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Painting process as journey: movement and stasis: meditation and materiality

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Painting Process as Journey: 
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Thesis statement 

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Statement of Sources

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.
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**Abstract**

This exegesis documents and supports a studio-based research project that produced a body of work, resulting in an exhibition entitled ‘Meditation and Materiality’. This project aimed to integrate an exploration of the physicality and materiality of painting with the universal interconnectedness experienced in deep meditation practices.

My aim was to broaden and develop the understanding of the dynamics that drive a sustainable contemporary painting practice by exploring the evolution of questions and ideas that arose in the studio process. A new painterly language began to form through the studio process of experimenting with the translation of my experiences in meditation onto canvas. During this process, new understandings arose — including a recognition of the parallels between materiality and immateriality, between movement and stasis, as well as a realisation that the ritual of preparation in the studio mirrored that for meditation space.

Central to this research was the concept of journey and specifically the parallels between the metaphor of the poetic image on canvas and the inner journey and between the worldly travels and paint materials. A deep enquiry into the nature of religion and spirituality led to a period of experimentation with various forms of meditation, which provided me with several profound experiences. This resulted in an insight into the interconnectedness — and thus interrelationship — of all things. These visions and understandings are the foundation of this research project.

An accidental event in the studio — the spilling of paint on the canvas — led to the development of techniques of pouring and manipulating the liquidity of the medium. The new painterly language that had emerged led to a revelation. It provided a way of expressing the interconnectedness between the microcosm and macrocosm that I had been searching for.
This visual language, coupled with further experimentation with texture and image development, gave me a means to communicate this notion of unity, and resulted in the final body of work.

The approach to my painting process was strongly influenced by Asian and Buddhist philosophies, which enabled me to engage with and examine contemporary knowledge on meditation, spirituality and art. In particular, it is the metaphysical representation in these artists’ work and theories that I identified with, and which provided a context for my work.

This research also encompassed a ranging, nomadic reading program across many fields and disciplines, including the work of scientists and philosophers. Subjects such as alchemy, silent intelligence and self-organisation informed, expanded and brought clarity to my studio enquiry. This helped to develop my understanding of how the interconnectedness of everything may be conveyed through painting.

This evolved to a resolution that the dual aspects of our being — physicality and spirituality, form and formlessness — are of the same substance; ultimately there is unification and wholeness.
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‘Painting Process as Journey: Movement and Stasis – Meditation and Materiality’ is a research project that was founded upon the experiences that I have had during meditation practices and explored utilising the materiality of paint to reflect the inner journey.

The process of making this work was one of self-reflection, exploration of states of consciousness, and piecing together the interconnecting relationship between all things. One challenge was to find a language with which to translate this into a contemporary painting practice. Adopting an experimental approach, using various mediums, and informed and inspired by extensive reading and other artists’ work, I developed several suites of paintings.

The context of this research is in the parallel meanings of the journey. The journey of the painting process itself and the translation of my experiences into the form of physical materials ran parallel to the inner ‘spiritual’ journey that I have been exploring in meditations. The meditations consisted of an array of spontaneous visions and understandings of matter and non-matter, illusion and invisibility, and interconnectedness. Through the process of the studio-based research, the duality of the inner and outer journey drew a third parallel in the form of a journey of the poetic image on the canvas, which unifies the duality of the material and the non-material.

In the context of a worldview, in our current fast-paced society which is highly dependent on a climate of growing technology (Thompson, 1998), I feel that the value of my research is firstly that it acknowledges an urgent need for a simple reminder of our existence as sentient beings. Secondly, I am aware of the current global economic and environmental crises, and believe that art, in all its forms, has a critical role to play in
supporting society and providing a way to address these pressing needs.

As American Catholic writer and mystic Thomas Merton wrote, in reference to the *Bhagavad Gita*, ‘It brings to the West a salutary reminder that our highly activistic and one-sided culture is faced with a crisis that may end in self-destruction because it lacks the inner depth of an authentic metaphysical consciousness. Without such depth, our moral and political protestations are just so much verbiage.’ (Merton, 1996).

In his article ‘What was abstract art? (From the point of view of Hegel)’ in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, Professor Robert B. Pippin observes that the current atmosphere is one of prevailing and intensifying self-consciousness (Pippin, 2002), a mirror of one’s belief system or faith in oneself, as an individual being in the heart of humanity. If all social systems are stripped back to survival mode, this sense of humanity is something that no earthquake or debt collector can take away. In her electronic article *Thinking about writing and research* in the online journal *Text*, senior lecturer in writing, editing and publishing (citing Dacey and Lennon) Donna Lee Brien contends that we are also moving towards a need for creative thinking in a world of ever-advancing information:

Sternberg’s analysis is the concentration of his argument on the idea that the kind of intelligence required by twenty-first century societies must include creative ability. Dacey and Lennon are even more pressing, arguing that as the world changes from being based on knowledge to information-processing, creative thinking is crucial to our survival as a species. (Dacey & Lennon, 1998:226) (Brien, 2005, para. 10)

While acknowledging the centrality of creative thinking, information that is accessible through current technology has nonetheless been utilised in this project. The purpose of drawing on this information was to expand on my knowledge and understanding, in order to inform the creativity of thinking and the understanding of what
painting can be.

This document is composed of nine chapters. The potential complex diversity of the nature of the research led me to create a chapter for each component in order that every area maintained its clarity, yet remained thematically interconnected. There were two main areas of research — the theoretical and literary research and the research within the studio processes. However, the actual foundation of the project was rooted in my background influences and my very personal experiences. I therefore began the document with an examination of this fundamental element.

Chapter One introduces the background to my research — the early experiences I have had, in relation to the theme of journey, that have influenced my general approach to life and my painting process. The sense of journey as a theme in my life was initiated by my international family background, and was further developed by extensive worldwide travelling. The other sense of journey that became intertwined with the physical journey was a growing sense of inner self that had been awakened in childhood. A brief introduction to Christianity was followed by an exploration of other, alternative, approaches to spirituality, both Eastern and Western. This inner and outer journey became more integrated over time, growing into a reflective parallel.

In Chapter Two I outline some of the influences in my life that led to an investigation of the integration of the practicality of daily life with the existence and meaning of conscious awareness. It also details some of the experiences that I had during meditation practices that established my inner journey, and which were the main inspiration for this project.

Chapter Three presents a significant thread of the research — the parallel
relationship between the painting practice and the exploratory process, and the practice of and experiences within meditation.

Chapter Four introduces the diverse range of artists that have influenced my work and inspired me in many ways. The theories and artworks range from the Abstract Expressionists to contemporary artists to Asian artists. The order in which the artists are introduced parallels the development of the studio process.

Chapter Five is an in-depth detail of the painting process that I employed as my studio research in an attempt to find a new language through the materiality of paint. It was the distillation of this painting process that led to the emergence of the final work. The painting process in itself was a journey, and chronologically parallels the artistic influences outlined in Chapter Four and the reading material covered in Chapter Six.

Chapter Six covers a broad spectrum of material sourced from a range of books, journals, articles, films and the worldwide web. The literary research was initiated by the questions that had arisen from the experiences that I had had during the meditation practices, and furthered by reflecting upon the outcomes in the studio.

Chapter Seven describes the expansion and development of the emerging painting language that had arisen from the distillation of various painting techniques. The chapter discusses how the studio activity can be seen as a daily practice, like a meditation, through such means as the making of the canvases and the exploratory experience of the materiality of paint. This chapter also details how aspects of the literary research informed the studio process in terms of topics such as emergence and self-organisation. Detailed descriptions of the final works that have been submitted as part of the exhibition are integrated in this chapter to illustrate the work.
Chapter Eight, The Conclusion, is a review of how my aims were addressed and explored and, ultimately, delineates the outcome of this research project.
Chapter One

Personal Background, Travel, and Eastern Influences

A homage to the ambience of ... the space, colour, rhythm and tempo that reverberates in heart and mind. (Wilson, 1990).

The early influences in my life, the notion of travel, and spiritual questioning led to an investigation within my painting practice and have ultimately affected and formed my painting style.

I was born in London, lived in Oxfordshire and was educated in Oxford, Bushey and Kings Langley in Hertfordshire, London, and Brighton, England. From a very young age I travelled with my family to their countries of origin — France and South Africa — and then journeyed on school trips to other countries in Europe including Russia, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. At eighteen I travelled solo to Bali and Australia and then continued travelling for part of each year for the next decade throughout North and South America, Asia, Africa, Europe and Oceania.

The sense of journey that was stimulated by worldly travel was also awakened internally, and from the age of ten I was aware of a conscious inner voyage. I began then to regularly keep a journal and sketchpad to record my travel experiences. An awareness of self also arose, along with an inner questioning about the nature of spirit, God and consciousness, which led to me reading books about souls and other dimensions. I questioned: What is spirit? Does it exist? Is it just a part of my cultural inscription?

The myriad external manifestations of religious observance that I have encountered in my life — from the Sunday Christian chapel rituals in boarding school aged eleven, to
a meeting with a Hindu priest in a tiny Shiva temple in India aged thirty — served to raise a question in me: what do religiousness, belief and spirituality mean to me?

In the Christian church the priest stood high on his dais delivering a monotonous sermon to his Sunday-dressed flock. In India, after removing my shoes, washing my feet and making my way past gaudy homemade statues, I faced a thin old man, dressed in rags and sitting cross-legged on a dusty floor counting the money in his wooden donation bowl. My donation scorned as insufficient, a handful of ant-infested rice was thrust in my hand: my praying time was up and I should go.

This reconfirmed to me what I had believed at eleven years old — that a single form of organised religion is not necessarily a pathway to God, with each leader or priest telling their own story or reciting from the book relevant to their religion.

During my childhood I regularly attended church, at boarding school or with my family. The judgemental elements of Christianity — heaven and hell, punishment and rewards, sinners and saints — began to repulse me. However, as a child I remained permeable and absorbed many of the colours used in the paintings and stained glass windows denoting Christianity, such as ultramarine blue, rich yellows and reds, and gold. These have often been the predominant colours in my paintings throughout my life. Despite my disenchantment with Christianity, the church nonetheless remains a sacred space of reverence and ceremony that I respect, and it is evident that I have translated that space and those colours into another sacred context with a personal meaning.

When I was fourteen I left the Christian boarding school to attend a Rudolf Steiner school. The resources at the library, as well as the philosophies of Rudolf Steiner, became an important starting point for the growth of my understanding and the formation
of my beliefs, and exerted a strong influence on my artwork. A main focus of the curriculum was on creativity, and, within the confines of this alternative academic institution, my imagination was given freedom to explore.

Over the years I absorbed a rainbow of colours and a sense of fluidity of form and broad movement from the paintings and weavings that were hung around the school. It seemed as if the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual were being blurred and merged in the artworks, and in the non-symmetrical shape of the buildings in keeping with the philosophies of this school. Children were encouraged to draw with the sides of the rectangular crayons instead of the tips, creating spacious, full-bodied marks, instead of severe hard lines, and to fill the whole page. This was to create an integrated foundation of body/mind/soul in the child. Eurythmy arose out of Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophical thinking, and is a form of specific bodily movements, rather like a dance that silently expresses sounds, sometimes accompanied by music, speech or poetry. Thus rhythm, the use of my whole body, and movement and colour became a stable foundation for my integration into the world and my expression through art, and is visibly evident in my current work.

When I was twenty-four I was introduced to meditation through a series of groups on Tantra, an age-old method for self-transformation originating in India. Eventually, Eastern philosophies became a predominant influence in my choice of lifestyle and approach to meditation, and I developed a regular practice. Two aspects of Buddhism and Taoism that also particularly attracted me were the emphasis on conscious awareness, and the focus on the healing potential of positive thinking, symbolically represented in their elemental mandalas (Norbulingka Norbulingka, 2006). In the book Celebrating The Kalachakra Through Art, Jeremy Russell, Kimm Yeshi and Dhruv Chandra Sud outline the benefits of the mandala and the Kalachakra ceremony:
Simply viewing this mandala can generate an experience of peace on many levels. According to the Dalai Lama, the Kalachakra deities create a favourable atmosphere, reducing tension and violence in the world. “It is a way of planting a seed, and the seed will have karmic effect. You do not need to be present at the Kalachakra ceremony in order to receive its benefits”, he explains. (Russell, 2006, p. 22)

The inherent influences in any creative process are dictated to some extent by one’s background. In my case, this influence stems from my multicultural origins, due to which the concept of journey was embedded in my roots. This propelled me into an exploration of the world and, instigated by an introduction to religion and spirituality, my sense of inner journey became a search for the integration of both materiality and immateriality — including a search for the unity between the known outer self and the unknown inner self that reflects the unity of the whole.
Chapter Two

Experiences during Meditation

During 2004–2005, I meditated intensively, utilising a variety of active and still meditation practices. During this time I had several profound experiences that gave me an insight into consciousness and a realisation of the interconnectedness of everything. The visions experienced during the meditations and my understanding of these experiences form the foundation of this research.

In September 2004 I went to an ashram in Pune, India, which had evolved around the late spiritual master Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, also known as Osho. What follows is, firstly, an introduction to Osho and an outline of a particular aspect of his teaching that led to the creation of specific meditation techniques designed for people who are experiencing the stresses of modern life and society. Secondly, I detail some of the experiences that I had whilst using Osho’s techniques and my own silent lying down or sitting meditation. My aim here is to convey the array of visions and understandings that I received, and to indicate why and how I am influenced in the painting studio.

Osho would speak at great length about a diverse range of subjects, and videos of these talks were shown daily in the ashram. From watching these videos and reading his books, I learned how meditation could become a part of our daily life; that life itself is a meditation. It is not necessary to set aside some special time for meditation, where one sits down quietly, unmoving, to experience peace and stillness. Anything we do can be a meditation — whether we are washing dishes, driving our children to school, working in the office or painting a picture. Osho talked about the simple awareness of the doing, watching the event; the hands moving in the activity of washing that dish, feeling the soap suds, feeling the solidity of the plate, and feeling the
movement of putting the dish on the rack to dry.

Having awareness in the present is meditative; meditation is not the activity but the awareness of the moment of now. Practising a prescribed meditation is simply a starting point. It is not the meditation that is important; what is significant is the witnessing of everything, including our thoughts and emotions, as well as the awareness of the stillness and the silence of our true inner selves.

This practice has been translated into my work in the studio as a sensory awareness of the materials and a witnessing of their application. Please refer to Chapter Seven ‘The Journey of the Painting Process’ for a more in-depth analogy.

In the ashram, I spent four to six hours a day doing various silent and still, humming, dancing and jumping meditations. During some of the stages of the more dynamic and physically active meditations, I would surrender to moving with totality.

During one evening meditation, a live band was playing jazz-style music as an introduction. At a certain moment my body stopped of its own accord; I instantly experienced myself as expanding into a huge black being as tall as the ceiling, filling the auditorium. During another dancing meditation, I felt as if I spontaneously expanded, filling the whole space in the room through the sense of having become the music itself.

