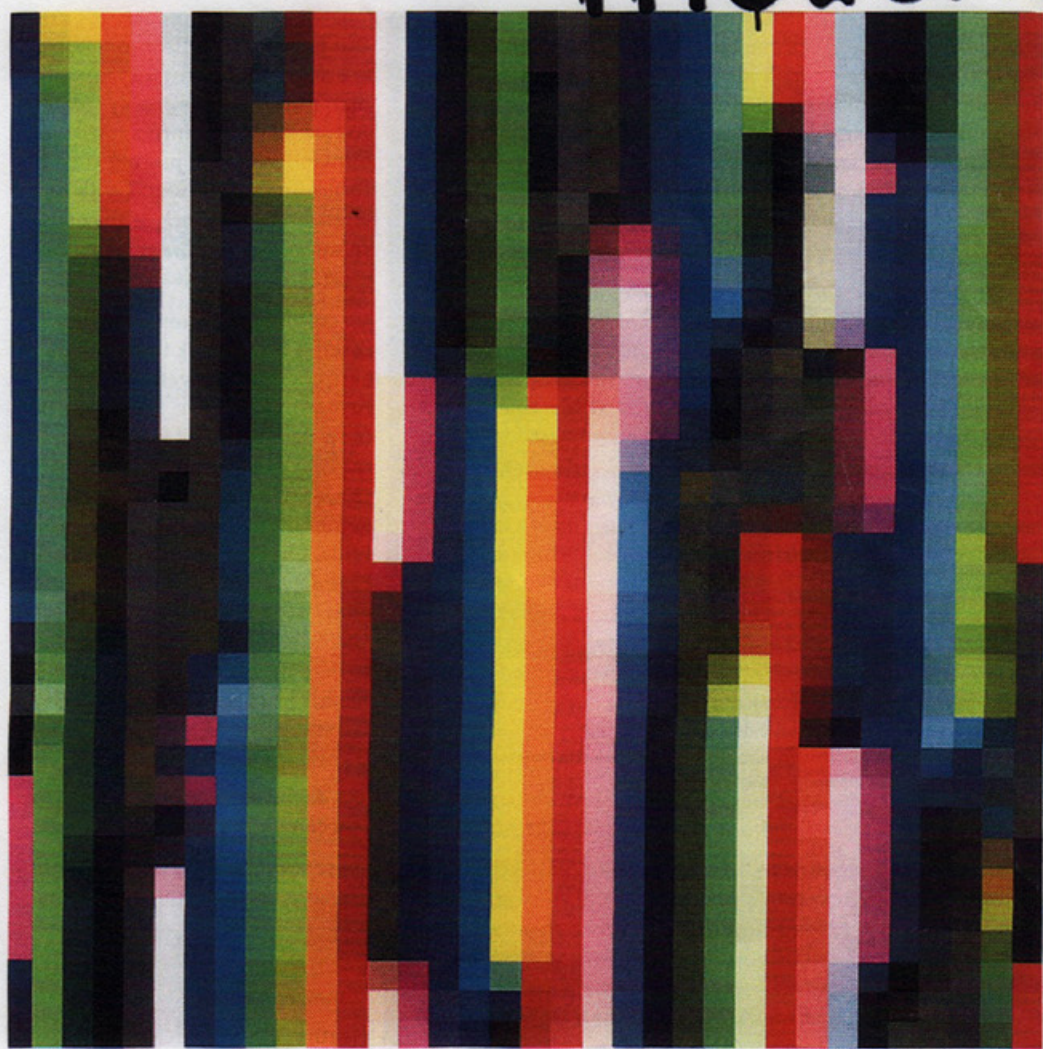


robert owen

caroline barnes

a different kind of modern



Robert Owen

RIGHT: *Spectrum Analysis #5*, 2004. Series: *The Text of Light*, synthetic paint on linen, 198 x 198 cm, photo: Andrew Curtis, courtesy Robert Owen & ARC 1 Gallery Melbourne. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 2006.

FACING PAGE: *Spectrum Shift # 1, 2, 3*, 2003 - 2004 from series *The Text of Light*, acrylic paint on linen 198 x 198 cm each. Photo: Art Gallery of NSW, 2004 courtesy Robert Owen & ARC 1 Gallery Melbourne. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 2006.



