



CONEY ISLAND

ARTISTS

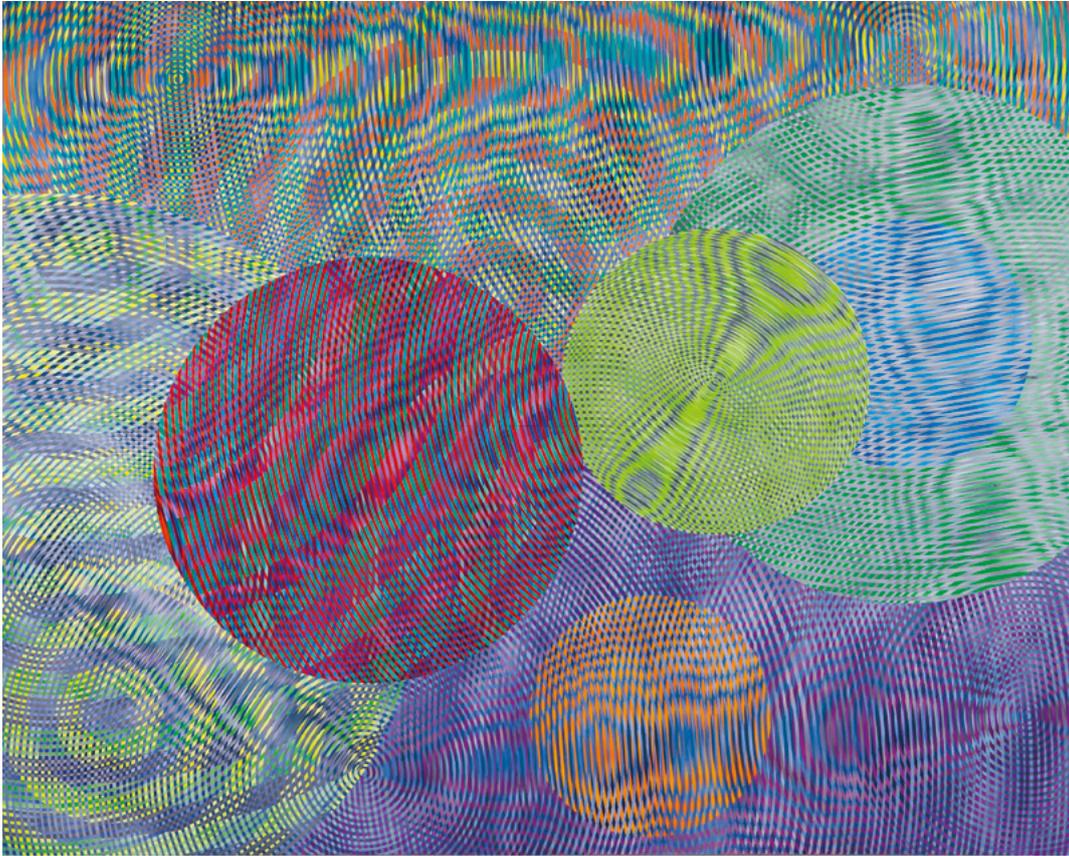
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Angela Brennan
Sadie Chandler
Renee Cosgrave
David Harley
Matthew Johnson
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Cover Image:
Renee Cosgrave
Untitled 2017 (detail)
Oil on linen
122 x 102 cm
Courtesy the artist



John Aslandis
Sonic Network No. 3 2007
Oil and acrylic on canvas
244 x 204 cm
Courtesy the artist and
NKN Gallery, Melbourne.

A small survey of abstract painting from Inner North Melbourne

To survey these paintings, we might be mistaken for thinking they are drawn from the archetypal amusement park Coney Island. Instead, the title is a conceptual platform through which to experience works by seven artists who live in the inner-north of Melbourne.¹ This inversion – of the spectacle of the amusement park back to the gallery space – privileges the work of sensory engagement over more passive forms of mass entertainment. Taking a cue from the title of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's book of Beat poetry, it's probably best described as a *Coney Island of the Mind*.²

Each artist expands the boundaries of the abstract tradition, at times eschewing arbitrary definitions in favour of inter-disciplinary tendencies. Such detours from pure abstraction surface in titles, in material form and through the augmentation of sound. There is a progression of styles that leads from highly planned hard-edged painting to more intuitive gestural brushstrokes. And there are many instances of festive dialogue between markings, patterns and colours.

