Earle, Helen Walter, Damien Cravino, Peter Scerys, Lorna Fitzpatrick, Daniella Tegani and Brian Sheehy for their dedicated and invaluable studio assistance.

Robert Owen was born in Sydney in 1937, and spent his first nineteen years in Wagga Wagga. He studied Sculpture at the National Art School from 1958 to 1962. Owen has travelled widely, living in Greece from 1963 to 1966 and then in London until his return to Australia in 1975. His work has been shown extensively in the UK, New York, Tokyo, Paris and throughout Australia. Owen represented Australia in the 38<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1978. He lives and works in Melbourne.

All works courtesy the artist and ARC one gallery, Melbourne and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

# Acknowledgements

The vision for the establishment of the TarraWarra Museum of Art has been inspired by Eva and Marc Besen's commitment to contemporary art over the last fifty years. It was over those years that the collection which the Besens have now given to the Museum was acquired. Therefore it is appropriate that, as we look to the future, the Museum embraces a programme strongly founded in supporting and encouraging contemporary artists to develop new work for exhibition.

As the building began to emerge from the hillside early this year and the gallery spaces began to take shape, I approached Robert Owen to make a new installation for the opening of the Museum. *The text of light* is the realisation of the project which Robert has specifically created for TWMA.

I wish to thank Robert for this wonderful installation and acknowledge all of the individuals who have helped him. I am also indebted to Vikki McInnes who has managed the coordination of the project and written the essay for this publication. We acknowledge Chris Palmer, Ros Caré, John Brash and Forbes Laing for their assistance. Finally we wish to thank Probuild Constructions for supporting the Museum's contemporary exhibition programme.

Maudie Palmer  
Director  
6 December 2003

# *the text of light*

## **Paintings**

*Cadence #1 (A short span of time)* 2003

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
Four panels 259 x 167.6 cm.  
6705 cm total

*Afternoon Glow #2* 2003

Synthetic polymer paint on linen  
1980 x 1980 cm

*Slippage* 2003

Synthetic polymer paint on linen  
1980 x 1980 cm

*Blind spot* 2003

Synthetic polymer paint on linen  
1980 x 1980 cm

## **Drawings for Sculpture**

*Untitled (Conditions are not invariable)*

#1 - 5 2003  
Pencil, graphite and tape on Arches paper  
77 x 57 cm. 285 cm total

## **Sculptures**

*Vessel #2 (Blue)* 1997 - 2003

From *Cubes and Hyper-cubes*  
Foam, Fibreglass and M1 Acrylic  
400 x 300 x 300cm (approx.)

*Different lights cast different shadows*

*Messenger* 2003

Foam, Fibreglass and M1 Acrylic  
130 x 160 x 140 cm

*Symmetria* 2003

Foam, Fibreglass and M1 Acrylic  
140 x 130 x 160 cm