When Robert Owen returned to Australia in 1975 after living in Europe for twelve years he found there was no real context for his work, though this may not have seemed to be the case on the surface. His work was accepted well, being selected to represent Australia at the 1978 Venice Biennale. It was more that Owen felt no connection between dominant accounts of the nature and purpose of art circulating in Australia and how he saw his work communicating with viewers and contributing to the world.

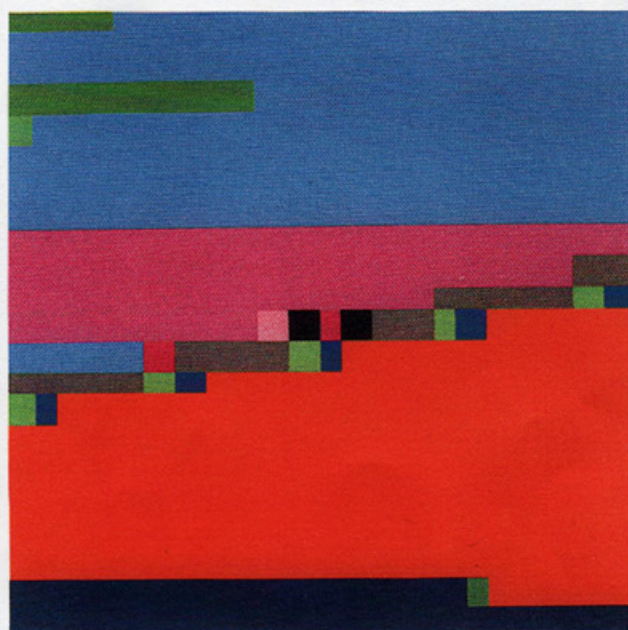
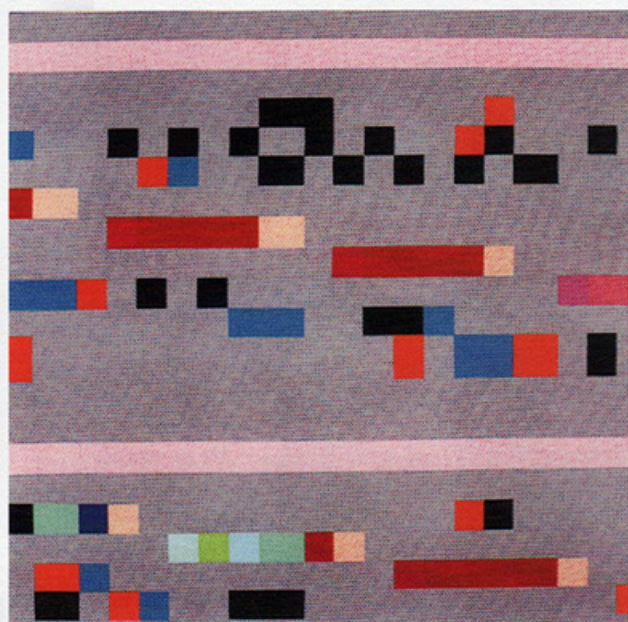
Of course, in the 1970s the whole idea of art was subject to intense debate. On one side was the discourse of formalist modernism, which regarded art as a special kind of self-defining experience, separate from the social sphere. On the other was a growing body of work contesting formalism's prescriptive model of museum art through strategies of negation and critique. Although neither position represented the activities of all artists, their prominence overshadowed or absorbed divergent practices while distorting perceptions of the history of modern art.

Recently there has been considerable reappraisal of the limited view of modern art found in late modernism and postmodernism. The 2006 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, *21st Century Modern*, which included Robert Owen's *Spectrum Analysis #4* and *Spectrum Analysis #5* (2003–2005), centred on the premise that many Australian artists no longer see modernism as a negative proposition but rather as a source of diverse aesthetic and thematic possibilities. Of the several generations of artists in the exhibition, Owen exemplified an artist whose enduring engagement with modernism had recently become more recognisable. In fact, it may only be now, since Australian art has moved beyond the intellectual closure of late and post modernism, that Owen's long-standing interest in exploring dimensions of light and space beyond the merely visual can be seen – not only for itself – but as part of an important line of constructivist art reaching back into the early twentieth century.