In another meditation, I suddenly stopped after a jumping stage and experienced myself as a little boy in the middle of the whole universe. I was just an infinite dark volume of space containing nothing but trillions of stars, and filled with a feeling of contentment. I could hear a series of pitches playing continuously in my ears like a rushing sound, or a series of vibrations, also referred to as the sound of Aum, or the
universal sound.

One afternoon, during the dancing stage of an active meditation, my body moved without my control; some other force was guiding and manipulating me like a puppet. I saw a vision of a large tunnel or channel appearing from below my feet and passing through the centre of my body to above and beyond my head. This vision gave me the understanding that all time is now. The past, the present, and the future: it only exists now.

During a week-long intensive meditation course, one day, whilst lying down in a meditation, everything disappeared, including myself, and in a timeless space that I can only describe as suspended, I was in the infinite, dark, black universe. This is all that I saw, all that there was, and I received the simple message that ‘I am The Creator and The Created’. The clear understanding that was given to me was that we are God, we are consciousness; we are creators of our universe because we are the universe, we are everything. This is why we can create our own realities, because that is our inherent nature; we are already doing it, often without even realising it.

I also regularly practised a meditation in which I would sit or lie down wearing earplugs and a blindfold. I would then relax into listening to the vibrating and buzzing sound of Aum, whilst looking at and sinking into the darkness that I understand to be consciousness itself. I would first feel a buzzing sensation creep through my body and then cover me; it started slowly and then grew more and more intense, until I felt as if I was just one large mass of buzzing energy, with no physical boundary. I would then have the sensation of expanding beyond the confines of the room, without any limits or bounds. After about 45 minutes, I had to consciously ‘find’ my physical body; this appeared to me like a mass of buzzing atoms that I had to re-collect and ‘pull’ back together. This is a
meditation that I still practise on a regular basis. I call it ‘recycling’, because during the space of expansion, I feel that an energy that I can only refer to as higher consciousness moves in through the crown of my head in waves, then down my inner ‘channel’, cleansing my energy field and replenishing me with revitalising energy.

Using this technique one day, I had an experience of seeing that I was essentially an atom, suspended in space. I could see the planet Earth at a distance. I ‘understood’ then that each atom, like a seed, contains the potential of the whole. To my understanding, everything that exists is made up of these atoms and is thus interconnected. For example, our body is made up of all things of the Earth, such as water and minerals. Everything is mirrored and reflected, in patterns and forms. After this meditation I remained in an altered state, experiencing a sense of bliss and joy, for several days.

At the beginning of this particular meditation that day, I saw a succession of many images of faces passing in front of my eyes. With this came the realisation that — as a human being — I have many masks and many layers. I began to understand what the sages mean when they say that we must find our original face. Since this experience, and on reflection, I now consider that my artwork contains many layers, or ‘faces’, and that the white primed canvas acts as its original face.

This experience could be regarded as an altered state, or a liminal space — a space in between the known and the unknown. After these experiences, I have come to my own understanding — that this space of the unknown is the original state, the state that we are already in, but which remains unknown to the mind because it is the space behind and beyond the mind. The mind is in it, part of it, but does not know it. It is just like a fish does not know what water is — because it is already in it and it is all that it has ever known — until it is taken out of the water. This liminal space could also be
regarded as a ‘midpoint of transition … between two positions’ (Turner, 1974, p. 261).

In his series of talks ‘The Way of the Dhammapada No.1’, Osho refers to the body as a bamboo, the hollow middle of which contains nothing but silence. He then commented that a simple splosh of paint on the canvas is a moment of that silence (Osho, 1990).
Chapter Three

Emergent Ideas of the Relationship between Meditation and Painting

For like the alchemist, the painter seeks to transform and be transformed by the medium. (Elkins, 2000, IFC)

The experiences in my meditations were communicated to me in a language of symbols and forms. The understanding was cognitive, as if the information was channelled through or to me. I have questioned whether this information was communicated from myself as a higher being to my 'human self', or whether it came from an external source communicating with my higher self. Aside from this pondering, the challenge I had was to translate this language into one of paint that I could use in the studio.

In his book The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations From The Masters of Chinese Art, Dr Lin Yutang poetically describes that this external source is the infinite spirit of all living things and, at the same time, the creative flow that inspires painting.

For painting is only an art, yet it has the power of creation of the universe itself. This is something difficult for shallow minds to grasp. It must be understood that just as the spirit creates living things in the universe, so in man the same spirit creates pictures. Therefore the pictures painted by men are infinite even as the living things in the universe are infinite. Proceeding from the spirit, they partake of the whims of the spirit. (Yutang, 1967, p. 204)

To my understanding, the spirit he describes is the same flow of creative consciousness that I open up to when meditating or painting. This seems true for the active
as well as the still and contemplative periods of both activities. For example, in my
devotion experiences, frequently the intensely active stage of a meditation led to a stage
of absolute stillness. Interestingly, the movement and the stillness on the canvas often
maintained a resonance that mirrored the process of its making.

Several other parallels between the meditation practices and the process of painting
include the practical preparation and ritualistic aspect of both activities. For example,
before meditation I would prepare the environment and myself by wearing comfortable
clothes and having ready my blindfold and earplugs. I would then choose a meditation CD,
music or silence, and clear the space for moving around in while blindfolded. Before
painting, I would also prepare myself by putting on my old painting clothes and choosing
my paints, brushes and rags, then tidying the jars and canvases to create a refreshed studio
space. This whole process is like a ritual — a transition from my previous activity into a
prepared state of mind. Through this process of preparation, the mind and body memory
would often be triggered into accessing the familiar meditative space, or habitual act of
painting; something else then takes over.

This transitional stage, or ritual of preparation, could in some way be likened to a
personal rite of passage, because the experiences that I had impacted significantly on the way
that I perceived myself, as a human being, and life around me. I feel like a changed person;
my eyes opened as the doorways opened. An essay by Charles Shure, inspired by Victor
Turner’s writings, defines his perspective of liminality and ritual society:

Just as chaos is the source of order, liminality represents the unlimited possibilities
from which social structure emerges. While in the liminal state, human beings are stripped of
anything that might differentiate them from their fellow human beings — they are in between
the social structure, temporarily fallen through the cracks, so to speak, and it is in these
cracks, in the interstices of social structure, that they are most aware of themselves. Yet liminality is a midpoint between a starting point and an ending point, and as such it is a temporary state that ends when the initiate is reincorporated into the social structure. (La Shure, 2005)

Following the thread of understanding that chaos is the source of order and formlessness is the source of form; I apply this to my painting process. The notion is then that the applied painterly materials could represent chaos, yet the outcome is an image, an orderly form, representing my experience of formlessness and inducing the liminal state. The viewer can then experience this state for themselves and sense that they are a being that is beyond, yet inclusive of, their body and mind.

During the long days of meditation in India, one morning I discovered that I had inner and outer vision at the same time. The first time this occurred, I had just completed an hour of silent, still sitting, and was walking down a garden path. I was physically seeing where I was walking, yet with my ‘inner eye’ it appeared as if I was invisible. I had simply become an observer and my physical body was like clear air — a mass of invisible atoms moving forwards. My being was never the same, because the atoms were constantly changing. It seemed as though ‘I’ — as the atoms — would bump into the next atoms with the force of the movement and the intention of where I was walking. My ‘being’ would be a ‘make-up’ of the next mass of atoms there in that next millisecond, and so on, sparked by the minuscule electric charges happening all the time, between each movement, change or reaction. I saw that all atoms have the potential to be anything and part of anything. I felt that this is how they were functioning, and that they were able to fluidly pass on information as if there was no time. Therefore, when I walked as an invisible mass of energy, it seemed as if I became and was everything that I passed, including flowers and trees, the sky or sun, houses, people or the pathway.
My experience led me to investigate scientific research on atoms. I discovered that physicist Fritjof Capra had initially been exploring and discovering atoms and then experienced their existence himself firsthand through a spiritual awakening. Capra describes a mystical experience similar to the ones that I had had, and compares it to his scientific knowledge:

I knew that the sand, rocks, water and air around me were made of vibrating molecules and atoms, and that these consisted of particles which interacted with one another by creating and destroying other particles. I ‘saw’ cascades of energy coming down from outer space, in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses; I ‘saw’ the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy. (Capra, 1975, p. 11)

This dual vision, for me, is similar to the notion that the colour already potentially exists on the canvas before it is applied, reflecting Michelangelo’s vision of his ‘Slaves’ in the rock, before he ‘carved them out’. The elements of formlessness could thus be regarded as already potentially existing in form.

In my mind, with my ‘inner eye’ I also saw the formless as infinitely complex, yet complete and whole, invisible entities, supported in an infinite space. The colours I saw were solid, yet fluid and semi-transparent. They resembled globules of colour moving slowly yet steadily from one side to the other, and upwards and downwards. The colours were not bright in the way we see them with our physical eyes, yet were vibrating with a luminosity that was simultaneously opaque and transparent. In my studio practice, the shapes and textures formed by the fluid movement of the thinned paint as it floods across the surface space of the canvas physically represent the movement of the inner visions of energy that I had experienced.
In an essay written for the 1989 exhibition *The Spiritual in Art – Abstract Painting 1890-1985,* art historian Sixten Ringbom draws together the ideas of various theosophists, such as Rudolf Steiner, who were working at the turn of the nineteenth century. He mentions this period in particular for the writings on the ‘distinctions between the world of forms and the formless world’, including the descriptions of this subject by the English Theosophists Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater. Ringbom quotes Besant’s concept that thought forms were considered to be part of the colourful world of form and formlessness — a notion which had manifested in my personal experience and thus informed my research:

These vibrations, which shape the matter of the plane into thought-forms, give rise also — from their swiftness and subtlety — to the most exquisite and constantly changing colours, waves of varying shades like the rainbow hues in mother-of-pearl, etherealized and brightened to an indescribable extent, sweeping over and through every form, so that each presents a harmony of rippling, living, luminous, delicate, colours, including many not even known to earth. Words can give no idea of the exquisite beauty and radiance shown in combinations of this subtle matter, instinct with life and motion. Every seer who has witnessed it, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, speaks in rapturous terms of its glorious beauty. (Blotkamp, et al., 1986, p. 134)

Influenced by Suprematist paintings by Kasimir Malevich and semi-abstract and abstract work by Wassily Kandinsky and Joan Miro, I had initially tried to paint the colourful symbols and designs from my visions, copied from my 2004–2005 journals, as a way to express my experiences and understandings. I had spent time painstakingly designing the canvas and composing the image to contain several different illustrations. However, by externalising and repeating the actual symbols, which included circles, squares and triangles of red, yellow, blue and green, the intrinsic meaning was somehow lost. The inspiration for this painting of geometric shapes came from an experience after a
meditation, when jolts of energy spontaneously began to enter my stomach chakra, or ‘hara’, forcing the centre of my body to pulsate back and forth. The energy started to shoot upwards, tracing a fluid, river-like channel inside me. The vision was of colourful shapes moving upwards inside this channel, driven by the force that I was experiencing. After some time, this energy experience ceased and I was left with a sensation of absolute stillness. I became a still, yet vibrating, buzzing mass, in a state of timelessness.

The initial attempt to represent this experience, in the studio, was by using a combination of thick texture and thinly painted areas to directly evoke an image of the cosmos. The shapes and colours that followed in my painting process utilised the ephemeral associations advocated in sacred geometry. The final strategy that eventually evolved — of pouring thinned paint onto a canvas — implied the elements of the cosmos in a more subtle and elusively liminal, yet direct, way.

Australian artist Margaret Wilson, who uses colour and shape in her nuanced abstract paintings to reference the spatial Australian landscape, acknowledges the meditative quality of studio work, as she also inwardly searches for that which she wishes to convey. She also introduced a universal language in her work, based in geometry (Perc Tucker Gallery, 2013).

‘I am aware the work is meditative and that in itself is a personal reflection and action … I try to visually express the emotional and physical core I am searching to reach, explore and hold onto; this is triggered from sensuous memory and then some facet is accentuated.’ (Perc Tucker Gallery, 2013, p. 3).

Although I was attempting to represent my visual and experiential memories rather than access and express emotional content, I found that I could relate to Wilson’s chosen way of painting, such as her use of ‘… thinned Acrylic paint for flooding and tilting wet grounds for
large expansive works …’ (Perc Tucker Gallery, 2013, p. 3) and the notion that ‘… she uses … paint on large stretched canvases and creates beautifully soft, diaphanous veils of tone and colour. Wilson likes to associate the establishment of the ground layer with the idea of setting the stage for her work’ (Wilson, Searle, Ross, 1990, p 4). Upon reflection, Margaret Wilson’s explanation for her flooding style of painting, underlined for me the significance of the foundation in a work — whether it be the foundation of the set-up for studio work, or the preparation of a space for meditation.

The exhibition The Spiritual in Abstract Art 1890-1985 focused on works that portrayed the unification of abstraction with mystical concepts. This exhibition exemplified for me that one of the most basic human urges is to search for an understanding of who we are and to discover our innermost core. Over the last century or so, many artists have turned to various forms of spirituality, and occult and esoteric writings, striving to find a visual language with which they could express their mystical experiences, revelations and understandings. The artwork in the exhibition employs myriad visions, forms and shapes, and the evolution of abstraction, to create meaningful images in relation to spiritual mysteries — a path that I followed in my own work.

However, in attempting to translate my spiritual experiences onto canvas, I came to the realisation that the portrayal of a particular vision, shape or form did not capture the totality and interconnectedness I had experienced, as they represented but parts of the whole. My work then moved further into the realm of abstraction in order to go beyond dualistic forms and capture the essence of the understanding that had arisen in my Tantric meditations — that all opposites are united.

I found a reflection of this idea in Tuchman’s writings on Mondrian’s theories and art, which were ‘based upon a system of opposites such as male-female, light-dark, and mind-matter
… His abstract language employed an unusually direct system of equivalences to express fundamental ideas about the world, nature and human life and to evoke the harmonious unity of opposites’ (Blotkamp, et al., 1986, p. 36).

In his essay *Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art*, written for this exhibition, Maurice Tuchman refers to the artist and spiritualist Frantisek Kupka and his visionary experiences, which were ‘translated into visual form in his painting as a transperceptual realm in which colour is imaginary, space is infinite, and everything appears to be in a constant state of flux’ (Blotkamp, et al., 1986, p. 35).

When I brought the memories of the experiences into my studio process, I began to question the reality of the visions:

Were these visions metaphors for the absolute truth, or were they simply an intuitive or psychic vision of a creative stream of consciousness?

This is where analysis becomes problematic, as these are not questions nor riddles to be solved, but experiences from which to gain inner knowledge. The simplicity of Zen, which encourages experience over theoretical knowledge, would not harbour analysis of this subject. Osho suggested that, ‘Nothing needs to be done; just be a witness, looking at the traffic in the mind. Witnessing simply means a detached observation, unprejudiced; that’s the whole secret of meditation’ (Osho, 1983).

