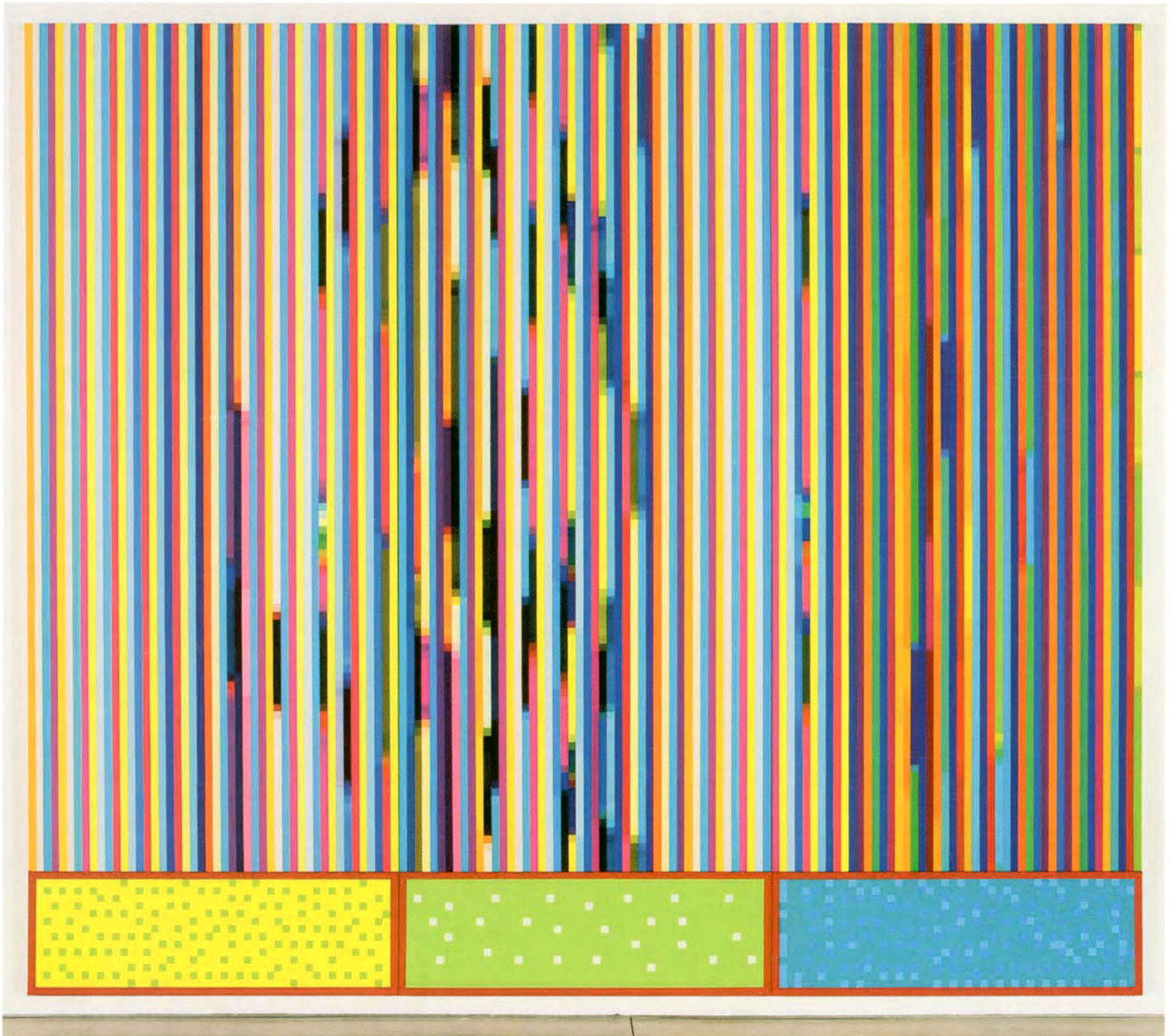




CONTEMPORARY  
AUSTRALIA

Optimism



*Aura (Ten eye colours)* (from 'The text of light' series)  
(detail: panels 5, 6 and 7) 2003-08  
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas / 10 panels:  
315 x 120 cm (each); 315 x 1200cm (overall) /  
Collection: The artist / Photograph: Greg Elms /  
© Robert Owen 2003-08. Licensed by Viscopy,  
Sydney, 2008

# Robert Owen

## How the light gets in

Art historically, figurative Expressionism has been more closely associated with personal subjectivity than abstraction. Yet, the Melbourne artist Robert Owen reverses these expectations. His works are closely tied to the emotional vibrations of consciousness, while also being abstract, process-based and often scientific.