In 1975 Owen certainly saw his work as part of the ongoing ambit of international constructivism, where later artists built on principles of non-objective art from Russian Constructivism, De Stijl and the Bauhaus to broadly challenge conventions of looking and thinking. While living in London between 1966 and 1975 Owen worked for two and a half years as an assistant to the British constructivist Anthony Hill, becoming part of a circle of artists with interests in optics, geometry and abstraction. Owen's practice focused on the physics of light, being framed by emerging scientific research that suggested vision was not simply a mechanistic physiological process but rather an instance of abstract thought. Around the time of his return to Australia he was producing wall reliefs comprised of grids of cross-sectioned aluminium tubing, inlaid with sheets of specially treated, mirror-backed acetate. The acetate produced shifting spectrum effects evoking recurrent and powerful experiences of light in the landscape that Owen had had since his childhood in rural New South Wales. These included witnessing a solar eclipse on the Greek island of Hydra in 1966, during which the earth's atmosphere acted like a prism, splitting light into its constituent colours.

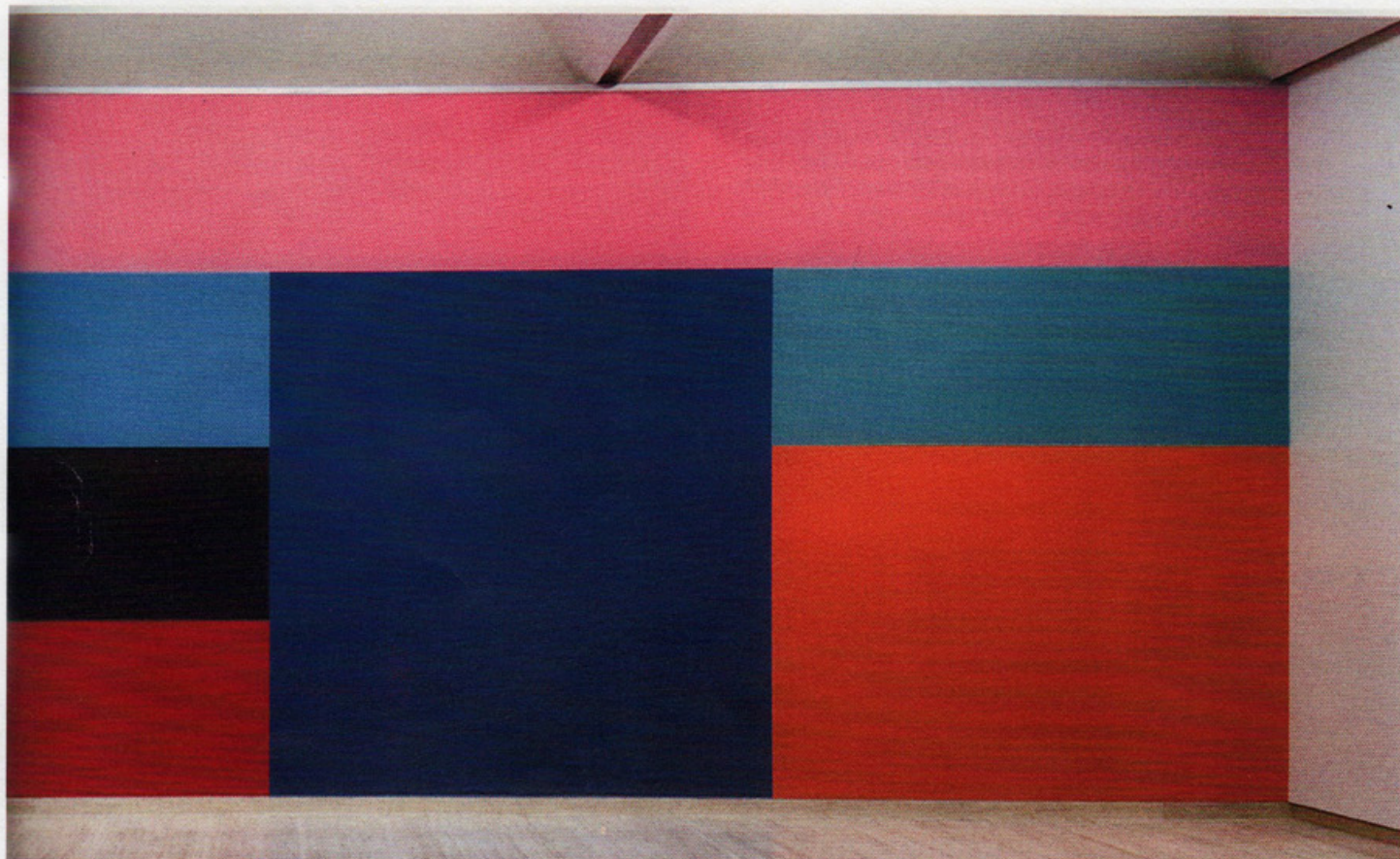
While the subject of light had a personal significance for Owen, his exploration of refraction echoed the constructivist idea that art and science are closely linked. The first art book Owen owned was a volume on the Russian constructivist Naum Gabo, who argued in 1937 that, 'Art and Science are two different streams that rise from the same creative source and flow into the same ocean of the common culture'.¹ The career of Owen's early mentor, Anthony Hill, is an intriguing example of the potential proximity of the two fields. Hill's search for notational systems to describe representational puzzles like the Möbius strip, non-isomorphic polyhedra and organic molecules grew from his artistic interests and saw him become a researcher in mathematics at University College, London, in 1971. It is perhaps not surprising that Owen was drawn to Hill's work. Before leaving Australia in 1963 he had trained in sculpture at the National Art School, Sydney, under Lyndon Dadswell. In 1954 Dadswell heard a lecture in Sydney by Walter Gropius. It inspired him to institute a model of art education at the school based on Bauhaus principles, emphasising problem-solving and experiments in form and materials, supported by knowledge of studio techniques and the science of art, including colour theory in light and pigment.²