It is relevant to ask how *Coney Island* fits within the current program at Counihan: a gallery well-reputed for staging exhibitions that address more pressing agendas of identity, politics and the environment. It's not only relevant, but crucial to ask what function abstraction has in an era where art can be a mobilizing force towards sane political values, gender equality and respect for our environment. Many argue that abstract painting no longer has a place: that any revision of this history is a mere re-hashing of a defunct political program. Some might even say that there is a decadence to showing abstraction, in the same way that a visit to a theme park is a superfluous luxury rather than a necessity.

¹ All of the artists included in the exhibition live and work less than 6km from Counihan Gallery.

² Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind: poems by Lawrence Ferlinghetti*, New York: New Directions, 1968 ©1958

Nonetheless, Counihan Gallery is committed to showing a diversity of practice and to celebrating the work of local artists. This project was initiated by Victor Griss in 2016, who suggested an exhibition by abstract artists living and working in the area. We could justify the project through the assertion that to promote artists who live in the area is a way to enhance our appreciation for the immediate community. More importantly though, abstract painting has had a rough trot in Australian history. It suffered an early blow following the confused agenda of Bernard Smith's 1959 Antipodean Manifesto (which declared war on abstraction in favour of figuration). The alienation of abstraction has been further cemented by the prominence of figurative art prizes such as The Archibald. Arguably, abstraction is yet to find appreciation in the Australian public conscience. No wonder then, that many of the artists here have thriving careers beyond Australia.

In John Aslanidis's paintings, circles expand and contract to create moiré forms that float across the canvas. The works are made through the unconventional combination of airbrushed acrylic and hand-brushed oil. Each circle is comprised of at least two colours layered upon each other, overlapping with other circular forms upon the canvas. In every painting, the density of visual information is so insistent that "there are always too many forms, too much repetition for the viewer to get a retinal hold or 'grip' on the different elements that confront them."³ In 2007, the *Sonic Network* series prompted Aslanidis to collaborate with musicians and since then his practice has justly linked to the artistic tradition of synaesthesia.

Wilma Tabacco's capacity for flawless hard-edge painting has been honed in a practice that spans thirty years. In the studio, smaller studies for works consist of cardboard components, that are shuffled into different configurations. The painted line surfaces differently in her works: at times in fine vertical vibrations, at others in highly pronounced block form. Dan Rule observes how,



Wilma Tabacco
Flights of fantasy 2008
Oil on linen, 152 x 137cm
Sesame, 2015, oil on linen
183 x 152.5 cm
Courtesy the artist
and Langford 120

³ Thomas, M, 'Dislocation - the Influence of Contemporary Music', John Aslanidis: *Sonic Wrestling*, Fox Galleries, Brisbane, 2004, p.30.



David Harley

File_cgb 2009 - 2016

Pigmented inkjet print on
Ilford rag paper mounted on
composite board, edition 1/3,
100 x 133,6 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Charles Nodrum Gallery

“Tabacco’s painted surfaces aren’t nearly as flat as their first read. With proximity, their patina and the play of the brush become far more complex.”⁴ Both *Sesame* and *Hatchepsut* are loosely drawn from the aerial view of archaeological sites. The scale of the works prompts figurative allusions and the artist freely asserts that many of her works are based on observations harnessed from reality.

A sonic component hovers at the edges of David Harley’s practice, who is inspired by classical music. In 1995, the artist’s early adoption of traditional painting was usurped by the language of painting afforded through different technologies. Harley plays with the fidelity of the image by using different resolutions: jagged pixelated edges contrast with softened sprayed markings. Part of the artist’s interest in working digitally lies in the way that layering works differently, a flexibility not afforded in traditional painting. Kandinsky is also a key influence here: thinking about the way digital painting affords a state of improvisation, Harley describes how he is able to “incorporate peripheral thoughts as they develop and to harness them...the digital has allowed me to take things in a direction that I probably be more restrained with as a painter”.⁵

In a multi-disciplinary practice that incorporates textiles, ceramics and abstract painting, Angela Brennan’s buoyant sense of humour surfaces through choices of colour, text and patterning. Her practice reveals broad tastes with references to philosophy, art history, popular culture and religion. Although the visual language is constantly evolving, there is also something immediately recognizable about a work by Angela Brennan. Recurring motifs include rounded (but never perfect) forms, highly keyed colours and visible brushstrokes.