I was looking for a way that the materiality of painting itself could juxtapose the immaterial source of images and colours, creating the same sense of boundlessness, luminosity, movement and stasis that I had experienced. This search and these ideas were developed during my painting process, which is illustrated in Chapter Five. The process
expanded into a technique that involved a particular sweeping movement in the process of pouring the paint — a physical movement of the body that paralleled the movement during active meditations. The fluid paint that reached the edge of the canvas, combined with the excess fluid that had run off the edge of the canvas, implied a sense of boundlessness. This feeling of limitlessness was extended beyond the materials and into an invisible space, where the imagination was free to explore.

Through the process of attempting to translate my experiences from meditation into painting, I realised that I was beginning to answer my own questions. Perhaps the boundary between the material and the immaterial was actually my mind: my mind was the boundary, creating limitations in its identity with the body. By using the whole body in the painting process, I started to understand that the creative flow in the studio is the same as that which was experienced in meditation. The forms and visions in both painting and meditation were symbolic metaphors for the conscious self that I had experienced. Once this was realised, I dropped the need to translate the actual visions of the past memories onto canvas; instead, while still retaining the understanding gained from the visions, I decided to allow a more spontaneous flow of creativity.
Chapter Four

Artists and Influences

Seeing the connection between abstract art and spiritual exploration is sure to contribute to a better understanding of the metaphysical quests taking place on the fringes of our culture. (Schaeffer, 1987, para. 19)

A valuable influence on my studio-based research has been the work from a diverse range of artists and movements, from the end of the nineteenth century to the present, who have attempted to represent the metaphysical through their art. The theories and artwork of contemporary sculptors and painters, the Abstract Expressionists and the recent influence of the work of Asian artists, derived from Buddhist Zen philosophy, have all provided me with a context for my ideas and enhanced the development of my approach to the painting process.

In relation to the work of the Abstract Expressionists, Robert Rosenblum explains that ‘… the Romantic search for an art that could convey sensations of overpowering mystery was vigorously resurrected, at times, as in the case of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, with explicit religious associations (Rosenblum, 1978, p. 197).

Rosenblum also infers that over the last two hundred years there appears to have been a recurrence of the formal structures that explicitly or implicitly invoke notions of a religious nature. Religious writer Pamela Schaeffer maintains that some of the formal structures of abstract art have altered quite considerably, and that abstract art has moved on from religious association, but still holds a utopian ideal (Schaeffer, 1987).

During a conversation that I had with contemporary Australian abstract artist and
Byzantine iconographer, Leonard Brown, an Orthodox Christian, he stated that ‘Post modernism believes that there is no truth, and that all expressions are of equal authority. I don’t believe that at all, I have no empathy with that at all. I do believe that there is a truth, and I do believe that there are deceptions.’

With reference to the history of Western art and philosophy, Brown takes the stance that its main expression concerns only the sense of doubt or the existence of the *philosophy of doubt*.

‘… Much of the history of Western art and philosophy, the primary premise is doubt and so it’s a philosophy of doubt, and every gesture, or most gestures are an offering of some kind of proof to answer doubt. So, the subject is not the divine being at all; it’s doubt. There is nothing else other than cynicism and doubt. That becomes the subject. There is no other subject other than the ego and cynicism and doubt, and self-serving. There is nothing outside of the self. When you hold up just the very basic premise of deity, and according to the tradition within the development of western philosophy, the very idea of deity, of God, whether it’s Stephen Hawking, or that other charlatan … the subject is Atheism, and, so doubt …’

Following my lengthy conversation with Brown, I concluded that although my background and inspiration were quite different to his, we both use a meditative approach in the painting studio. Brown’s Orthodox Christian background contrasts with my Eastern meditation influences and experiences, by taking a more religious stance. When I questioned his technique on his contemporary abstract paintings, he said that he paints ‘The Jesus Prayer’, also called ‘The Prayer of The Heart’, which is silently recited with rhythmic breaths in and out (Rossi, 2010). He drips the paint on the canvas according to this rhythm, and the repetitive patterning on the canvas from the rhythm of this prayer puts him in a no-mind space of meditation. The viewer, through immersing themselves in the final image, can then be taken into a meditative
state. Brown has said: ‘I hope they feel something of life, an affirmation of being, which is a primary spiritual sensibility’ (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2010). He also affirms that his ‘references are universal … As a Christian, my references are within that dimension where pure abstraction is familiar, where the ideas of emptiness and the metaphoric going into the desert to find God are pursued’ (Cutherbertson, 2010).

Although our sources of inspiration differ — mine welling from deep experiences in Eastern style meditations and his from the Christian tradition — the similarity of our approach is clear: we both paint in a meditative way, and intend to guide the viewer into a similar state or experience. Expounding on this, Brown describes his vision of an artist as one ‘… whose images of vibrant presence transcend the many paradoxes that lie between the material world and the world of the sacred’ (QUT Art Museum, 2011).

Another facet of our conversation that I found interesting is that Brown sees universalism as inclusive of everyone, and all things, and that the Godhead (Brown used this term rather than ‘God’) is in everyone and every thing. I experienced that everyone and everything is God, with no separation. Or maybe these beliefs are two sides of the same coin. However, my thoughts are in alignment with his concept that there is no time — that past, present and future exist in the one time.

‘And so there’s this whole language of Archetype within Byzantine Christian thought, you’re dealing with the concept called the Eschaton, where the perversion of existentialism comes from. The Eschaton doesn’t just apply to the present day; it incorporates the past, the present and the future as all one thing. The manner, in which clairvoyants operate, is because the future has already happened. So a fundamentalist view of the book of Genesis, the beginnings and the end are the same thing, but the scale and the nature of creation is beyond our comprehension. It’s in time but out of time, and so the Greeks speak about this as the Eschaton:
the past, the present and the future. It’s not linear, it’s definitely not linear. The future has already happened. … In Greek thought, everything that has a beginning has an end.’

Events in the art world have progressed quite some distance from the birth of abstraction at the turn of the century — a movement that was still related to the influential thinking and events of the time, such as theosophy and occultism. In more recent years, as American philosopher Robert B. Pippin comments, the cultural consciousness has evolved into a more self-conscious way of thinking.

Whatever else is going on in abstraction as a movement in painting, it is relatively uncontroversial that an accelerating and intensifying self-consciousness about what it is to paint, how painting works, and a transformation of painting itself into the object of painting (issues already in play since impressionism) are clearly at issue. (Pippin, 2002, p. 1)

In alignment with this notion of the ‘object in painting’, I refer to Brown’s thoughts that ‘… people like Malevich, while he painted pure abstraction, he started life as a Russian icon painter, and so he came out of this tradition of pure abstraction, where European abstraction came from’. Brown stated that within his own icon paintings, he considers that the text is of equal value to the image. And yet, when he commented on his abstract paintings, he said: ‘When I paint these are not my visions, this is just my everyday reality. This is my reality; it’s not a vision. It’s my poetry … it’s anchored and informed by a certain mode of thinking, it’s personal. Whereas the other [icon paintings] has a whole tradition and formality that carries authority.’
In relation to the penetration of spirit into matter, one of my own fundamental areas of interest, Brown also stated: ‘There is a historic phenomenology that manifests in people’s lives, and also manifests in events, and it manifests materially. There’s an interpenetration of spirit and matter, and this is so in something like the icon. You have icons that weep … that transform themselves … in the area of the icon, you have a whole tradition, a whole gamut of manifestation of the interpenetration of matter and spirit, where the laws of physics are laid aside.’

I found this to be an interesting consideration, because one of my first avenues of research was to examine the work of physics and others working in various scientific disciplines in order to in some way verify the experiences I had had. Rather than laying aside the laws of physics, I saw them as a necessary component of the same experiment in a different field of research — the aim of which was to question and explore the very make-up of existence.

This cross-over of disciplines was also remarked upon by Maurice Tuchman in the essay *Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art*, where he notes that in ‘some of the spiritual movements that influenced twentieth-century artists, the bond between metaphysical ideas and science was an important element. Metaphysical thinkers, for example, were especially eager to learn about the advances in physics and chemistry. This new knowledge not only was adapted to confirm their beliefs but also allowed them to speculate about the invisible aspects of the material universe’ (Blotkamp, et al., 1986, p. 36).

In the same writings, Tuchman describes the art and theories of Mondrian, which were based on a system of opposites: ‘His abstract language
employed an unusually direct system of equivalences to express fundamental ideas about the world, nature, and human life and to evoke the harmonious unity of opposites’ (Blotkamp, et al., 1986, p. 36).

My introduction to Piet Mondrian’s grid-like paintings was an important turning point in my thinking; I experienced another directional change towards the search for a simpler, more stripped down form, structure, rawness of colour and minimal composition. In his essay *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality* (1919), Mondrian states: ‘The first aim in a painting should be universal expression. What is needed in a picture to realize this is an equivalence of vertical and horizontal expressions’ and in a statement in 1943 (cited by H.B. Chipp from *Eleven Europeans in America, Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, New York, XII, 4 & 5, 1946), he wrote: ‘… in the abstraction of form and color, that is to say, in the straight line and the clearly defined primary color’ (Chipp, 1968, pp. 362, 322).

This research sought to utilise universal feelings and defined structure through abstract form and colour, which simulates the way that Jackson Pollock approached his painting. Chipp cites Pollock: ‘I want to express my feelings rather than illustrate them … I can control the flow of paint: there is no accident, just as there is no beginning and no end’ (Chipp, 1968, p. 548).

However, unlike Pollock and Mondrian, I aimed to look beyond feelings and the straight line; rather, I wished to more deeply explore a sense of being (Thompson, 1998). The approach I had been using — the incorporation of shapes and symbols — quickly moved towards an absence of image-based representation. The 1950s’ concept of the spiritual search and its translation into a painterly language formed an essential foundation for my initial use of materials — for example, thick texture and deep colours, and attempts at creating luminosity.
One artist who particularly inspired me was Robert Motherwell, who reflected the notion of the journey in his abstract expressionist paintings, for example ‘Elegy To The Spanish Republic No.110 ’ (1971). The bold, black marks on a light background command presence and imply a sense of groundedness. The simplicity of the negative and positive space evokes, to me, a notion of the inner and outer being, yin and yang, shadow and light. Mary Ann Caws suggests in her 1996 book Robert Motherwell: What art holds that Motherwell’s work was a matter of process and becoming (Caws & Motherwell, 1996).

In his essay Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art, Tuchman considers the common ideas within the world views of mysticism and occultism:

… the universe is a single, Living substance; mind and matter also are one; all things evolve in dialectical opposition, thus the universe comprises paired opposites (male-female, light-dark, vertical-horizontal, positive-negative); everything corresponds in a universal analogy, with things above as they are below; imagination is real; and self-realisation can come by illumination, accident, or an induced state: the epiphany is suggested by heat, fire, or light. (Blotkamp, et al.,1986, p. 19)

The free, abstract images of the stained paintings by Helen Frankenthaler, executed with poured paint, involved a degree of risk, and the creation of a successful image and composition was subject to chance. I am particularly drawn to two of Frankenthaler’s paintings — ‘Ocean Drive West No.1 (1974)’ and ‘Untitled (1995)’ — for the vibration of colour on the raw canvas, and the sense of motion suggested by the stains on the canvas, which follow the texture of the surface. Frankenthaler’s invariably large paintings have also influenced my choice of canvas size.

I have also been greatly influenced in my studio work by Mark Rothko, Barnett
Newman and the more recent artist Anish Kapoor due to the ‘radical abstraction’ that they arrived at in their work. In the words of Schaeffer:

Newman’s and Rothko’s somber, borderless canvases suggest deep silence and infinite void, yet somehow, too, evoke a sense of presence and mystery. Newman … made no attempt to hide his spiritual interests. In 1943 he wrote, “The painter is concerned . . . with the presentation into the world mystery. His imagination is therefore attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets. To that extent, his art is concerned with the sublime. It is a religious art which through symbols will catch the basic truth of life.” (Schaeffer, 1987, para. 17)

In his desire to communicate his new ideas and perception at the time, Newman stated in his essay *The Sublime Is Now*:

Michelangelo knew that the meaning of the Greek humanities for his time involved making Christ the man into Christ who is God; that his plastic problem was neither the medieval one, to make a cathedral, nor the Greek one, to make a man like a God, but to make a cathedral out of man. In doing so he set a standard for sublimity that the painting of his time could not reach … Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or “life”, we are making (them) out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history. (Newman, 1992, pp. 172–173)

A core subject matter of Newman’s work was the mystery and meaning of creation and human existence. He intended to impart the sense of wholeness to the observer of his paintings, stating in reference to the particular painting ‘Onement I’: ‘I hope that my
painting has the impact of giving someone, as it did me, the feeling of his own totality, of his own separateness, of his own individuality …’ (Newman, 1992, p. xxi).

In his essay *The Plasmic Image*, Newman said:

The present painter is concerned not with his own feelings or with the mystery of his own personality but with the penetration into the world-mystery. His imagination is therefore attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets. To that extent his art is concerned with the sublime. It is a religious art which through symbols will catch the basic truth of life … The present painter can be said to work with chaos not only in the sense that he is handling the chaos of a blank picture plane but also in that he is handling chaos of form. In trying to go beyond the visible and known world he is working with forms that are unknown even to him. He is therefore engaged in a true act of discovery in the creation of new forms and symbols that will have the living quality of creation. No matter what the psychologists say these forms arise from, that they are the inevitable expression of the unconscious, the present painter is not concerned with the process. Herein lies the difference between him and the surrealists. At the same time, in his desire, in his will to set down the ordered truth, that is the expression of his attitude towards the mystery of life and death, it can be said that the artist like a true creator is delving into chaos. It is precisely this that makes him an artist, for the Creator in creating the world began with the same material — for the artist tried to wrest truth from the void. (Newman, 1992, p. 140)

Newman’s words clearly express the challenges of painting a mystical or mysterious human experience. In my research I am attempting to create a material image of an experience of a very personal nature that evolved from my meditation practice.
A colour field painting that I was particularly absorbed in and moved by was Newman’s 1951–2 ‘Adam’, which I viewed whilst in the Tate Gallery, London, in June 2008. This large vertical painting is a deep reddish-brown with three cadmium red, or crimson, stripes of three various widths. I was drawn to the sense of silence in this painting, and the single ‘column of light’.

The depiction here, as suggested in the essay *Barnett Newman, Abstract Expressionism and American Cultural Conventions*, by art history lecturer, writer and painter Adrian Lewis, is that, ‘The myth of Adam was read not as a fall from grace to sin, but as a self-knowing aspiration to be like God in the creation of worlds. For Newman, art involved an aspiration to return to that creative state of Eden’ (Davies, 1996, p. 160). As Newman himself said in his essay *The First Man Was an Artist*, ‘Man’s origin was that of an artist, and he set himself up in a Garden of Eden close to the Tree of Knowledge, of right and wrong, in the highest sense of divine revelation … for it is the poet and the artist who are concerned with the function of original man and who are trying to arrive at his creative state … For the artists are the first men’ (Newman, 1992, pp. 159–160).