Robert Owen **BELOW**: *Study for Mantra (detail #6)*, 2005–2006, from the *Music of Arvo Pärt, Spiegel im Spiegel* 50 x 150 cm synthetic polymer paint on canvas from series: *Music for the eyes*. **BOTTOM**: *Blue Note (detail) - unit #5*, 2006. (from the *Music of G. I. Gurdjieff, Interlude II*) 22 x 122 cm synthetic polymer paint on canvas, series: *Music for the eyes*. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 2006. **RIGHT**: *Sunrise # 2* 1991–2004, acrylic paint on wall, 427 x 1200 cm, Installation in *Robert Owen: Different Lights Cast Different Shadows*, Art Gallery of NSW photo: AGNSW, courtesy: Robert Owen & ARC 1 Gallery Melbourne. All Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 2006.



Experiments with form and materials have characterised Owen's practice throughout his career, as has his openness to heterogeneous influences, his time in Europe making the idea of multiple cultural pathways seem normal to him. From 1963 to 1966 Owen was part of a diverse artistic community on Hydra that included the writers Charmian Clift and George Johnston, the poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen and the poet Jack Hirshman. In London he not only had access to the work of British constructivists but to a breadth of art that demonstrated the existence of parallel, continuous and discontinuous developments in modernism, making the centre-periphery and mainstream structures dominating Australian accounts of twentieth century art mystifying to Owen when he re-encountered them in 1975. These versions either omitted constructivism or took it as a closed chapter in art history.³ Moreover, formalist theory, in limiting abstraction to categorical statements about the nature of painting and sculpture, denied the diversity of non-objective art.