A long engagement with colour has characterised Owen's distinguished oeuvre, and is the key to understanding his expressionist tendencies. Like the German Bauhaus-trained artist Josef Albers, Owen sees relationships generated through the proximity of fields of colour as generative of sensation. While Albers famously hated both the word 'expressionism' and its artistic incarnation, he acknowledged the relationship between colour combinations and their effects:

... color is changing continually: with changing light, with changing shape and placement, and with quantity which denotes either amount (an areal extension) or number (recurrence). And just as influential are changes in perception depending on changes of mood, and consequently receptiveness.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the works that form Owen's painting series 'The text of light' plot his feelings and sensations. The artist tabulates his emotions into a graphic system of colours, with each band of colour representing an approximate 24-hour period in his life. These graphs are then formulated into paintings which resemble pixelated digital blow-ups. His mastery of colour is matched by his ability to manipulate light effects, and the use of white in these works lifts and brightens their composition. Their enveloping size and insistent verticality relate to portraiture and the body, and bring rigid formality to the charted structure.

Colour theory is a recognised discipline, and Owen has long been interested in the intersections between art and scientific theories of perception. He has employed the advice of mathematicians and scientists to explore his hunches about colour

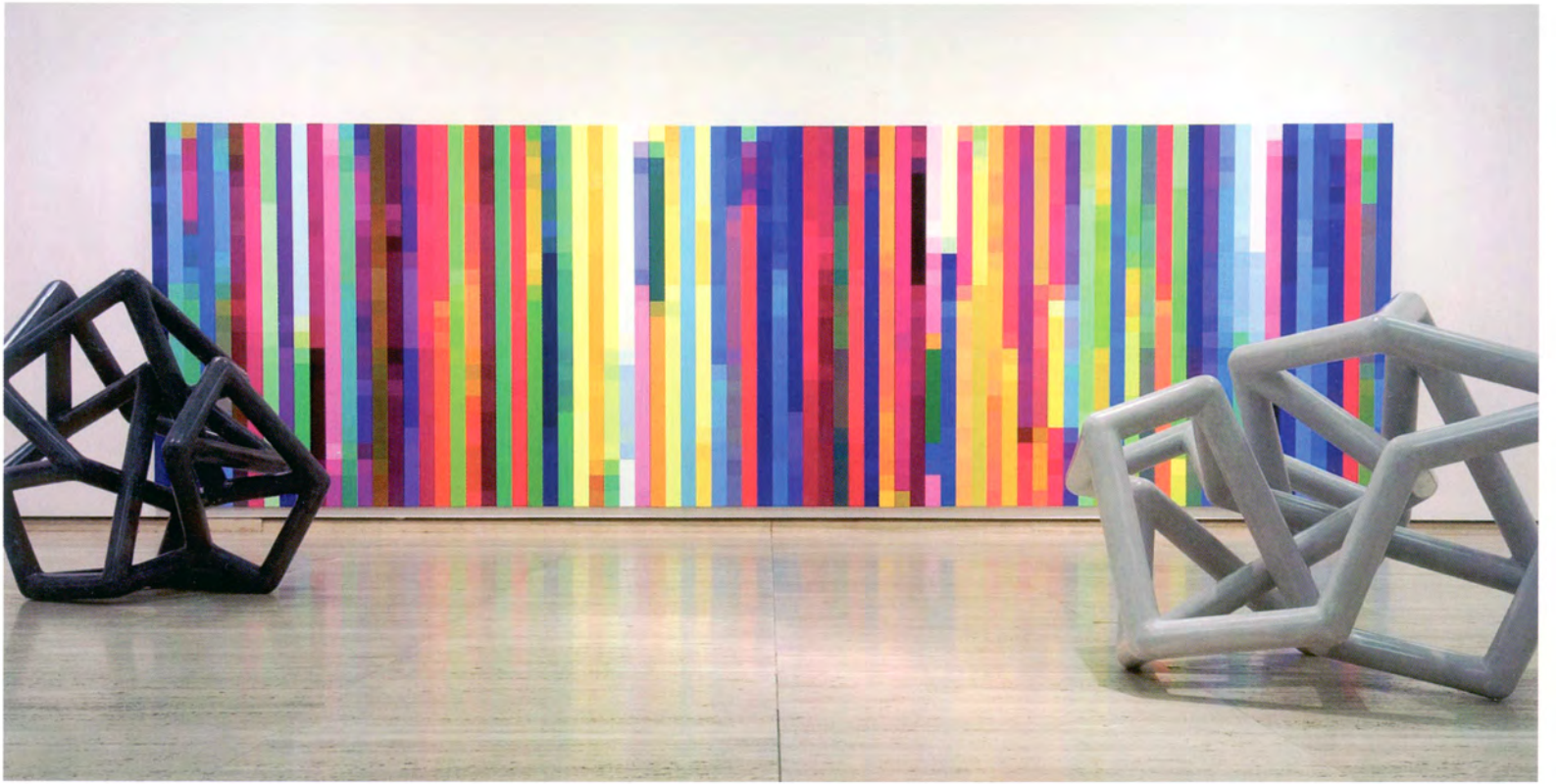
variations and materials, but his approach deliberately avoids being merely systematic. As Owen reports in an interview in 2004, he introduces chance and intuition to make selections, invoking entropy and its relation to order, disorder and chaos:

