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ILDIKO KOVACS

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Ildiko Kovacs' beautifully resolved abstractions are the work of an artist fully in control of her craft, yet willing always to take the risks needed to transform those paintings into art.

ILDIKO KOVACS' FORTHCOMING survey, at the Orange Regional Gallery in Central-West NSW, and soon after that at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra, will be a fascinating re-investigation of the ideas which drove her work up to her previous survey, roughly ten years ago. Bold and fresh as the new work is, its impact is amplified by the way it links back to earlier work.

Surveys such as this can represent a sharp and potentially lethal focus on an artist's career, for what we are looking for in a survey is a consistency of concern. Any lack of conviction, any wavering from the core mission will not just be exposed, but writ large.

A painter, for example, may make stylistic shifts or even radical changes pictorially (say from abstraction to figuration), but the investigation of visual experience needs to sustain a coherent, underlying trajectory.

Although one can never know until the paintings are up there on the walls, I suspect that Kovacs' survey will confirm her reputation as a major player in the much contested field of Australian abstraction.

Of course, abstraction is itself contested. As the clouds of hype and advocacy disperse, we can see that abstraction does not come out of nowhere, but unsurprisingly out of the world around us – just look at Mondrian –

while the postwar American abstractionists are now generally acknowledged to have been responding to the cities and landscapes they lived in.

And so it is with the work of Kovacs, who comments, 'I am totally inspired by landscape'. But this does not make this firmly committed abstract painter a landscapist. Rather it begs the question about how the landscape is perceived.

Here we need to acknowledge the important role played by Kovacs' exposure to Indigenous art. She lived in Broome in 1995 and from there she visited Fitzroy Crossing, returning later for a residency in 2008. She



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was not so much influenced by the imagery, but by the process by which that imagery emerged. After all, the work of art is simply the artefact left behind by a process.

For Kovacs it was more the performative nature of Indigenous art which concentrated her painter's mind and, I suspect, the response to landscape from multiple perspectives. Landscape as something experienced, not observed – landscape as a simultaneously emotional, historical and physical place. The exploration of landscape, then, becomes an exploration of the self.

Kovacs is very much a painter by vocation – which is to say she lives through her painting. It is, she says, 'an instrument to express my nature,' although my guess is that it's through painting that she is able to encounter herself. Just as her lines and forms often seem to float in space, so she ventures into the Milky Way of her imagination, coming into contact with the marks that roam and occasionally collide in that space. Her painting has its origins in mark-making and, she says, 'it is so hard to put down that first mark, so hard seeing and feeling a different mark'.

She speaks of 'intuitive intellect' which points to the importance of the process in her work, a process which begins as an intuitive

encounter with a mark which then becomes a conscious and deliberate, almost artisanal process of exploring and fully developing the inherent nature of that mark.

But the process still needs its intuitive impulse and it is important that the history of the painting's making shows through in the final result. This derives from the constant reworking of the surface. Working on plywood – 'I love the seductive naturalness of the board' – the paint is put down, then stripped back with turps before being re-worked again. This process is evident in her sinewy 'ribbon' paintings. The 'ribbons' are made using a roller and the ribbing effect in a painting such as *In Flight* (2015, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia) is produced by the process of repeatedly stripping back. These forms seem to float in deepest space and their interweaving has a contrapuntal quality where each line is separate and yet part of a rhythmic whole.

There is a 'push-pull' dynamic at work here where the eye is first drawn towards spatial depth only to be brought back to the surface, thus ensuring a unity of the picture plane. We see this at work in very different paintings like *Over the Gap* (2015) where a tightly knit surface wrestles with some very muscular underpainting, and *Sunray* (2017)



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where a smallish irregular form in the centre seems to advance towards the viewer, only to then recede, leaving behind a tension across the surface.

The survey looks at roughly the last ten years of Kovacs' work (since the publication of a monograph accompanying her survey show in 2011 at the Hazelhurst Regional Gallery) and one of the highlights will be the emergence of a new stream of expressive, curvilinear paintings with a strongly graphic character. *Sunrise* (2018) and *Highly Strung* (2018), for example, use paint on card with boldly gestural and linear graphite lines worked into a richly textured and layered surface. Yet there is a recursive quality to this new work which links it back to work from earlier years. It is as though the marks then have transmogrified, constantly evolving into new marks, taking on different meanings as they reincarnate.

Henri Matisse once commented that the significance of an artist was to be measured by the number of new signs he has introduced into the language. A sign is an

01 *Moonwalk*, 2010, oil on card mounted on plywood, 94 x 76.5 cm

02 *India*, 2011, oil on plywood, 180 x 180 cm

03 *Over the Gap*, 2015, oil on plywood, 180 x 180 cm



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image which embodies the meanings distilled from lived experience. So, it is apt that Kovacs should say of a survey that it is 'the luxury of bringing together a history of what I've gone through and the relationships that have shifted'.

Certainly, the joy of a survey that works is to recognise a recursive character to the work, enabling the viewer to appreciate not so much a progression in an artist's work, but rather an ever-deepening and enriching exploration of visual experience, the seeds of which were there right from the beginning.

As T. S. Eliot wrote in *Little Gidding*,
We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. ■

EXHIBITIONS
The DNA of Colour
18 April to 16 June, 2019
Orange Regional Gallery, NSW

21 June to 11 August, 2019
Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra

04 *Sunrise*, 2018, oil paint and graphite, 90 x 60 cm
 05 *Gemini*, 2017, oil on plywood, 122 x 244 cm
 06 *Sunray*, 2017, oil on plywood, 180 x 180 cm

Courtesy the artist, Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney,
 Orange Regional Gallery, NSW and Stephen Oxenbury

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