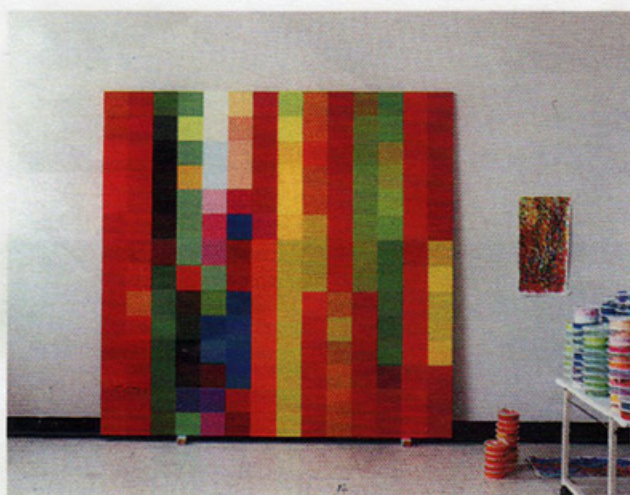
All artworks are obviously open to the codifying effects of their art historical context and in some ways Owen was fortunate in transplanting his practice to Australia when he did. By the mid-1970s growing rejection of the aesthetic qualities that determined art's social, cultural and economic value had opened Australian art to a wide range of experimental media and processes. In occupying the space between painting and sculpture, Owen's work corresponded with the hybrid nature of contemporary art. As the 1970s progressed his work moved from the production of self-contained objects to more open, environmental arrangements of images, objects and materials while continuing to explore the physiology and subjectivity of



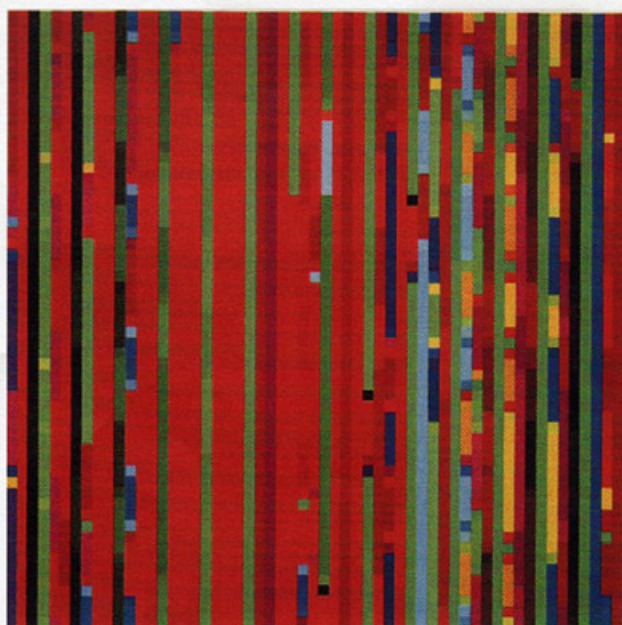
perception, where the human body became the active producer of experience. Consequently, Owen's environments didn't equate with the practices of art critique attributed to the installation art of the 1970s and early 1980s in its appointed role as a mainstay of anti-formalist tendencies in Australia. In expanding abstract form into actual space to explore ambiguities in visual and spatial perception, Owen's work extended constructivism's exploration of the different dimensions of form and space available to the mind and

senses, while drawing on an array of influences including metaphysical philosophy, Buddhist spirituality, the study of higher geometry in physics, research in materials and optics, plus aspects of minimalist sculpture and the work of Marcel Duchamp.

While the introduction of the discourse of postmodernism into Australian art in the early 1980s challenged the validity and continuation of modern art, Owen's work suggests that perhaps modernism had moved onto a different stage.



ABOVE: *Flickering Light #2*, 2003, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 198 x 198 cm.
RIGHT: *Melatonin Shift #4* 2003 – 2005 from series *(Feeling time)* synthetic polymer paint on linen 198 x 198 cm, photo: Andrew Curtis, courtesy Robert Owen and ARC 1 Gallery. Both licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 2006.



The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard depicted the postmodern as the regeneration of the modern on altered principles of ambiguity, uncertainty and unpredictability.⁴ Owen saw Lyotard's ambitious exhibition *Les Immatériaux* at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, in mid-1985 and discussed the exhibition with the philosopher.⁵ Through a complex, sensory environment comprised of objects, images, sounds and activities, the exhibition agitated for the renewal of human perception in the face of altered social and cultural conditions and new technological criteria, echoing Owen's own investigations into the nexus of nature, science and