The work ‘Adam’ was adjacent, and clearly interrelated, to the sculpture ‘Ishi’s Light (2003)’ by Anish Kapoor, which was inspired by Newman’s painting. Kapoor’s sculpture was a tall, very large, egg-shaped piece of fiberglass, with resin and lacquer that was white on the outside and a deep red on the inside. The lacquer created a reflection, forming a ‘column of light’ (Bhabha, 2011, p. 181), in the middle of the rear inside the sculpture.

For me, this column of light represented the inner channel of our being. I have experienced this ‘inner’ vertical channel of timelessness in various ways in meditation, and have tried to paint this space, where there is no past or future … all there is, is now — this
present moment. In this sculpture, Anish Kapoor opened an accessible space to imply a notion of no time, and thus our vertical ‘plug-in’ to universal information. Anish Kapoor stated, during a conversation with his friend, accomplice and professor, Homi K. Bhabha:

> The void is not silent. I have thought it more and more as a transitional space, an in-between space. It’s very much to do with time. I have always been interested as an artist in how one can somehow *look again* for that *very first moment* of creativity where everything is possible and nothing has actually happened. It’s a space of becoming … ‘something’ that dwells in the presence of the work … that allows it or forces it not to be what it states it is in the first instance. (Bhabha, 2011, p.189)

However, it was Kapoor’s 1998 ‘Untitled’ works on paper, of pigment transferred to print, from ‘Wounds and Absent Objects (P78186-P78194)’, displayed as a part of the Tate Collection, that for me surpassed his sculpture and brought an instant sense of connection with simply being, a state of spontaneous meditation leading to inner silence. The rawness of the pigment, the vibrant depth of the colour, contained movement and yet was so still. This sense of *being* is precisely what I am aiming to convey in my work.

Kapoor began his play with light some time after *when The Light and Space movement* commenced in the 1960s. This movement was initiated by Californian artists, who brought a heightened awareness to our perceptions of space and light by creating seemingly infinite hyper-minimalist installations using both natural and artificial light, to see how it was reflected, absorbed and became a subject within itself. By means of a meticulous melding of materials from the technological and natural worlds, they created tension, and through an overwhelming sensory experience forced the observer, by this re-sensitisation, to perceive light in an empty space, or to experience a sense of the void. This questioning in the modern movement was following the continual quest to find the absolute
truth, utilising aspects of the aesthetic to explore the sublime, rather than the beautiful (Butterfield, 1993). Bruce Nauman’s ‘The True Artist Helps the World By Revealing Mystic Truths’ (made from neon lights and clear glass tubing supports, 1967) is an example of this notion, and gave an opportunity for the public to question this statement, expressed in the title of the work, for themselves, as well as to examine the cultural role and function of an artist in society. In considering these works, it became evident to me that my artistic influences have also been drawn from this historical period of abstraction, as well as from the evolution into abstract expressionism.

Robert Owen, known for his abstract paintings and sculptures of geometric and grid variations, as well as his installations, is another contemporary Australian visual artist whose works are concerned with light and with conveying aspects of the metaphysical. Owen’s painting ‘Soundings (composition #1)’, 2012, part of his Fallen Light series, reminds me of Newman’s painting ‘Adam 1951-2’, where the ‘column’ of colours resembles the same column of light, liminal space, and the constant stream of unified consciousness and colourful energy of light that I experienced.

Like composed musical notes the colours dance across the canvas. As the light resonates through space the paintings capture the encounter and transition of the two separate spheres of pure light and pure darkness. The canvas acts as a mediator for references, experiences and transitions — where sensation, colour and movement interact and come into being. (Arc One Gallery, 2012)

‘Falling Light’, 2012, based on a microscopic element of silver nitrate that is magnified in the form of a sculpture, together with 800 tiny neon lights to resemble star constellations and installed and displayed together with ‘Silence 2012’, consisting of seven geometrical sculptural forms made of stainless steel and covered in thousands of Swarovski
crystals, are two other works by Owen. The effect, Owen said, is ‘of excessive presence … a wonderful, immersive experience’ (Arts Center Melbourne, 2012a), and the work reveals ‘… the mysteries of the earth. It is cell-like, molecular, crystalline and transparent.’ It ‘emerges like an x-ray or highly magnified image of silver crystal. A cosmos of stars glitters through the perforated surface image with occasional shafts of light punctuating the undulating array … responding to the movement of bodies, shifting atmospheres … and … triggers an illuminated response to create a space where memory is housed and evoked, to transform space into place’ (Arts Centre Melbourne, 2012b).

Owen's work — and his reflections on it — initiated my own contemplation about the microcosmic and macrocosmic elements of the new painterly language that had been evolving in my studio, where the images seemed to morph and change, representing different aspects of the natural universe.

New Zealand born contemporary artist Max Gimblett accesses his experience in the actual moment of painting. Although his work is more concerned with the no-mind moment, his understanding is influenced by the notion of meditation and Eastern philosophies. Art writer and curator Anne Kirker writes of his work:

The distinctions between Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Taoism are irrelevant to an artist who accepts the Modernist notion of duality as a guiding principle, even though the reconciliation of opposites constantly asserts itself in his imagery. As a believer in the practice of meditation to empty the conscious mind and to engage with a pure space, Gimblett in his work may be regarded as coalescing the principle of ‘poverty of the spirit’ of Christian meditation with the Buddhist notion of ‘emptiness’, the ‘silence’ of Hinduism and the ‘unutterable’ of Taoism. The
canvas or blank sheet of paper serves as the matrix for receiving archetypal shapes as structures of contemplation, which are beyond any orthodox religion. They have the ability to evoke a sense of transcendent order through aesthetic gesture without heavy doctrinal reference. (Kirker, 2002)

Max Gimblett, an inspiring artist, is especially known for his minimal abstract symbolism and expressionism. One of the ways in which he works is to wait until the mind is empty; he then allows the image to appear, executing it with what appears to be a shamanistic gesture of a sharp, loud, vocal sound and/or a stamp of his foot on the ground. He then claps, as if to celebrate the success of the mark, or to clear the air. Video clips, ‘The brush of all things Parts 1-4’, of Gimblett are accessible on the worldwide web, as a documented performance aspect of his painting process (Gimblett, 2009). The sweeping brushstrokes used in the video clips remind me of Morris Louis’ stain-paintings where there are semi-transparent layers in many colours painted in wide streaks on un-primed canvases. However, I feel that Gimblett’s paintings, on a primed surface, have a higher intensity of luminosity than the works by Louis. An excerpt from the Gow Langsford Gallery catalogue 2005 reflects on Gimblett’s work and comments:

There is a performance aspect to the creation of work. ‘I am committed to the Buddhist idea of the “not self” and in that sense, I try to suspend judgement, and “float”. As an intuitive thinker, my imagery comes to me as I command, as a whole unit — the mind is cleared, an image arrives and I execute this quickly.’ (Gimblett, 2005)

Gimblett’s works on canvas and on paper interweave gestures inspired by Zen art and the unconscious mind. Anne Kirker describes Gimblett’s technique:
The calligraphic gesture, which paradoxically requires extreme concentration and abandonment to the unconscious, takes a single stroke with a loaded brush to establish a motif. This is ‘Zenga’ (Japanese Zen Pictures). There may be splattering and flooding of the diluted ink onto the paper, with whole series of dance-like movements established across numerous sheets. More often, the artist strikes the paper with an ink-laden Chinese or Japanese brush, slapping the floor with his foot and shouting as if to trigger and release the image. (Kirker, 2002, para. 4)

Although my images are generated more from past experiences, contemplation and meditative preparation than from a spontaneous no-mind moment, I have found a great similarity of influences, as well as a correspondence of form, gesture and bold use of colour, to that evident in Gimblett’s work. His paintings since 2000, including ‘Blackfire-2004’, ‘Ring-2007’ and ‘Filling the bowl-2001’, amongst many others, are a good example of this.

A working premise is that at the time of touching paint to surface: no thinking. No mind / all mind. The impulse is to feel. I paint without thinking, in an unselfconscious and free way. I encourage a feeling flow between the paint, the surface, and myself. When the support is ready and the paint is mixed, I simply step up to the painting and paint. I love to paint. I don’t have any ambition other than to let the painting happen to itself … Deep structure and deep content are implicit in touching paint to surface … In working with fluid paint, the mark flows, runs, and drips — it opens and breathes. (Gimblett, 1984)

I find Gimblett’s intuitive insights and down-to-earth descriptions of his way of working reassuring and encouraging. My process has come to a point where I am simply pouring paint, watching what happens, and analysing what it is about. My consideration is
about what worked and why and what did not work and why. Aside from the external influences and internal inspiration, my work also revolves around the simplicity of the matter of paint, medium and canvas.

In the exhibition *The Third Mind – American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, Gimblett also showed with a collective of artists who, through various styles of abstraction and using concepts of being and consciousness, sought to give universal form to particular Asian metaphysical philosophies and aesthetics to create an articulation of new conceptual and visual languages. Their work aimed to show the cultural transmission — the appropriation and integration of strains of Asian metaphysics that transformed American cultural and artistic currents, as models of philosophical thought, resulting in a new transcendentalist understanding of existence, art, life and consciousness. The artwork seemed to achieve a dynamism that suggested something numinous and wondrous beyond external form, and to create aesthetic embodiments of ‘the Self-Awareness of the Formless Self’ (Munroe, Solomon, Guggenheim Museum, 2009, p. 27).

Some of the ideas embodied in the work stemmed from Eastern religions (Hinduism, Tantric, Chan/Zen, Buddhism, Taoism), and the exhibition displayed pieces by several artists who employed a specific spiritual practice or meditation technique that became central to their personal philosophies and influenced their artistic innovations. The majority of the artworks were concerned with the primary structure of consciousness and the outer world reflected in it, stemming from East-West mysticism — the selfless, direct, transcendent experience of being one with God or ultimate reality conceived as an infinite void, like the Buddhist nirvana.

Senior curator of Asian Art, Alexandra Munroe, aptly offers that Theosopher Helena Petrovna Blavatsky promoted in *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and
Philosophy (1888) that ‘tantric meditation techniques to attain arupa-dyhana, a state of meditative concentration transcending self and nature differentiation and completely free from forms and images’. Further, she refers to Kandinsky’s thoughts, who ‘drew from Theosophy to develop his revolutionary claim that abstract art (the formless form) had the greatest potential for expressing cosmic laws. The notion of art as a mystical inner construction charged with the power to transform the viewer’s state of mind had a profound effect on American vanguard artists, on whom Kandinsky’s debt to Asian logic for his theories of abstraction was not lost’ (Munroe, Solomon, Guggenheim Museum, 2009, p. 23).

Munroe referred to a review by Ad Reinhardt of an exhibition of Chinese painting at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1954; he wrote: ‘They are organized and organic, atmospheric and airless, immanent and transcendent … compete, self-contained, absolute, rational, perfect, serene, silent, monumental, and universal’ (Munroe, Solomon, Guggenheim Museum, 2009, p. 30).

The overall subject matter is steeped in ephemerality; the relation of art to the everyday, the use of language, and interpenetrating realities unified by an existential concreteness. One artist in the exhibition, Ann Hamilton, whose words caught my attention, raised the question in response to her exhibition commission proposal:

“how — and in what ways do we come to recognize — what has been transmitted — where does it ‘body’ forth?” Hamilton focuses on the relation between reading and translation and transmission through reading … which leaves no material trace but which might forever change you. (Munroe, Solomon, Guggenheim Museum, 2009, p. 33)

My immediate response was to reflect upon how my experiences in my meditations forever changed me and my perception of who we are, what we are and what we are here for,
as existential human beings. As Munroe eloquently suggests:

The purpose of art is to contain and communicate a divine mood or state of mind, which Coomaraswamy depicted as an arousal of an experience of mindfulness, an emptying of discursive consciousness to feel oneness with nature … Inherent in Coomaraswamy’s theory is the notion that “ideal” art thus engages the viewer’s mind in a process of self-realization. This process is the kernel of artistic experience. “In Western art the picture is generally conceived as seen in a frame or through a window, as so brought toward the spectator; but the Oriental image really exists only in our own mind and heart and hence projected into space …”(Munroe, Solomon, Guggenheim Museum, 2009, p. 29).

Agnes Martin, close friend of Bruce Nauman, and a revered abstract artist known for her abstract paintings with subtle pastel hues, pencilled and painted grid lines, and soft contemplative brushstroke also believed in emptiness of mind, self-awareness, immateriality and universal truths:

Martin believed that the horizon’s infinite expanse makes us aware of a wholeness and perfection that, although unseen and immaterial, is the pervasive essence of reality. Martin believed that all human beings momentarily sense this perfection in the world in moments of exaltation such as when we quietly contemplate Nature. It is only then, she believed, when such external stimuli quiet self-awareness, that one forgets oneself, becomes truly humble and appreciates such perfection. Even though such moments are fleeting they point, she insisted, to universal and absolute truths. We can reawaken memories of such moments, she maintained, through art. To evoke such sublime beauty is ultimately the true nature of the artist’s task. (Christie’s, 2008) I found myself relating my work to her older paintings of biomorphic shapes,
‘involving abstract shapes that evoke living forms’, and that, like myself, it ‘was a serious effort to find a new language and visual vocabulary’ (The Harwood Museum of Art, 2012). Like myself, she dilutes her ‘paints to a thin wash to get just the right hue and applies color with a steady hand’ (Hunter, 2004). I also related to her later more formless works for the sense of ‘the transcendent and the sublime’ (Christie’s, 2008), and for her dedication to meditation to attain a clear mind, through which she channelled her paintings, as she describes in these comments from an interview:

I have a vacant mind. I used to meditate until I learned to stop thinking. Now I’ve stopped thinking; I don’t think of anything … nothing goes through my mind … You have to keep a clear picture in your mind. I don’t start to paint until after I have an inspiration. And after I have it, I make up my mind that I’m not going to interfere … The inspiration comes from you: Tells you exactly what to do. Even when you’re painting: Tells you every brushstroke.

…I gave up all the theories, even the atomic theory … so that leaves me with a clear mind … an empty mind. So when something comes into it, you can see it … The best things in life happen to you when you are alone — all revelations. (Popova, 1997).

Martin ‘praised Rothko for having “reached zero so that nothing could stand in the way of truth”’ (Christie's, 2008). Like Rothko, Martin also has work in the Menil collection in Houston. In a similar style to Rothko’s ‘Menil Chapel’, Agnes has a meditative site designed specifically for a series of seven of her paintings, in the Agnes Martin Gallery at The Harwood Museum of Art, New Mexico, USA. I like the expression of her ‘religion’; it reminds me of my thoughts on nothingness:

Love fills the world and it's all around us like air. It's visible like air … That's my religion. I
I also felt attracted to the writings of Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, a Tibetan contemporary artist and a lama in the Nyingma tradition of Buddhism. Drawing inspiration from artists such as Picasso and Kandinsky, Rinpoche also paints as an abstract expressionist as a form of contemplative meditation. Rinpoche comments on the merging of Buddhist philosophy and Western art:

My interest in Western art has a lot to do with my own meditation practice. Though Buddhist meditation and abstract art may seem like an odd combination, the practice of meditation and the practice of abstract painting are actually complementary. (Rinpoche, 2009)

The meditative aspects of Buddhism, and images of traditional, modern and calligraphic Chinese art, have evidently influenced my current work, particularly after a visit to China in 2009. While in China, I was drawn to the quick, gestural brushstrokes in black ink on rice paper, performed in a state of meditation, which result in a single, or multiple, image(s); see Fig. 1 as an example of traditional Chinese ink drawing. I have immense respect for the masters who have spent years perfecting a brushstroke. I have also been attracted to the positive universal meanings inherent in this art, and will later identify how Chinese art specifically influenced my painting when I discuss the technique that evolved in my process in Chapter Seven, ‘The Journey of My Painting Process’.
It seems that my best painting experiences happened when I surrendered to the flow of creativity with which I had become familiar — the no-mind state of meditation — and allowed myself to become like a puppet, no longer the ‘controller’. Images surfaced of their own accord and created their own language and symbolism. Rinpoche refers to the controller as the ‘ego’: ‘What makes art a transformative practice … is getting ego out of the way and allowing the art to reflect a natural, uncontrived awareness’ (Rinpoche, 2009).