Wonder is the ground and generator of it all: the beginnings of philosophy, science and the investigations following this trail. What I like to do is to materialise ideas and feelings.<sup>2</sup>

Though his practice now ranges across multiple media, Owen's work originated in sculpture. Lyndon Dadswell at the East Sydney Art School was his first teacher, and employed the Bauhaus pedagogical tradition — an important source was Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion* (1956), as was the work of diverse artists such as Vasili Kandinsky and Charles Biederman. Owen travelled abroad for several years from 1963, a period when, in many areas of cultural life, artists were retreating from orthodox lineages and inherited codes to forge their own directions.

While overseas Owen immersed himself in experiences which set down foundations for his rich artistic vocabulary. These ranged from encounters with ancient Greek mosaics to cutting-edge scientific technology — in London he approached scientists at the Yardley Testing Laboratory to research materials so that he could capture the spectral flare of colour on scorched silver wrapping paper.

Owen also spent a pivotal three-year period on the Greek island of Hydra, alongside Australian authors Charmian Clift and her husband George Johnston (who was busy writing *My Brother Jack*), and the poet Jack Hirshman. On Hydra Owen also met the poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen, whose lyrics from the song 'Anthem', although written decades later, resonate in the context of Owen's art: 'There is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in'.<sup>3</sup>





*Ten eye colours*  
 (from the 'Notes to myself' series) 1978  
 Glass, wood, and lead, cardboard and text /  
 48 x 39 x 3.5cm / Collection: The artist / © Robert  
 Owen 1978. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008

A studio detail of panel 6 from *Aura (Ten eye  
 colours)* (from 'The text of light' series) 2003-08/  
 Collection: The artist / © Robert Owen 2003-08.  
 Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008

Opposite:  
 Background: *Cadence #1 (a short span of time)*  
 (from 'The text of light' series) 2003 /  
 259 x 893.8cm / Collection: Art Gallery of New  
 South Wales / Foreground: *Carbon Copy #2* and  
*Symmertia* / Photograph: AGNSW / © Robert  
 Owen 2003. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008

Upon his return to Australia in 1975, Owen made a small construction — *Ten eye colours* — comprising an empty eye shadow kit made by London's iconic fashion label, Biba. Biba's cutting-edge palette in the early 1970s would have comprised metallic and bright colours, but in Owen's work the make-up crayons are absent; the record of their presence is materialised into another form as ten scattered glass fragments. Inspired by the metaphysical potential of *Ten eye colours*, Owen has revisited this work to develop the painting included in 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism'. Entitled *Aura (Ten eye colours)* 2008, the work is made up of ten large panels painted with the vertical bands of Owen's emotional graphs.

As part of 'The text of light' series, *Aura (Ten eye colours)* combines the neutral and detached aspects of process art with expressive lyricism. These vicissitudes create great symphony and enticing complexity within the picture plane, but the works are also partly closed to us: Owen does not reveal the exact correspondence between the different colours and the different states of his own emotional register. The process basis of the paintings resembles a conceptualist attitude to serial documentation (as seen in the conceptual repetitions of Sol LeWitt), whereby the system becomes the subject of the art work. But Owen's colours create their own narrative. In a way, their systematic genesis becomes irrelevant when we look at the paintings — as we can only speculate on the artist's personal colour-emotional equivalences, we naturally tend to make assumptions about the works based on our own responses. Although pigments might be subject to the laws of physics, the affect of colour defies definition by rule: its impact on individuals is essentially unclassifiable. As Albers said:

If one says 'Red' (the name of a color) and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different.<sup>4</sup>

Wielding the contrapuntal artistic approaches of Constructivism, Expressionism and conceptual art, Robert Owen creates his own multiple layers of context and source material in *Aura (Ten eye colours)*. Its dazzling surface exposes us to the truth and mystery of one man's personal barometer of emotion.

Angela Goddard

- 1 See Josef Albers's 'Statements of content portfolio II' (11:33), in TG Rosenthal, *Josef Albers, Formulation: Articulation*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2006.
- 2 George Alexander, 'Robert Owen interviewed', in *Robert Owen: Different Lights Cast Different Shadows* [exhibition catalogue], Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2004, p.22.
- 3 Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem' is from the 1992 album *The Future*.
- 4 Josef Albers, *Interaction of Colour*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1963, quoted in Rosenthal, p.21.