*Sometimes I have a clear and defined idea of how I want a painting to develop but at other times the preliminary marks I make on the canvas dictate the rest of the painting. The latter approach is the more exciting because there is an element of chance, that is to say the picture evolves in directions that were previously unimagined and that’s the thrill of it, to see what evolves just by laying marks down on top of each other or big blobs of colour so it’s as if I’m not in control of it absolutely, it’s as if the painting makes itself.*⁶

Although Renee Cosgrave paints mostly on canvas, she has also worked directly on city walls, gallery walls and shop windows. This is a steadfastly expansive and at times, deliberately juxtaposed practice. On one hand, there are organic arrangements in pale shades such as *The Land (Maori Song)*, where pinks and violets meander tentatively over the surface. This is contrasted with more formal arrangements of order, such as grids or vertical lines, where there is a tendency towards bolder and darker colours. Sometimes, Cosgrave embeds a conceptual component in works by using leftover paint or labelling colours. For this artist, it is as though the tradition of abstraction is a vast mine through which to constantly experiment with painting, colour, form and pattern.

4 Dan Rule, (short review of *Cycladic* at Gow Langford Gallery, Melbourne) *Around the Galleries*, *The Age*, December 18 2015

5 Unplugged interview <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/program/unplugged-live-6/> Unplugged Live Tom Ianssek & David Harley Sunday 9 Aug 15, 2pm NGV Australia, Federation Square 2015

6 Interview with the artist and Mark Ashkanasy 2000 *Art Right Now* 2 14 June 2005 <http://gallery.discoverymedia.com.au/artzinePub/story.asp?id=291§ion=ArtStud>



Sadie Chandler
Riot 2014
Acrylic and enamel on canvas
86.5 x 102 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Charles Nodrum Gallery

A key component of Matthew Johnson's work is the universal form of the circle, repeated in grid form across the canvas. These circles occupy a spectrum from hard-edged to smudged. The effect evokes many different triggers: of pixellation, of coding, of a pulse. Although observations from nature form the basis for much of his work, the selection of works here are more electric in their suggestion of urban lights and commercial signage. In the recently completed *Pharos*, the artist embeds the canvas with microbeads, an effect that creates a frosted appearance but also extends the possibility of illumination. When purposefully lit, he describes the effect of "raking light", a term used in photography to reveal the topography of the surface. A sculptural work from 1998 introduces kinetics and light to a kind of utopian vision of architecture: the artist describes its function as a formal exercise in the containment of paint, of the city as an imaginary place.

Sadie Chandler's broader artistic project attempts to reference the vast history of painting from the perspective of a contemporary artist. She describes this series of bruised organic shapes "as abstractions by a painter as opposed to abstractions by an abstractionist."⁷

These works are about mark making and the qualities of the material. Spray enamel comes out fast and uncontrollable - it all happens in a few minutes. The paint is anarchic - no wonder graffiti artists use it. It's glossy and brushless, unlike anything that could be made with traditional paint and brush.