In his book *Natural Vitality*, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche discusses how the creative process and meditation can merge, and outlines the potential of the resultant artwork to promote spiritual growth. Buddhist mandalas, for example, pictorially represent the Buddhist view of the impermanency of life in the different layers of human existence in the structures of the universe. One aim of the mandala is to act as a focus for the purpose of meditation.

Rinpoche, in his words of wisdom, clarified the experience of the everyday outer world and the inner world of being, and outlines how to bring these experiences into art making:

![Fig. 1 A traditional Chinese ink painting. (www.csontvarystudio.hu/web/tan/kepek/image001.jpg)](image001.jpg)
I understand that the nature of mind is not simply a void. If it were, it could not produce anything. Rather, this nature must have tremendous vitality to give birth to all of the things we experience in the mind and in the world … we will see that the true nature is pristine and stainless. In the view of meditation, all our thoughts and various feelings arise out of the natural state of mind and are ultimately made out of the same “material.” That material is empty awareness itself … we can then recognize that everything that arises is simply a manifestation of this very nature. (Rinpoche, 2009)

Lee U-Fan and Yayoi Kusama are two inspiring contemporary Asian artists who maintain a principle of the spiritual in art. Although Kusama’s work uses multimedia and some electronic devices such as lights, and U-Fan predominantly uses materials derived from natural sources, their work relates to the same universal space beyond the human body and sense of self.

If a bell is struck, the sound reverberates into the distance. Similarly, if a point filled with mental energy is painted on a canvas (or a wall), it sends vibrations into the surrounding unpainted space … A work of art is a site where places of making and not making, painting and not painting, are linked so that they reverberate with each other. (Ufan, 2009)

The meditative and elemental qualities in Lee U-Fan’s sculptures and paintings have provided me with a context into which I can place my paintings of simple colours on white canvases. U-Fan’s words contributed to my reflection on my paintings, such as ‘Forms 1-4’, where the colourful form(s) also reverberates with the surrounding white space, and continue(s) to vibrate into the space around the canvas, as a natural continuation of the form. For example, in Lee U-Fan’s sculpture ‘Relatum – Response (2009)’, a three-
metre-high iron sheet stands as a backdrop for a large natural stone placed in front of it. The work is intended to be a metaphor for the meanings connected to philosophies such as Zen that U-Fan employs in his work. The Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, an art gallery in Paris, comments in their catalogue about Ufan’s work: ‘Lee U-Fan allows the essence of steel and stone to speak for themselves without ornamentation of any kind … deep resonance and calm, a tangible sense of subtle energies, which are the internal mechanism in all the artist’s works’ (Ufan, 2009).

Lee U-Fan’s watercolours, such as ‘Dialogue’ (2009), contain a language that creates a concrete ground for my works with a single uni-colour image. U-Fan’s paintings in that series consist of a thin wash of watercolours in the shape of a square, strategically placed on a large sheet of paper. ‘Dialogue’ has a blue square and my work ‘Form in Blue’ (2009) has a single splash in blue.

Although I have not yet experienced Yayoi Kusama’s work firsthand, I am mesmerised by her installation ‘Soul under the moon’ (2002), which was installed in APT: 2002 Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. I am drawn to her use of bright colours, dots and balls, the grid-like structure, and the way her work creates a completely new atmosphere for the participant to experience. From the APT: 2002 catalogue, Kusama writes about her work and her ideas:

Our earth is only one polka dot among the million stars in the cosmos … When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment. I become part of the eternal, and obliterate ourselves with love. (APT, Seear, QAG, 2002, p. 61)

I find Kusama’s perspective on life and the universe particularly exciting, because
although a large part of her inspiration comes from her hallucinations, her work is born out
of her inner visionary experiences rather than from philosophical understanding alone. I
related her work ‘Self obliteration by dots’ to my visions of dots, and interpret her attempt
to ‘erase herself’ as alluding to the cosmic unity or universal whole. Rhana Devenport,
senior project officer for the Asia Pacific Trienniel at the Queensland Art Gallery, describes
Kusama’s work in terms of her understanding of the world:

Kusama’s placement of dots on her body and her surroundings aims to absorb the
image of herself into an endless world of dots. It is a way of reducing the world and
the self into an infinite web of simple parts. The dots are like the molecules or fine
matter that form the substance of life. (Devenport, 2002)

It is evident how these artists, and the order of my introduction to them, have
influenced and were integrated into my studio practice, which is outlined in Chapter Five.
The more sombre and deeper colours and the painterly techniques of the Abstract
Expressionist era initially inspired my evolving painting process. My ideas were then
propelled forward to a more contemporary domain. The cultural transition of the ideas
reflects the movement of Western thought, from subjects such as theosophy and occultism,
to a more multi-cultural perspective, promoting and incorporating aspects of Eastern art,
Buddhism and Zen philosophy. Previously, artwork that focused on the ephemeral was
more involved in making work about consciousness. Contemporary artwork is now more
cconcerned with making work that evokes an experience of that space, such as that of
Kusama or Ufan.

I have found, however, that although the artwork that invokes the ephemeral is
intended to create an experience of a conscious space, I have not yet found commentaries
written by these artists that express their own, direct experiences of consciousness. The
theories talk about the fourth dimension, our emotions, feelings, the cosmic and the spiritual, and the work reflects this, but the articulation and expansion of actual experience is not prevalent. For example, Max Gimblett has expressed his no-mind space from which he creates his work, and does make available the experience of the unsayable in his work, but he has not articulated his actual, direct experience with the divine.

Moreover, in researching these artists, I have realised that using less and less distinctive form can more closely emulate the simple, silent, true essence. I am not trying to obliterate the form, or to simplify it for the sake of stripping down structure. The forms themselves are expressing my visual and sensual experience, and the elemental quality of my final work expresses some of the depth of understanding that I have gained. I am expressing exactly what happened, in an explicit way, with an intention to implicitly impart the understanding. I am promoting that the materials are potent, and of equal value to the form and space of transcendence, without exclusivity. In this context, the materials are in unity with the non-material, and the sense of duality is not renounced, but apparent and maintained.
Chapter Five

Distilling a Painting Strategy

Indeed, Schleiermacher’s theological search for divinity outside the trappings of the church lies at the core of many a Romantic artist’s dilemma: how to express experiences of the spiritual, of the transcendental… (Rosenblum, 1978, p.15)

The words that Rosenblum used to describe the late seventeenth-century, early eighteenth-century writings of Friedrich E.D. Schleiermacher express the same dilemma that forms the question which emerged in my studio-based practice:

‘How to express experiences of the spiritual, of the transcendental?’

An experimental approach in the studio led me to distinguish a parallel between the sense of journey in my travels and life experiences, and the metaphorical journey. I have described in great detail the discoveries and challenges of the methods that occurred in the process, including the way I was influenced in my choice of materials, and the way that they were used. The following works are not resolved, but stand as a fundamental part of the technical evolution towards my final work, and the development of a sustainable contemporary painting practice.

Mediums Used

Oil paints, on primed canvas, are the medium that I predominantly use, due to the organic quality and richness of the colours and the slow-drying consistency. The studio becomes akin to a laboratory in which I experiment with various proportions of glazes, mediums, thinners and paint, as well as other textural mediums such as wax. Gold and silver leaf has also become regular media in these works. This is possibly inspired by the use of gold in religious, and especially Christian, paintings; by the associated physicality of earthly metal; and by references to alchemy.
Fig. 2 *Dark Blue Cosm* 100 x 120 cm Oil on canvas 2008

### Dark Blue Cosm

The first painting, ‘Dark Blue Cosm (see Fig.2), was inspired by a meditation I did a few days before starting the work. The canvas was 100 x 120 cm, presented portrait style. During the meditation I had a timeless experience of being in a black void, and I felt what I would describe as bliss. I painted the entire primed canvas, using black, burnt umber, and ultramarine blue oil paints thinned with turpentine.

In the centre of the canvas appeared an image that was reminiscent of a ghost-like
broad bean, or a seedpod, which contained the potential of a whole plant. It also resembled an asexual amoeba or algae. From a microcosmic scale to a macrocosmic and universal scale, the broad bean image stood as a metaphor for the birth and creation of every organism on Earth.

Due to the way I paint, I am aware that a symbol that suggests a particular meaning to a certain culture or religion may incidentally appear in the work. This seems difficult to avoid, as we live in a world of symbols and universal languages. However, rather than trying to depict anything in particular, I was aiming to induce an understanding of consciousness, incorporating both the non-physical and the physical aspects of the materiality of paint. Elkins describes this as follows:

Painters love paint itself: so much so that they spend years trying to get paint to behave the way they want it to … To an artist, a picture is both a sum of ideas and a blurry memory of “pushing paint,” breathing fumes, dripping oils and wiping brushes, smearing and diluting and mixing. (Elkins, 2000, pp. 2-3)

I began to see that I am the middleman — a doorway and a vehicle between the subjective experience of meditation and the objective physicality of the painting process of mixing paints and the application of it. The trinity transpires — that of experience, painter and materials — and the compelling inner journey, reflected to the outer and vice versa, continues.

Continuing ‘Dark Blue Cosm’, I then painted silver web-like threads running between painted points, like stars on the canvas This reflected a meditative vision I once had — of silvery threads linking each individual atom and object of existence — during which I ‘understood’ that everything is connected. The lines in the painting brought a sense
of order and connectivity to the chaos of the structural universe.

The Blue painting developed over time, slowly evolving as different layers were added, painted over, or scratched away. On one layer, I added some brightly coloured geometric shapes — again inspired by a meditative vision — to illustrate the concept that geometry is a fundamental principle of the universe. The addition of further Prussian blue to the background, plus areas of white and earthier colours such as raw umber and yellow ochre, enhanced the earlier nascent image of Earth seen from space. The textures seemed to counteract the ethereal feminine airiness with a solid masculine, almost metallic feel, adding an element of physicality alongside a sense of being. The topographical aspect allowed the imagination to explore and find its own sense of inner meaning or journey personal to the viewer.

I was reminded of the painting ‘The First Step’ (inscribed 1909) by Frantisek Kupka, described eloquently by Maurice Tuchman as ‘a diagram of the heavens and as a nonrepresentational, antidirectional image referring to infinity and evoking the belief that one’s inner world is truly linked to the cosmos’. He notes in his essay Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art that ‘Kupka had written of a mystical experience in which “it seemed I was observing the earth from outside. I was in great empty space and saw the planets rolling quietly”’ (Blotkamp, et al., 1986, p. 36).

On evaluating Dark Blue Cosm, I found that it had informed the practice that followed. Although the textured and dark areas were alluring, it was the ‘windows’ of thin washes of paint that assumed more of an ethereal sense. It had also led me to key literary sources, such as those related to the sciences, to further my research.
On this canvas, also 100 x 120 cm, I mixed and diluted black oil paint with reds and blues to create a deep burgundy and I applied it to the canvas. The thinly painted centre emitted a sense of light, and the shape that appeared there seemed to be a masculine figure, standing on the edge and looking out into the glowing space between the trees. Through my romantic eyes, the figure seemed to be viewing the space as if seeing in it a reflection of his own soul, his eternal flame and the infinite inner journey. However, I realised that if I retained the figure as part of the image, rather than the observer directly entering the painting, the experience of it would be filtered through their identification with this figure, and their experience would thus be fused with his. I wanted the observer to directly experience the painting, as the subject as well as the object — to identify with the poetry of the image itself. I thought about how the elimination of a figure from Mark Rothko’s paintings resulted in a closer identification with space:

Where, in earlier paintings, a rectangular area of colour hovered above a field of colour, in the ‘brown and gray’ paintings the rectangular figure was eliminated and became the ground itself. The white margin both emphasizes the flatness of the surface and suggests the possibility of depth. In the elimination of the figure in these late works and in the abutment of one tone against another, Rothko comes close to the effect of certain paintings by Barnett Newman. (Tate Gallery, Rothko, 1988)

David Thomas comments on J.M.W. Turner’s flat use of colour in his 1830s’ paintings: ‘in which flat areas of colour represent solid objects, and the spectator’s eye, recognising the objects by their outline, reads a roundness into them’ (Thomas, 1997).
**Butterflies as Metaphor**

In India, I had written a poem about a state of heightened awareness that I was experiencing, which led to experimentally using the various patterns on a butterfly’s wing as an image to express the macrocosm and the microcosm. With the idea that the patterns could also create a rhythm or a structure as a basis for my paintings, after significant enlargement and projection onto the painted canvas, the objectified insect itself simply became another abstracted pattern beyond the inherent pattern on the wings, and appeared as a rhythmical sequence.

In order to best place the image, I rotated it on the canvas in various directions and then turned the canvas itself in increments of 90 degrees. However, although I did not find the image useful after this experiment, I did discover that when the ‘busy’ part of the painting was on the right-hand side and the plainer and almost blank part was on the left, the image was harmonious, but when the painting was turned 180 degrees — the other way around — the ‘busyness’ caused a sense of unrest and discomfort.

This raised questions about the function of the left and right sides of the brain, and whether people are affected by what they see according to the composition of the left- and right-side areas of an image. I was left pondering how this concept would affect my awareness concerning my choice of composition. Bearing in mind the results of many studies on the functions of the left and right brains, including Steiner’s philosophies, I wondered if leaving the right area plain and uncluttered would allow the left brain to relax into the simple space, thus counteracting its usual analytical activity. If the busyness is presented in the left area, the right brain, with its greater capacity for detail, can absorb this busier image more readily. Then both brain hemispheres are able to join together to absorb
the image as a whole. My understanding was that if the left brain saw the details of the image first, the feeling of the painting would be lost. The parts of the image are independent; their sum is what makes the image whole — thus the painting needs to be seen in its entirety on the first viewing. Taking this into consideration in the way I composed future paintings was perhaps a way to achieve this. In her internet guide *Right brain / left brain: What is it all about?: A simple explanation of right / left brain theory and its relevance to painters*, artist, writer and photographer Marion Boddy-Evans assesses the relevance of the brain hemispheres to painters:

> One (the right brain) is visual and processes information in an intuitive and simultaneous way, looking first at the whole picture then the details. The other (the left brain) is verbal and processes information in an analytical and sequential way, looking first at the pieces then putting them together to get the whole. (Boddy-Evans, 2010)

I also thought about the traditionally uncluttered space of meditation, the simplicity of Zen and the art of Feng Shui, in contrast to the excessive proliferation of material objects in the Western world and our identification with them. Also inspired by Miro, Klee and Kandinsky, I now strove for a personal minimal style and fluid technique of painting, with a simplified image.