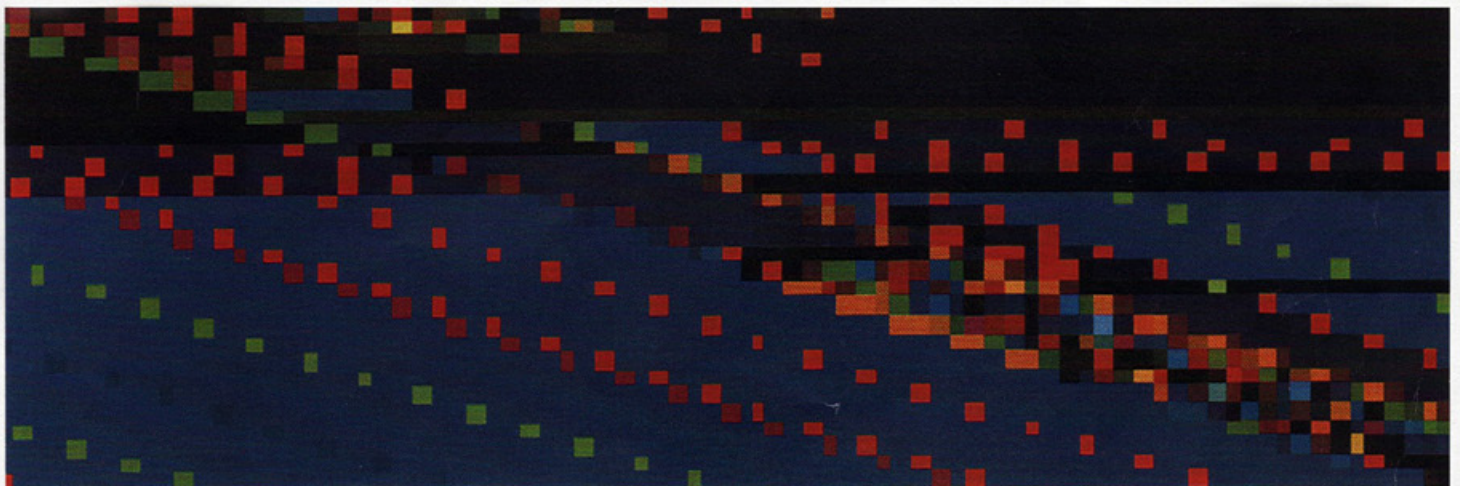
human consciousness, using a research model of art impelled by social and metaphysical objectives.

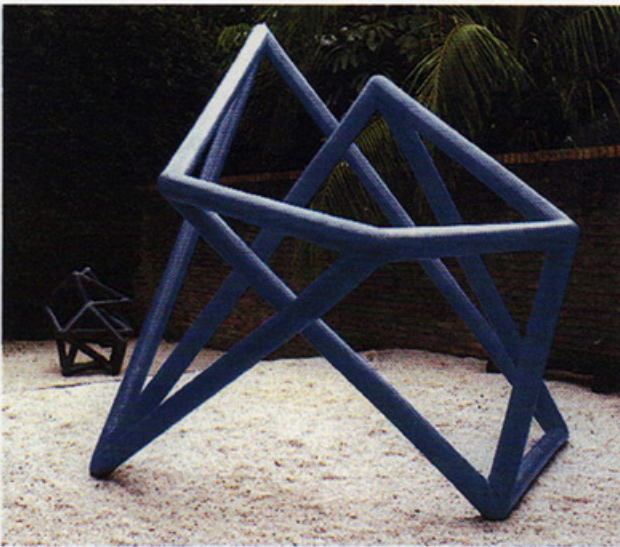
Since the early 1990s, Owen's work has returned to geometric abstraction and colour theory to address the experience of the phenomenal world in a cybernetic age. Its roots trace back to simple grid drawings Owen made as a young artist conceptualising the process of seasonal change. In 1992, through his teaching role at RMIT, Owen gained access to a research lab for advanced computer graphics. Transferring his early grid drawings to the computer allowed him to add colour to the drawings and rapidly explore many combinations of colour and form. A glitch in the program scrambled the grids, reconstructing each image so it suggested a three-dimensional object. Owen was well aware of the field of descriptive geometry, where mathematicians represent three, four and n-dimensional entities in two dimensions to better understand them and natural


phenomena like complex molecules and genetic sequences. Through this chance occurrence Owen began to use the computer to drag the points of his grids around to create forms in virtual space, meaning one grid could generate a painting, a drawing and a sculpture.

