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ARTS

# Astronaut of British abstraction

ART

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The most common gripe heard against Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* is that it doesn't represent anything in particular. "It's badly painted", "a child could do it", "what does it mean?" are phrases well entrenched into the mythology and controversy surrounding the National Gallery of Australia's finest example of American abstract expressionist painting. Pure abstract painting is far more demanding of the senses than forms of abstraction evolved from representational imagery. Glimpses of trees, boats or faces reassure an impatient and cynical late 20th-century psyche all too easily intimidated by abstract thought and visual processes.

Unlike American abstraction of the '50s and beyond, British painting is less often as purely abstract in content. Frank Auerbach's streetscapes and portraits remain streetscapes and portraits, no matter how dissected and unfocused the forms become, and Howard Hodgkin's interiors defiantly evoke the specifics of time and place. In contrast, John Hoyland's non-representational paintings provide no pictorial coathangers on which to hang literal readings. Instead, form and colour are part of a sensory language that operates independently of associative signposts. Where other British artists have, over the decades, straddled that ambivalent border between figuration and abstraction, Hoyland has straddled a desire for an abstract familiarity with the American tendency towards establishing a freer lexicon of imagery.

Hoyland turns 60 this year. When still in his 20s, he participated in the pivotal 1960 *Situation* exhibition in London, along with other young abstract painters such as Gillian Ayres and Bob Law, who were then articulating a new brand of abstraction. British abstractionists of the previous decade (Alan Davie, Patrick Heron and Roger Hilton, among



John Hoyland . . . with *Black Something* and other "cross-cultural hybrids".

Picture by Salton Hayes.

others) were excluded on the grounds that their paintings drew too closely on the natural world. The unabashed bright colours in these young artists' work also broke with national tradition.

Typically, the muted browns and greens in British painting reflect the reality of a bleak climate and unpaid studio light bills. The terror of absolute freedom of form and colour is something that Hoyland revels in to this day.

Anandale Galleries is showing 21 recent paintings and works on paper in the artist's second Australian exhibition - the first was in 1980. Since I last spent time with Hoyland's work in London during the mid- to late-'80s, it has turned itself inside out, the characteristically enigmatic motifs exploding outwards rather than formally constricting inwards.

The paintings are more open-ended, the forms in space lurching between a feeling of freedom and tension. As the exhibition opens this week, comparisons will inevitably be drawn with the concurrent astronomical action in our solar system.

A sort of cosmic chaos prevails, formal and colourful unpredictability within a deceptively structured grand plan. Hoyland's paint hits the canvas with the same explosive impact as the comet fragments hitting Jupiter, and its course is just as clearly plotted by the artist as the course of the comet by astronomers.

Although the initial effect might be one of paradoxical coincidence, nothing in these confidently bombastic paintings is left to chance. It is here that Hoyland's approach differs from the more accidental branch of

Abstract Expressionism, sharing more with Miro's flowing but precise calligraphic line and sculptor Anthony Caro's fluid arrangement of brightly coloured forms floating in three-dimensional space.

Dominating the exhibition are three large canvases, including the malevolently titled *Hating and Dreaming*. The background is a vacuum of blackness.

OVER the surface a physical circular space is defined by a raised purple line of thick acrylic paint. Fluorescent explosions of colour punctuate the outer sections of the composition, keeping the viewer's eye moving in, out and around the entire canvas. Another of the large paintings, *Devil's Leaf*, has more earth-bound than cosmic connotations, a tentative bright green

line tracing a snail's trail or silent toxic leak. All of Hoyland's work has an innate musicality; this one emanating a more funereal than jazz band ring.

In a recent interview, Hoyland spoke of his practice as essentially dialectical, of "being aware of contemporary art as well as art from the past" and of hoping to create "cross-cultural hybrids". The notion of cultural hybridity in Hoyland's work represents more than deference to a fashionable catchphrase. In this show there is a relatively modest painting, *Little Gold Snake*, which in its new Australian context suggests an awareness of Aboriginal artistic culture. Next to it hangs *Black Something*, the third of the major paintings and in its insinuated figuration the most intriguing image here. The "black something" lurks enigmatically, neither

WHAT'S ON  
CRITIC'S CHOICE

*Art Is Good For You*: debate and auction, Artspace, 43 Cowper Wharf Road, Woolloomooloo, tomorrow 3-6 pm. *Liz Day: New Tracks in an Old House*: First Draft, 116-118 Chalmers Street, Surry Hills, until July 31. *Time Lime*: large group exhibition to mark the gallery's closure, Lime Gallery, 271 Goulburn Street, Darlinghurst, until August 6. *Christopher Snee, Pattern of Virtue*: Kunst, 1st floor, 436 Oxford Street, Paddington, until August 13.

ominous nor optimistic, against a dark sky-blue background. Although Hoyland's titles are not to be taken at face value, the connotative racial link between these two paintings seems more than coincidental. By facilitating an interplay of possible readings within a purely abstract language, Hoyland comes close in these works to fulfilling his dream of crossing "social, linguistic and cultural barriers in the way that music does".

At Mori Gallery, Peter Cooley's paintings share Hoyland's ebullient sense of colour, though less of the enigma of concept and technique. More camp than cosmic in sensibility, Cooley's *Homemade and Slutty* series comprises painted renditions of party decorations, knitted woolly rugs and hilly landscapes. A crafty exuberance prevails, the artist's goods a celebration of gay and rural Australian culture. The sexual associations of the image of Mount Warning reflected onto the Tweed River, shown here in a picture postcard, was precociously noted by Cooley as a child. Giant squelching orifices are rendered here in garish colours, strung together in the repetitive series of paintings like *Fritly streamers* in a Mardi Gras parade. The tight frills are actually streams of illegible handwriting, dirty poems the artist invents himself. Completing the performance are Cooley's ceramics, colourful vessels which, with their handcrafted rustic charm, reaffirm the artist's homemade and slutty intentions.