**Painting with Geometric Shapes**

In Artistry Gallery in Melbourne, in February 2009, I discovered some richly coloured and intricate geometric paintings, built up with a multitude of rubbed down layers of acrylic paint, by contemporary artist David Milne. His work is inspired by prints of alchemy, old manuscripts, scientific drawings, and financial publications. For me, they
formed Western versions of mandalas, and implied notions of sacred geometry. They led me to reflect on the use of a more calculated physical structure incorporating various shapes — in particular, circles, squares and triangles. An understanding that I had gained from my meditation was that geometric shapes are an integral part of our basic physical structure. An idea formed for using these in a painting, and I began to transcribe from memory, and from my journals, the diagrams and shapes I had seen in my meditations. I drew the shapes onto a canvas, meticulously composing the layout, using a pencil, ruler and compass. I connected all the images, thus uniting the experiences I had had when first seeing them. Using an assortment of bright colours, I then carefully painted each shape, leaving the background white. I like the starkness of a basic primed coat. White, for me, eventually became a complete space containing all colours.

At this time I was reading a book on chakras and alternative healing. I therefore chose the colours for the shapes, and their placement on the canvas, according to the colours and placement of the chakras in the human body. My intention was that the related chakra in the viewer’s body would resonate and vibrate on viewing the corresponding colours and shapes on the canvas.

When I returned to the painting I found that it lacked the multi-dimensional quality that I wanted. In an attempt to resolve the painting by adding thicker and denser layers to the shapes, some went askew and formed non-perfect circles. In this subtle adjustment, a movement started to happen; I found the imperfect, organic shapes appealing.

**Loops and Circles**

I began to play with circles in a looser way, on a new painting, leaving the measuring devices and such behind. A gestural and loose wrist with the paintbrush created
large elliptical loops that began to allude to ‘Zenga’, a Zen way of painting. With a light coloured background, the loop created a boundary line within the space, bringing to mind a sense of internal and external landscape. One does not exist without the other, yet the line clarifies that both exist simultaneously, creating a sense of wholeness. Although written approximately five centuries ago, Leonardo da Vinci’s words still ring true for me:

With a view that humankind and nature are one, each part is an entity with a soul, all equally considered divine, an inner pulsing consciousness runs through all parts. This consciousness is the make-up of all parts, and it is precisely these parts that are this consciousness in pulsing concentration, revealed as material forms.
(Vollmer, 1965)

Here I turn again to the essay *Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art* by art historian and curator, Maurice Tuchman, as he quotes the words of the seventeenth-century German mystic Bohme, who ‘sought to identify the forces and conflicts that lie beneath all human existence: “The eternal center and the Birth of Life … are everywhere. Trace a circle no larger than a dot, the whole birth of Eternal Nature is therein contained.”’ He comments, ‘Efforts to find the underlying life-form (the UR-form, the thyrsus, the double ellipse) were made over a long period of time. The UR-form … is used … to describe the biomorphic shape that suggests the original and the primal and is the visual equivalent of “an inarticulate sound, uttered instead of a word that the speaker is unable to remember or bring out”’ (Blotkamp, et al., 1986, p. 19).

On a windy day, I tried another method. I laid a large roll of paper on the lawn and spattered it with ink that had been extremely diluted with water. Using my whole body, I painted large, loose circles. I felt a pull to walk on them and, as I walked up the roll of paper, with one foot per circle, I had literally become a part of the painting process,
connecting with my materials, in the style of Jackson Pollock and his ‘splatter’ canvas paintings on the floor. I related this process to Pollock’s words in a 1947 statement about his canvas painting process on the floor:

‘I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting … I continue to get further away from the usual painter’s tools such as easel, palette, brushes, etc. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives, and dripping fluid paint … and other foreign matter added. When I am in my painting … after a sort of “getting acquainted” period … I see what I have been about. I have no fear about making changes … because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through … there is pure harmony, an easy give and take.’ (Chipp, 1968, pp. 546–548)

I adopted this approach in the studio and took the canvas off the easel and laid it on the floor. This move immediately altered my perspective of the canvas, because I was no longer forced to have a pictorial direction in the canvas due to its upright positioning on the easel. I was now able to move around my canvas and relate to it as another three-dimensional object. I felt a sense of freedom and revelation in the non-directional picture plane.

No-Mind Splash

In June 2009 I became deeply absorbed and moved by the meditative effect of Rothko’s paintings ‘The Seagram Murals’ at the Tate Gallery, London, where they were displayed in a combined exhibition with paintings by J.M.W. Turner. I was so entranced as I sat with these works that time seemed to stand still and I felt I could remain there forever. I have not yet had the good fortune of experiencing the sacred space that Rothko’s great
paintings have created in the Menil Chapel in Houston, USA, where, for fifty years, visitors have been, and continue to be, ‘welcomed to meditate, reflect, and immerse themselves in the transformative power of art’. However, Mrs. de Menil’s description — ‘as if he were bringing us to the threshold of transcendence, the mystery of the cosmos … They are an endeavor to go beyond art. They are an attempt to create a timeless space’ — poetically expresses the wordless experience that I had with ‘The Seagram Murals’ (Rothko Chapel, 2014).

Following this inspiration, one day in the studio I poured turpentine all over the surface of a 100 x 120 cm blank canvas. Choosing the colour violet, because of its resonance and connection to higher states of awareness, I mixed up the oil paint, diluted it with turpentine, and prepared to pour it onto the canvas. As I was crouching half over the canvas, the paint unintentionally started to drip out of the container onto the edge of the canvas before I had reached the middle, where I had intended it to go. I then, without thought and spontaneously, poured the contents of the entire container onto the large white canvas, in that one area, emptying out the last dregs and lumps of pigment in a swirling motion. The materials then flowed in a way that I could not control, and moved and expanded freely within the confines and particular surface areas of the canvas. The pigment that was the most diluted ran down towards the bottom corner of the painting, and all began to spread out. The heavier pigment remained more or less where it fell.
The result (see Fig. 3) was a fresh, violet splash on a white primed background, evoking a sense of explosion, macrocosm and microcosm, and displaying the raw quality of the materials.

Although the painting took only a few minutes to complete, it was in reality a year
of work that had finally started to come together through this accident on the canvas. And
of course, in that moment, my informed mind then became useful. By exploring and
evaluating the outcome of the painted images, I not only gained understanding about the
materials, but also an awareness of my ideas and the correlation between the two. This
was the beginning of my ‘Splash’ paintings, and my current work.

Through the arduous journey of distilling a personal painting strategy, I have found
a technique that complements and supports my subject matter. The continued process of the
technique and the outcomes will be described in Chapter Seven, ‘The Journey of the
Painting Process’.
Chapter Six

Reflections of the Interrelationship of All Things

Material thinking occurs in the making of works of art. It happens when the artist dares to ask the simple but far-reaching questions; what matters? What is the material of thought? To ask these questions is to embark on an intellectual adventure peculiar to the making process. Critics and theorists interested in communicating ideas about things cannot emulate it. (Carter, 2004, p. XI)

My research began through studio enquiry, which involved speculation upon the rhetorical question that Paul Carter asked in his publication Material Thinking: ‘What matters?’ In an attempt to find some answers, I embarked upon the ‘peculiar’ process of finding, using, discarding and connecting a continual flux of relevant information. This chapter predominantly covers the sourced theories and discoveries, by scientists and philosophers alike, which informed my studio process.

In researching a way to bring understanding to my sense of interconnectedness, I turned to books about science, philosophy and mysticism, such as The Tao of Physics by research physicist and lecturer Fritjof Capra. Capra commented on the parallel search and discoveries within physics and mysticism: ‘… modern physics leads us to a view of the world which is very similar to the views held by mystics of all ages and traditions’ (Capra, 1975, p. 19).

One important Eastern approach to mysticism, which comes from a 4000-year-old tradition, is contained in the book I Ching. Much of the wisdom in this book can be related to — and influences — the arts. I Ching is based on ‘the recognition that the ever-changing diversities of existence have an underlying unity of order, in which everything is related to everything else’ (Doczi, 1981, p. 128).
At the same time, one of the first articles that I read, related to this area of research, was ‘Rapunzel’ by William Irwin Thompson, from his book *Imaginary Landscapes*. This piece of writing explores an intellectual story about the multi-layering of the fairy tale *Rapunzel*. Thompson formed connections in the recurring patterns of the story, such as maternal and paternal analogies with regards to social order and evolution, asexual plants linking to algae from the beginning of time, and cosmological patterns amongst others. Thompson suggests:

> When everything is in a flux, it is the not-so-obvious periodicities that capture the imagination of the initiate who begins to perceive the hidden geometry that connects the cycles of the moon or the wanderings of the planets. With the tallying stick of the midwife or the circle of standing stones, the initiate begins to mark out what Gregory Bateson liked to call “the pattern that connects” the singular to the cyclical. Sketched on the sand, the geometry, when seen in the sky, could be seen again in the symmetry of the flower … “As above so below”… a lost cosmology … It requires an act of imagination to bring it forth. (Thompson, 1989)

Thompson’s clarity, combined with the unique way he correlated his theories, led me to attempt to more concisely link my concept of the interconnectedness of every atom, molecule and particle of the universe and my understanding of the space of meditation with the process of painting.

**Experience of being an atom**

The direct experience that I had had in a profound meditation — that I am essentially an atom — compelled me to tentatively investigate writings from the world of science, where the results of experiments are accepted as ‘proven reality’. I realised that I
was initially searching for a structure that directly related to my experiences — such as a diagram of an atom — or at least some substantial confirmation from the scientific explanations. This raised some questions:

I wondered if the scientists would describe atoms in the same way that I experienced them in my silent meditation?

How would the information translate into my studio work?

As I began to read, I realised that it is too big a field to do it justice, so I intend to use any findings in more of an anecdotal way, with great potential for a future project. The first volume on atoms that I came across was Shumsky’s atomic theory, and according to him, nothing actually touches, which parallels my understanding from my meditative experiences. Every atom and particle is surrounded by an electrical field and communicates information through an electrical charge (Shumsky, 2003). It seems then that a boundary must exist. But how to describe in a painterly language the boundary between the human body and the energy surrounding it? Words fail me, and I turn to Deepak Chopra, who refers to it thus: ‘The faintest shadow-line separates the human body from the cosmic body’ (Chopra, 1990, p. 96).

Mikhail Epstein, an American literary theorist and critical thinker, takes another step to the next border, and eloquently phrases the point of the inexpressible truth itself within the realm of creative disciplines in terms of semiotics:

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>>…the “primary word”, the philosophical sign of the absolute, or the infinite being as it is revealed on the border of language and the inexpressible. When Mozart was asked what is most important in music, his answer
This inferred space resonates with an experience that I often had during my silent meditations — that of becoming a boundless mass of buzzing space. The majority of an atom is also regarded as a large mass of space, in which the electrons themselves move around (Shumsky, 2003). In keeping with this, the researched macrocosm has been discovered to consist of identical microcosms. I look at each individual human as a macrocosm, and simultaneously a microcosm, of the whole universe.

In his book *Quantum Healing*, when writing about the scientific research into cells, Chopra explains that when each minute part of a cell is investigated, there is always something more, beyond what is found … something smaller and yet limitless. There is a continual revelation of vast amounts of elements to investigate, seemingly into infinity.

These concepts I encountered while reviewing the scientific literature allowed me to not only form parallels between my experiences in meditation and scientific discoveries, but also to more clearly conceptualise the existence of a possible boundary between the inner and outer worlds, thus adding a further dimension to my studio work.

Moreover, further questions arose, such as: What is the boundary? How could I paint the inexpressible? How can I translate the sensory and visual experiences onto canvas? Questions such as these became a daily mantra. I realised that I could only reflect on the connections and parallels by looking at the happenings inside, and the influences outside, my studio.

While sitting in my garden, looking at the trees and sky, listening to the insects and birds and traffic, I unfocused my eyes in order to look at nothing in particular, and relaxed
my mind. Instantly, everything appeared to be comprised of tiny coloured dots, or pixels, like a Pointillist painting. The dots were all connected, each existing in one place yet constantly vibrating, but there were no linear formations. When I focused my mind on feeling and being that space, I experienced a sense of expansion, and feelings of bliss and joy. I also realised that if the inexpressible is everything, including infinite space, then this is what I also need to convey on the canvas. By using the senses to feel space, rather than just depending on the visuals or the thoughts, another dimension can be introduced — one that conceives of nature perhaps, or a landscape in particular, as a reflection of consciousness. After a trip to Ohio in 1949, Barnett Newman reflects upon his experience of space, nature and the artistic act:

Here I am, here ... and out beyond there (beyond the limits of the site) there is chaos, nature, rivers, landscapes ... But here you get a sense of your own presence...

Here is the self-evident nature of the artistic act, its utter simplicity. There are no subjects — nothing that can be shown in a museum or even photographed; (it is) a work of art that cannot even be seen, so it is something that must be experienced there on the spot: The feeling (is) that here is the space; that these simple low mud walls make the space; that the space outside, the dramatic landscape looking out over a bridge one hundred feet high, the falling land, the chasms, the rivers, the farmlands and far-off hills are just picture postcards, and somehow one is looking out as if inside a picture rather than outside contemplating any specific nature. (Newman, 1992, pp. 174–175)

In the studio process, I started to use my whole body in the activity, and painted strokes that covered and incorporated the entire canvas. I began to paint loops and circles. The loops naively began to represent porthole windows or doors, initiating thoughts on inner and outer space metaphysically and literally. The loops represented the ‘shadow-line’ and the background inside and outside of the loop represented the space, or creative
consciousness. The loops were painted with the moving body, and yet, when the strokes were finished, a still moment also resonated in the final image. However, this still seemed too obvious; I wanted to go beyond the obvious and the representational and move closer to a subtler, more fluid and integral form. In terms of material, form or ideas, I could recycle, but not introduce anything new to the field of art, so any form that I did create was bound to be an appropriation or symbolic of something.

I began to consider exploring a looser image on the canvas, one that was more focused on the space of the experience rather than the particular visions that I had seen.

**Looking at The Space in Terms of Silent Intelligence and the Self-Organisation of Nature and Materials**

Scientists have examined the way that messages move from thought to action. Pythagoras documented that the message goes from one point, ‘A’, to another point, ‘B’. In his book *Quantum Healing: Exploring the frontiers of mind/body medicine*, Deepak Chopra claims that it is evident that A drops into an unknown zone on its way to B. This emergent theory has been referred to as the ‘Silent Intelligence’ (Chopra, 1990).