Owen's highly coloured geometric paintings explore visual sensations in nature like coloured shadows and the scintillating effects of light. To achieve a more intense experience of space, colour and perceptual consciousness, since 1993 he has translated the coloured grids worked out in the computer into wall paintings, continuing the legacy of room designs found in Russian Constructivism, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus. The manipulated grids are produced as both wall drawings and sculptures, exploring the different perception of things in the actual and the virtual. Lately Owen has revisited the writings of the eccentric American constructivist Charles Biederman, which he first read in the 1960s. Biederman hailed Cézanne as the source of a new art attitude, dedicated to representing the actuality of nature while showing the way to non-objective art as an adjunct to science in breaking through the appearance of things. He also carried on a long correspondence with the physicist David Bohm, exploring the connections between art and science.⁶ Recently, Robert Owen has discussed his work with the Canberra mathematician Stephen Hyde, who on seeing one of Owen's polyhedral sculptures noticed its form matched that of a 'knotted graph', used by mathematicians to describe the structure of liquids and solids.

It was in 1962 – the year Owen started his art career – that Thomas Kuhn argued important scientific discoveries are most likely to come from outside the established theories and processes of a field.⁷ Owen's sculptures suggest art's capacity to invent valid visual models. His most recent series of paintings, *Music for the Eyes*, investigates the connection between musical scales and configurations of form and colour. While the product of a program of aesthetic exploration going back to the 1960s, these paintings have arrived at a strikingly similar position to current thought in a broad range of fields from psychology and philosophy to design, highlighting the indivisibility of human affective responses to the world. This outcome cautions against constraints on diversity in art. Since the mid-1960s aesthetic divergence within modernism has often been suppressed, limiting art to what could be codified as linear historical development. This restriction has served





both the progressivist mentality of late modernism and postmodernism's claims to the hegemonic basis and collapse of the modern, whereas the unfolding of Robert Owen's work suggests that the modern is a far more complex proposition. 

1 N. Gabo, 'The Constructivist Idea in Art' in L. Martin, B. Nicholson and N. Gabo (eds), *Circle – International Survey of Constructive Art*, London, 1937, reprinted in C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p367.

2 In 1957, Dadswell received a Fulbright Scholarship to study art education in America, visiting university departments at Harvard University and the Illinois Institute of Technology where ex-Bauhaus staff like Gropius and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy had established programs in art and design following the Bauhaus model.

3 See the essays by Royston Harpur, Elwyn Lynn and Patrick McCaughey in the catalogue to *The Field*, the National Gallery of Victoria's substantial 1968 survey of Australian hard-edged and colour-field abstraction. Each essay includes cursory references to Russian Constructivism to create a putative art historical pedigree for the work in the exhibition.

4 J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p79.

5 See J-F. Lyotard, 'Les Immatériaux', *Art & Text*, no 17 April 1985, pp47-57.

6 See D. Bohm and C. Biederman, *Bohm-Biederman Correspondence Volume One: Creativity in Art and Science*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1999.

7 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962.

Dr Carolyn Barnes is a Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Design, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. Her book on the Hong-Kong Australian artist John Young was published by Craftsman House in late 2005.

Robert Owen FACING PAGE: Installation at Art Gallery of NSW 2004: *Robert Owen: Different Lights Cast Different Shadows*, showing on left wall: *Cadence #1* 2003 – 2004, sculpture *Carbon Copy # 2*, and L to R. *Afternoon Glow; Blind Spot*, 2003 – 2004, sculptures *Symmetria; Messenger*, courtesy Robert Owen & ARC 1 Gallery Melbourne. **ABOVE:** Sculpture Garden, Sherman Galleries Sydney 2005.

Foreground: *Vessel #2 (Blue)*, 2004, fibreglass & M1 acrylic, courtesy Robert Owen & Sherman Galleries Sydney. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 2006. **BELOW:** Installation view *Music for the Eyes*, ARC 1 Gallery 2006, photo Andrew Curtis. **BOTTOM:** *Witness – Facing East (Chart From a Holy Book)* 2006, synthetic polymer paint on linen,

7 units, 122 x 122 each, 122 x 852 overall, (From the Music of G. I. Gurdjieff, Chant from a Holy Book), photo: Andrew Curtis, courtesy Robert Owen & ARC 1 Gallery Melbourne. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 2006.