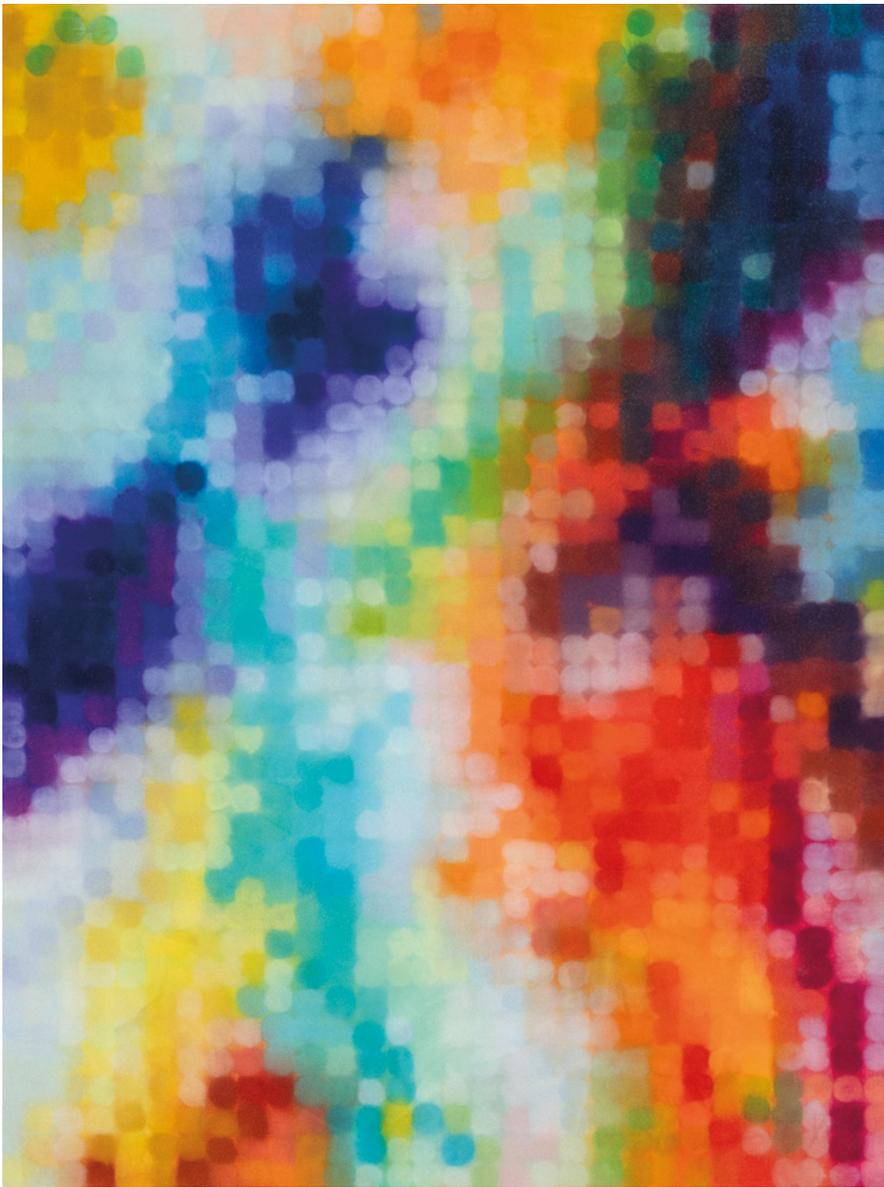
Overlapping circles are restricted to a palette of three colours. The after effects of dots dance across the paintings, creating subsequent illusory layers in the works.

In 1913 a visit to Coney Island was a turning point for migrant artist Joseph Stella, whose rendition of the theme park *Coney Island (Battle of the Lights)* is now an icon of American modernist painting.⁸ The work combines the dazzling array of light into a rhythmic composition in that chimes with many of the works in this exhibition. It is not difficult to imagine these paintings as components of Stella's larger painting. Ultimately, the vision for this exhibition is hopelessly utopian: it simply proposes the sensory enjoyment of abstract painting as an alternative to mass entertainment. And, given the marginalization of abstraction in the Australian art world, it might end up being more fun than you expect.

Jane O'Neill
Curator
August 2017

⁷ Conversation with the artist 2015.

⁸ An image of this work is featured here in the catalogue, courtesy of the Yale University Art Gallery.



Matthew Johnson
Purlieu Illume (Pharos) 2017
Oil and glass micro spheres on linen
244 x 182 cm
Courtesy the artist and
NKN Gallery, Melbourne

VISITOR INFORMATION



About the gallery

The Counihan Gallery In Brunswick opened in 1999. The public gallery for the City of Moreland, it is named in honour of Australian artist and activist Noel Counihan.

The gallery has a focus on contemporary art exhibitions and aims to encourage discussion and debate about issues in arts and culture through public programs.

Moreland City Council acknowledges the traditional owners of the land in which the gallery is located, the Wurundjeri people.

Counihan Gallery In Brunswick

Located inside Brunswick Town Hall
233 Sydney Road
Brunswick VIC 3056
(03) 9389 8622
counihangallery@moreland.vic.gov.au
moreland.vic.gov.au/counihan-gallery

Opening Times

Wednesday - Saturday
11 am - 5 pm

Sunday
1 - 5 pm

Closed on public holidays
and between exhibitions.

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 /counihangalleryinbrunswick

Public programs

For details on upcoming programs
and events please check the gallery
website or facebook page.

Schools/Groups

We welcome visits by school and
community groups. Please contact us
if you would like to visit with a group
and meet the gallery curator.