Aside from social systems, other new patterns that relate to the theory of silent intelligence include ‘swarm behaviour’ or ‘collective intelligence’. This is in terms of birds flying in a flock, where the birds adjust their movements to coordinate with the other birds, and retain their formation using the emergent phenomenon of self-organisation. A multitude of researchers from various disciplines have not yet been able to exactly explain how this happens, but patterns have begun to be distinguished (Garg, et al., 2009).

Through a contemplation of these ideas, I also began looking at the self-
organisation of the materials that I was pouring onto the canvases, and the resultant emerging patterns. I did not know why or how the materials flowed in unexpected directions, or why they cracked in certain formations. However, in order to repeat the action and achieve a similar result, I did not need to know why it happened, just how. I followed the emergent patterns on each painting, and learned what happened when different pigments and mediums were mixed together with various degrees of consistency. A sanded or rough surface also affected the flow, and if the canvas was placed on uneven ground, or sagged in the middle, the paint would form a pool. Although I was not able to predict exactly how a painting would turn out, using the information I could glean from the paintings that worked, and also from those that did not, I was able to proceed with the knowledge thus obtained and continue to experiment in the studio. The knowledge gained also aided in assessing what was a poetic image, in terms of form and composition, and whether or not it evoked a sense of space, movement and stillness.

I realised then how crucial it was to remain aware of what I had experienced, as well as my conscious state during the painting process. As Sixten Ringbom summarised in his seminal study *The sounding cosmos: a study in the spiritualism of Kandinsky and the genesis of abstract painting*, Kandinsky’s main intention was ‘to produce vibrations in the beholder, and the work of art is the vehicle through which this purpose is served …The formative factor in the creation of a work of art is the artist’s same vibration’ (Ringbom, 1970, pp. 121–122). Aside from the formalities of composition and mark making, it seemed paramount to paint in the same way and also in the same state of mind that I wished the observer to be in when viewing the image.

I understand that Chopra refers to this state of mind as a silent gap and also as a quantum body:
Finding the silent gap that flashes in between our thoughts seems relatively easy, but because it flashes by, a tiny gap is not a doorway. The quantum body is not separate from us — it is us — yet we are not experiencing it right now. (Chopra, 1990)

Chopra comments on the deep transformation of thinking that occurs in relation to the phenomenon of silent intelligence and claims it to be ‘normal reality’, whilst using the descriptive words of a psychologist to support this assertion:

Abraham Maslow, who was a pioneer in studying the positive aspects of the human personality, gave a classic description of the experience of the deep self: “These moments were of pure, positive happiness, when all doubts, all fears, all inhibitions, all tensions, all weaknesses, were left behind. Now self-consciousness was lost. All separateness and distance from the world disappeared …” Although such experiences are rare — Maslow termed them “peak experiences” for that reason — they have a curative power that goes far beyond their brief duration, which may be a few days or just a few hours …“They felt one with the world, fused with it, really belonging to it instead of being outside looking in.”… Any sudden revelation of a deeper reality carries enormous power with it — one taste alone can make life undeniably worthwhile … It is not energy or strength, genius or insight, but it underlies all of these. It is life power in its purest form … he concluded that it was indeed normal life and not the mystical that he had been observing. “The little that I had ever read about mystic experiences tied them in with religion, with visions of the supernatural. And, like most scientists, I had sniffed at them in disbelief and considered it all nonsense, maybe hallucinations, maybe hysteria — almost surely pathological. But the
people telling me about these experiences were not such people — they were the healthiest people!”… Maslow viewed them as accidents or as moments of grace. I believe that they were glimpses into a field that underlies everyone’s life, but which has remained elusive. The implication is that we should dive very deep if we want to transcend normal reality. (Chopra, 1990, pp. 164-5)

It is evident that by studying an action or event one may or may not clearly comprehend how or why certain things happen. But understanding happens naturally by having the experience oneself, and understanding gained this way cannot be denied. The spontaneous or natural occurrences indicate that the self-organisation of ‘silent intelligence’ or a ‘peak experience’ is ‘normal life’. This reminds me once more of Osho’s insistence on focusing one’s awareness on the everyday event, bringing one’s mind back to the present, whether one is washing dishes or painting a canvas. Osho often refers to this place of the everyday as ‘the marketplace’, and states that:

Silence must happen while you are absolutely alive, vital, bubbling with life and energy. Then the silence is meaningful. Then it will be an alive silence. It will be a silence that can be both in the mountains and in the marketplace. Then you can live in the world and not have the world living in you. (Osho, 1974, p. 36)

Overall, in contemplation of this described space, and in relation to the way that my painting technique has evolved, I have drawn a parallel between my painting process and the actions of the neuro-peptide and the atom. This mirrors the way my paints and mediums work together, with elements of silent intelligence, cause and effect, self-organisation, and emergence.
Although I have already mentioned the emergent qualities in my work, I will re-introduce them in the next section as a more integral aspect of my overall research.

**Emerging Patterns, and Constituent Parts of The Macrocosm**

Perhaps the most elaborate recent definition of emergence was provided by Jeffrey Goldstein in the inaugural issue of *Emergence*. [46] To Goldstein, emergence refers to “the rising of novel and coherent structures, patterns and properties during the process of self-organization in complex systems.” As Jeffrey Goldstein noted in his *Emergence* article, “emergence functions not so much as an explanation but rather as a descriptive term pointing to the patterns, structures or properties that are exhibited on the macro-scale” (p. 58). [46] Broadly defined, synergy refers to the combined (cooperative) effects that are produced by two or more particles, elements, parts or organisms. (Corning, 2002)

I discovered that the self-organising structure of the materials in my painting process narrated an emergent pattern, derived from the synergistic combination of its parts. With the constituent parts forming a macrocosm, or in effect a mini universe, it appeared to reflect the understandings that I had gained during my meditative experiences. The experiences, in a way, also mirrored the results of scientific experiments, because although it has not been proved why, or how, emergent experiences or patterns occur, scientists have at least formed a theory concerning their observations of patterns in relation to the macro-scale and micro-scale. Emergence theory applies to the structure and space that I have intended to convey, the materiality of painting, my experiences, and the emergent patterns and images. I used several pouring vessels and different materials, such as paint, medium, glaze, turpentine and primed canvas. Mixed together in estimated percentages, with varying consistencies, I created a new material with the various parts. I controlled the environment,
but I could not completely control how the mixed media responded each time to a new canvas. Each part is as valid as the whole (Thompson), and ‘These new qualities are irreducible to the system’s constituent parts’ (Laughlin, 2005), reflecting its participation in the phenomena of complex systems and the interconnectedness of everything. Director of Institute for the Study of Complex Systems, Dr Peter A. Corning, states that:

In other words, emergent effects would be associated specifically with contexts in which constituent parts with different properties are modified, re-shaped or transformed by their participation in the whole. (Corning, 2002)

This idea is also relevant to my meditations: each solitary experience was profound, but it was through a series of spontaneous, transformative experiences that I could come to a more stable understanding of what they might mean. The same applies to my paintings: rather than looking at one painting, I had to maintain observation of a few, which had received a similar treatment, during both the application and drying process. In the same way that I created a particular environment for an experience to happen in meditation — by maintaining a healthy body, and using a method that had instigated an experience on a previous occasion — in my painting process I also created a certain set of circumstances in order to replicate the result through a particular preparation and application of the materials in my painting studio. The result is a developing image, with emerging patterns, which creates a distinctly organised pattern that I can only align with the concept and space of silent intelligence (see Fig. 4).
Apart from an understanding of the reactions of the chemical components in the mediums, I do not know why the materials respond as they do. However, the effect suggests a sense of movement and stasis, space with colour and form, and a fresh timelessness that I was searching for.

Emergence theory is today used frequently by scientists and theorists as they observe
and examine phenomena in nature and in the human mind. Personally, emergence theory has helped to structure a formula for the way that I have evaluated my paintings, in terms of the effects of the materials and the emergent images: ‘… a precise notion of emergence is involved in consciousness’ (Bedau, 1997, p. 396).

I realised that it is no longer about attempting to reconstruct the universe, even though, as Mark A. Bedau comments in his journal article on Weak Emergence (1997), ‘… it is uncomfortably like magic … that emergence entails illegitimately getting something from nothing’ (Bedau, 1997).

It is for me, however, to simply observe the connecting threads of the emergent qualities apparent in the materiality of my paintings, which mirror and reflect my sensory experiences of consciousness.

**Imagination / Reality**

William Irwin refers to the imagination as ‘the realm of the psyche … the astral plane … an ocean of shifty and shifting imagery … an intermediate realm, a template between matter and spirit.’ (Thompson, 1998, p. 83)

In his book *Coming into Being*, Thompson comments on the realm of the imagination and suggests that metaphorical imagery can be taken too literally; that dreams and certain imaginings can come from a store of memories. He also proposes that the imagination acts as a go-between for our ego, or human selves, and intuitions from higher dimensions,

The imagination is an intermediate realm between the ego and its perceptual body of senses and the intuition of higher, multi-dimensional states of consciousness.
Information moves in both directions. Some kinds of intuitions come down to the ego, and some kinds of peripheral perceptions are transformed by the imagination as they surface into awareness and become rendered into an imagistic narrative (Thompson, 1998).

On contemplating my vivid experiences during meditation it seems that, on one level, sages, doctors and psychologists would accept the experiences as valid and transformational. However, seen through the prism of Thompson’s concepts, the imagery in the visions is more of a metaphor than a solid reality. It is certainly strange to imagine that I could really suddenly expand to fill an entire room with my being and enter timelessness or become a small boy in a star-filled universe. However, a question arises in relation to the geometric shapes that I saw. Naïve as it may sound, I did not have any prior conception that shapes and geometry were so fundamentally integrated in the multi-dimensional aspect of the universe. Were the visions and experiences conjured up by my imagination, or were they real? Thompson also brings mathematics and angels into this realm of multi-dimensionality:

When we shift into the musical-mathematical domains of consciousness in the gaps between each heartbeat — in the fine microstructures of human time — then angels begin to have a topological reality … The universe is exactly all sorts of possibilities. (Thompson, 1998)

The universe is full of possibilities, and it does sometimes look like magic; this gives a freedom and invitation to surrender to the imagination and to the nature of the materials of the studio.

I realised that I had been trying to include all of the infinite possibilities in one
painting; however, even just one microdot on a canvas was, to me, sufficient to represent the whole of the cosmos. In his usual poetic way of writing, Ralph Waldo Emerson declared that ‘Natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind … [a] work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world … a leaf, a sunbeam, a landscape, the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind’ (Emerson, 1969, p. 13), and epitomises the unity that I have been seeking to convey in the studio: ‘The day of days, the great day of the great feast of life … in which the inward eye opens to the Unity of things’ (Emerson, 1969, p. 13).

At this point the notion of abstraction became personal to me, because the irrelevance of image size, form, colour, shape of the canvas, or medium also reflected the aforementioned discovery that however small or complex the particles, cells and atoms can be investigated into infinity. Or when any pattern is magnified, more emerge — again, into infinity. The elasticity and spontaneous limitlessness of the imagination and the notion of infinite possibilities now exerted their full effect on my painting process.

Just for now, I dropped the concern whether the images were real or not, because there is a possibility that they had appeared in the visions as potential forms dancing in the gap between form and formlessness, posing as metaphorical truths. From this demonstration, the creative play of consciousness itself stands out as the most poignant reality.

The imagination is, after all, as Thompson puts it, ‘… a template between matter and spirit’, metaphorically paralleling my paintings as matter, or a permeable ‘membrane’, and my experiences or imagination as spirit or non-matter.

The imagination is a particular kind of membrane: it is a transformer that takes in
higher dimensional experiences and steps them down to household current to run the appliances of our daily life. Like the membrane around a cell or the membrane around a flame that is the dialogue between the atmosphere and the flame, the imagination performs the relationship between the unique and the universal, between beings and Being. Imagination can be liberating as long as one realizes that it is a membrane and not a wall. (Thompson, 1998)

One artist that comes to mind here is Clytie Alexander, whose series of Diaphans (aluminium sheets which are rectangular, painted and perforated, installed 4 inches away from the wall) portray emerging patterns, and emulate permeable membranes, or boundaries. She has also been inspired by spending time in India, where her fascination began with ‘permeable boundaries’. I found a connection between my paintings and the conveyance of these boundaries, permeability and the emerging patterns. Alexander’s concern is with the space around each artwork, and one’s awareness is guided to the edges and forms of her work. The pieces are ‘seemingly floating or hovering in an aura or reflected light’, and have an ethereal sensibility, that I would quietly liken to the textural images that have formed on my canvases (Betty Cuningham Gallery, 2009).

**Chakras / Colour / Healing / Sound / Vibration**

Chakras are considered to be a type of invisible doorway between the gross physical body and the etheric body, which open and close at will or independently (Shumsky, 2003). Certain areas of the body correspond with particular emotions, colours and sounds. I became aware of this in the studio when, as an observer, I noticed a heightened resonance or harmony when I chose colours and locations that corresponded to the theory on chakras.
Theology / Duality and unity of Creation and Destruction

Originally the term theology was applied not to the systematic study of religious dogmas but to the mystical experience … definition of theology as penetration into the unnameable mystery. (Capra, Steindl-Rast, & Matus, 1992, p. 15)

Religiousness to me is experiencing, or glimpsing, the divine, and then drawing the experiences into daily life, with the knowledge that the ordinary life experiences are also the divine. The practical materiality of the gungy, oily, smelly process of painting (Elkins, 2000, p. 2) is equally as much a part of the divine experience as the deepest silence of meditation.

Spirituality lets meaning flow into daily life. If you had this peak experience, and you shook yourself and lived as before, there’s no spirituality … So spirituality is a way of being that flows from the religious experience. (Capra, et al., 1992, p. 13)

On reading a conversation held between Fritjof Capra, David Steindl-Rast and Thomas Matus, in Belonging to the universe: new thinking about god and nature, I began to reflect on my mystical experiences, and to wonder if they have had a positive influence on my daily life. I think that the answer is ‘yes’, as through them I have gained a sense of inner strength and centredness of self, which acts as a reference point during challenging or tumultuous periods in my life. I realise that although I experience a constant influx of thoughts and emotions, they are not who I am. If I can choose to watch them from a distance as an observer, and instead focus on the simple stillness that is also present, I feel a sense of freedom and ease.

I found that this also applies to my artwork. Reflecting on my busier past work, it
seems that rather than the paint being applied with conscious awareness, it was applied more as if I was offloading ideas. However, I regard the ideas and busyness of daily life as an integral part of my meditation, because a part of my practice is to observe the busyness of the mind as a witness rather than participating in the thoughts. Thoughts and a sense of stillness can co-exist. I then realised why I was so drawn to Zen art and to many of the past abstract artists to whose work I was introduced during my European upbringing. The Zen art encouraged my focus on order, harmony, simplicity and being. The abstract masters also summoned a deep state of stillness, such as Mark Rothko’s ‘Seagram’ paintings; imaginative play, such as Wassily Kandinsky’s colourful watercolours of the 40s; or mystical notions of other worlds, such as Paul Klee’s later paintings. I have found that this has influenced my movement towards abstraction and minimalism, and that I now wish for my work to induce a sense of stillness, freedom and release.

