

# Robert Owen

Robert Owen's paintings, *Spectrum Analysis #4* and *Spectrum Analysis #5*, are resplendent in their quivering, vibrant use of colour. Owen's use of sharp greens, solid pinks and purples, shades of grey and blocks of red, yellow, orange and blue, seduce the viewer into journeys in colour and form that seem to move in and out of focus, never allowing the eye to rest. While we may yearn to build up a story, a logic, or a narrative trace through the paintings, these works are so alive with energy, they confound any quest for closure.

Robert Owen's oeuvre, which includes painting, sculpture and installation, continues to develop strands within modernist practice – geometric abstraction, minimalist sculpture and 'constructivist' assemblage. The grid has been a perennially generative form for Owen since he lived in London between 1966 and 1974, where his early experiments with the grid paralleled its many variations in modernist painting and sculpture at the time. Owen then worked alongside the group of artists known as the 'Constructive' or, in the phrase of their foremost practitioner, Anthony Hill, 'Constructionist' sculptors who sought to create an art of mathematically precise abstraction.

The predominant aim of this and other streams of modernism was to reduce painting and sculpture to its barest essentials, to achieve a self-reflexivity that drew attention to the form, colour, and composition itself, and nothing more. At its most rigorous, this work rejected narrative, memory, metaphor, religion and symbolism. Yet modernism's rich legacy of abstraction offers artists and critics alike ever new terrains for exploration and reconfiguration. Since the 1970s, critics have unravelled the eccentricities of modernism's leading practitioners and movements. Robert Rosenblum famously linked the abstract sublime to the northern romantic landscape tradition. Hal Foster has analysed the ways in which American Minimalist sculpture

anticipated movements such as Conceptual art and Post-minimalist sculpture. Yves Alain Bois has identified the 'narrativisation of the gaze' in the work of Ad Reinhardt. Rosalind E. Krauss has referred to the 'optical unconscious' of Minimalism. Moreover, critics such as Geeta Kapur have analysed hybrid versions of modernism in regions outside Europe and America.

Robert Owen revisits geometric abstraction with an artist's eye for both transformation and continuity. Owen's geometry is distinguished by the celebration of colour as a symbolic and material force, and light and darkness as an expression of being. The intense sensations we experience in looking at *Spectrum Analysis #4* and *#5* respond to forms that are simultaneously mathematical and emotional. At one level, the paintings exist as information, mapping and archiving the artist's emotions through colour, with the assistance of a computer software program. This is their mathematics. At another level, the fluctuating and serendipitous relationships of light and colour across the canvases exude a jubilant feeling of excess and reverie. Owen's grid is like a stringed instrument that is in perpetual play. As such, it creates a synaesthetic spectrum that resonates with the Buddhist principle of impermanence. The artist unites two seemingly incompatible worlds that have long been a passion: the rational and the spiritual.

Victoria Lynn

*Spectrum Analysis # 4* 2003–05  
from the series *Text of Light*  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas linen, 198.0 x 198.0 cm  
private collection, Melbourne  
photograph: Andrew Curtis