*Pattern, Spirals, The Solar System and The Cosmic Order*

‘…as above, so below.’ (Thompson, 1989)

From the structures and patterns observed in self-organisation, I move on to the natural patterns and spirals that occur in nature, including the solar system, in the search for how things interconnect in the world, which then informed my painting process.

The spiralling arms of a galaxy mirror the electrons around an atom. As in Thompson’s ‘Rapunzel’ analysis, I am looking at the ‘pattern that connects’. The rhythmical rotation of the planets and comets in their orbits creates a pattern as they loop in their journey around other planets or stars. The slight change in angle each time moves the orbit slightly, changing the pattern; this alters the loop, which then echoes the last orbital loop, but with more of an oblong than circular shape (Scagell, 2006). I was influenced by
these observations when producing loops in my paintings. This also led to thoughts about pattern, and self-organisation in relation to the image and canvas structure, such as using the golden rectangle and Fibonacci’s numbers.

Mondrian’s minimal ‘grid’ paintings, which are among those paintings that have particularly stimulated and moved me, reflect this notion of universal structure, pattern and interrelatedness. Schaeffer comments: ‘… according to Mondrian’s own notebooks, the patterns represent the struggle toward unity of cosmic dualities and the religious symmetry undergirding the material universe’ (Schaeffer, 1987).

I was trying to find a concrete ground on which the duality of the materiality of painting and my meditative experiences could meet and unify. I reflected upon the experience of unifying the duality of opposites in a higher state of consciousness during my tantric meditations. This kind of unification is mentioned in the book The Tao of Physics:

The Eastern mystics affirm that such a union on one’s male and female nodes can only be experienced on a higher plane of consciousness where the realm of thought and language is transcended and all opposites appear as a dynamic unity. (Capra, 1975, p. 149)

**Bringing Fibonacci’s Numbers To My Canvases**

Whilst looking at patterns in nature, and at numbers and mathematical structures that have been regarded as creating a natural aesthetic beauty, I considered paintings by the Renaissance masters which also exhibit use of the golden ratio and Fibonacci’s numbers as harmonious proportions (Doczi, 1981). In his book The Power of Limits; Proportional Harmonies in Nature, Art, and Architecture, Gyorgy Dozci quotes Leonardo da Vinci: ‘…
every part is disposed to unite with the whole, that it may thereby escape from its incompleteness’ (Doczi, 1981, p. 95). This was in line with an intention for my work to become a harmonious structure for harbouring and possibly counteracting the emerging chaotic image(s) created with paint. If I controlled the environment, with the emergence of an image or pattern, I hoped that the aesthetically harmonious structure of the canvas and the image that appeared could penetrate the observer more deeply. With this in mind, I therefore adjusted the dimensions of my canvases according to the mathematical calculations of Fibonacci’s numbers, and made four canvases with the dimensions of 34 x 55 cm, and eight of 55 x 89 centimetres.

**Alchemy, The Philosopher’s Stone, and Painting**

Painting is *alchemy*. Its materials are worked without knowledge of their properties, by blind experiment, by the feel of the paint. (Elkins, 2000, p. 9)

I now move on from the notion of chaos and harmony and how they affect a canvas and its image to the alchemical metaphor that relates to the material activity in the studio.

James Elkins eloquently parallels the spiritual search for the Philosopher’s Stone with the materials used in the studio process in his book *What Painting Is* (2005); for example, the mixing of the pigment and mediums, or the water and stone, and the ‘spiritual’ and ‘meditative’ search for the metaphorical Stone. Elkins’ parallel became an important reference point for me, as I am also attempting to unite the experiences of two disparate realities — my meditative experiences and the materiality of my painting — while also investigating the question of the existence of a boundary between the inner ‘spiritual’ world and the outer ‘material’ world. Each search has the same goal: to obtain a
higher state through a universal search of the truth. Elkins advocates:

For a “spiritual” alchemist, whatever happens in the furnace is an allegory of what takes place in the alchemist’s mind or soul … The philosopher’s stone is the sign of the mind’s perfection, the almost transcendent state where all impurities have been killed, burned, melted away, or fused, and the soul is bright and calm. (Elkins, 2000, p. 4)

Through an arduous process of ‘blind’ yet informed experiment in the studio, an image has emerged, seemingly purged of its unresolved predecessors. The transcendent experiences from meditation have been translated through thought, journeyed through the sludge of the painting mediums, and materialised into an image with a potential to evoke another transcendent experience.

So painting and other visual arts are one example of negotiations between water as stone, and the other is alchemy. In alchemy, the Stone (with a capital S) is the ultimate goal, and one of the purposes of alchemy is to turn something as liquid as water into a substance as firm and unmeltable as stone. As in painting, the means are liquid and the ends are solid. And in painting, most of alchemy does not have to do with either pure water or hard stones, but with mixtures of the two. (Elkins, 2000, p. 1)

The sourced theories that I have covered in this chapter have informed my painting process in various ways, influencing the way that I thought about my work and the way that I applied the paint. The research also shifted my initial question from ‘How would the information translate into my studio work?’ to ‘Why am I translating the information into my studio work?’ The answer to this would be a whole new project in itself, so instead I
speculated upon the application of the learning I had gained from the literary research to my studio practice.

During this painting process I discovered that I wanted to find my own language in which I would not need to use more than one simple image to express the sense of unity that I have experienced in meditation. In the striving for a sense of unification, in a world of dualism, my thinking process was to look for a way to clarify my own understanding of the interconnectedness of everything; over time, my studio enquiry began to reflect this.
Chapter Seven

The Journey of The Painting Process

When the artist is ready to start a picture, his mind can plan only the general type of brushwork and composition. Yet as the splash of ink descends upon the paper, guided by the artist’s spirit, it comes out in a myriad forms entirely beyond the original plan of the artist. It comes out one way today and another way tomorrow. If the artist insists on doing what he did yesterday, he cannot do it. Why? Because, when an artist insists on something, he is already obstructing the free-flow of the spirit. (Yutang, 1967, p. 204)

A recognition of, and an ability to express, the ‘free-flow’ of the spirit that Yutang describes is one of the main outcomes from this research project. The ‘free-flow’ is what I had experienced in meditation. I then accidentally learned how to duplicate this in the studio process, and was thus able to represent exactly that which I had been trying so hard to emulate. The finished works began mid year 2009, through pure chance — an accident that happened when I was attempting to create a simulation of a Mark Rothko colour field painting. During this process, I had a revelation, which resulted in the painting ‘Essence of The Cosm’ (see Fig. 3, p.50.). As Rothko points out, if the observer of a painting is to experience the same revelation as the creator of the artwork, the artist must undergo that defining moment of revelation during the creation of the painting. Rothko describes the space in which the accidents and the revelatory moments occur:

They begin as an unknown adventure in an unknown space. It is at the moment of completion that in a flash of recognition, they are seen to have the quantity and function which was intended. Ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway through which one left the
world in which they occur. (Chipp, 1968, pp. 548–549)

By this stage, I had also recognised that a still space created in the studio reflected the space created in meditation. I had begun to ‘let go’ in the studio, and through the evolution of research in my practice, I found a new way to apply paint to the canvas, and learned to surrender to the outcome.

Another aspect of the journey of my painting process — the stage of canvas making and preparation — also gradually seemed to become part of the journey itself as well as a fundamental element of the studio practice. First, the ritualistic aspect of this activity illustrates the concept of turning an everyday activity into a meditation (see Fig. 5). Second, the physical canvas is itself the support structure for the painting, and therefore part of the image. Third, the way the canvas is primed ultimately affects the surface and materials, thus also becoming an intrinsic component of the image.
I shall begin by describing the process of canvas making in detail, before moving on to the nitty gritty of the painting process in the studio, the outcome of which is my current body of work.

I spent a considerable amount of time and energy making the stretchers, cutting the wood, measuring, checking, hammering, and stapling (see Fig. 6). I often developed blisters while stretching the canvas, turning it this way and that in order to balance the staples so that the weave would remain straight and not be pulled diagonally. I then primed the canvas three times. The first two times were with straight brushstrokes, up and down, detached, mechanical, and practical. The third time I primed in a random criss-cross manner to create marks in the surface that would become a part of the painting. This was evident in my first ‘splash’ paintings when I noticed that the rough, uneven surface and the fine marks created by the brushstrokes of the priming brush affected the flow of the paint, and partially dictated where it settled on the canvas.

Fig. 6 Alignment check of the painting stretcher, Southern Cross University, Lismore. September 2009
Physics professor Lawrence M. Krauss comments on the ‘happy accidents’ in the laboratory, which parallel the activity in the studio:

> In our laboratories today, we literally wait for accidents — except we stack the deck, creating favourable conditions according to which the laws of probability must play themselves out, and we wait and watch! … predictable accidents are the basis of scientific accuracy. (Krauss, 2001, p. 19)

To experiment further with these ‘predictable accidents’ I made a series of four small, square canvases with singular images of bright oil colours — blue, red, yellow and green — straight from the tube (see Fig. 7). Again, I diluted each colour and mixed them with turpentine and a small amount of medium. I wet the entire surface of the canvas with turpentine and poured on the paint mixture. The completed images symbolised an asexual organism, a single unity: a simple essence of truth simultaneously representing the whole. I was reminded of Rothko (cited by Chipp), who suggested that the shapes in pictures are ‘performers’. The single, organic shapes that had been created on my canvases took on a new meaning and value, and revealed a connection with my meditative inner visions of multi-coloured globules, when I referred to Rothko’s statement (cited by Chipp) on shapes:

> They are unique elements in a unique situation. They are organisms with volition and a passion for self-assertion. They move with internal freedom, and without need to conform with or violate what is probable in the external world. They have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms. (Chipp, 1968, p. 549)
However, although the representation of organisms was a good metaphor for the essential basic element that I was looking for, I was not intending to represent anything. I had wanted to instead imply a sense of the microcosm and the macrocosm. The simple rawness of the materials — a splosh of paint directly on a primed canvas — called forth a sense of nakedness. The image felt so bare compared to my other multi-layered and multi-textured paintings. Bearing this in mind, I searched for reasons for this feeling of emptiness and nakedness. Reflecting upon my European upbringing and the resultant attachment to my
belongings, I realised that I had been conditioned to cling to material objects, to use them as a security blanket. Or perhaps the feeling resulted from identification with the human body. The paucity of material on the canvas mirrored the result of stripping away this identification with my physical form. I have experienced not being my body. However, it was my mind that had raised questions about the experiences, thus the struggle has been physiological. Therefore I added a further component to each of the four paintings — a solid circle of gold leaf. This subtly added a reflective quality, an aesthetic pleasure and a metallic earthiness. My use of the gold leaf may or may not have come from my childhood exposure to paintings of deities, in particular those from the Christian tradition. However, to me gold is more symbolic of something precious, honourable, alchemical, wise and sacred; an element to be treasured and respected, much in the same manner as Max Gimblett’s spiritual explorations of the use of gold and silver (Yau, 2002). The circle of gold leaf also emulated a stamp or seal on the image, perhaps as a mark of completion.

In relation to this notion of using gold leaf in my paintings, in his essay

*Concerning The Spiritual in Contemporary Art*, Donald Kuspit explores the transformative power of an alchemical approach to the usage of materials in the studio:

The alchemical approach offers a different way of using abstract art to articulate the spiritual. By converting material, even the most random and outrageous material, into the ‘mystical inner construction’ of art, the artist gives the material inner meaning and thus uses it to generate spiritual atmosphere. This is less destructive of art itself, using its material nature to extend its spiritual possibilities rather than obliterating both. The alchemical approach emphasizes art’s transformative power. Art has not only the power of transforming material by locating them in an aesthetic order of perception and understanding but also of transforming the perception and understanding of
different kinds of being by making explicit their hidden connection. Both silence and alchemy are spiritual in import, but where silence is an articulation of the immaterial, alchemy is a demonstration of the unity and of the immaterial and the material.

(Blotkamp, et al., 1986, p. 315)

In my view, art that aims to convey understandings of a spiritual nature is simply a reminder of our own unity — that our immaterial inner spirit and mind and material human body are in reality one.

In Chapter Six, ‘Reflections of the Interrelationship of All Things’, I introduced the concept of utilising Fibonacci’s numbers and the dimensions derived from them. With these calculations, I made four canvases of 55 x 89 cm. Choosing a single colour from the primary and secondary colours for each canvas, I repeated the act of pouring the diluted paint (see Figs. 8 & 9). Waiting and watching the movements and effects of the materials followed this. The materials systematically followed the grain of the canvas surface and the flow of gravity on the slightly uneven floor. The self-organisation was evident. The materials reacted with each other as if in a scientific experiment, or as evidence of chaos finding order. I wished to see if there was a difference in resonance from the abstract ‘splash’ forms when different colours were used. I considered the colours associated with all the chakras, and wondered if the paintings could be displayed together to represent the whole body. However, on evaluation of the paintings, I discovered that the pigments of each colour had responded slightly differently to their respective canvases and had produced different textures in the patterns that had formed. I then connected each colour to certain chakras of the human body. For example: blue is connected with the throat chakra and with communication and creativity, and orange with the stomach chakra and with emotions.
Aside from the colour association with chakras, and the meanings that connect to the chakras and certain qualities of the human being and body, each painting represents a different aspect of the same basic energy. Each of these aspects relates to my perception of the essential material of the atoms and particles that I deem to be the make-up of the universe. I see the ‘make-up’ as invisible and containing no colour, and at the same time I see that the invisibility contains all colours, as does the colour white. This is why the white background has become symbolic for me. The single painted image, created with material, is a light-hearted metaphor for the concept of immateriality. As a parallel, the white background is also a play on the concept that white contains all colours. The parallel I am implying is that these ideas are not visible to the naked human eye, and therefore are illusory concepts. The observer is thus seeing the material images, but the meaning is symbolic of the immaterial.
This series of paintings is called ‘Form 1–4’: individually they are titled ‘Form in Blue’, ‘Form in Orange’, ‘Form in Yellow’ and ‘Form in Red’. They can be hung as a set, or solo.

The various tones of colour and the feathery and cracked textures of the series ‘Forms 1–4’ represent topographical impressions of the earth, with explosive areas of colour invoking images of the reactions of natural elements, such as jets of water or a chemical explosion. They also resemble amoebas, thus representing the first life forms reportedly to have evolved on Earth. ‘Form in Blue’ covers half of the surface area and flows off the lower left side of the canvas, creating a sense of movement into the space beyond the canvas. The dense deep cadmium red ‘pool’ in the centre of ‘Form in Red’ commands a sense of stillness, and the wispy ‘tendrils’ that slightly skim the bottom of the canvas introduce a sense of movement.
The raw, unvarnished materials in the paintings also convey an element of vulnerability, apt for our current time of global flux. The world of mankind may be advancing technologically with ever increasing speed, yet it is also experiencing a complete helplessness and sense of insignificance in the face of one aspect of existence that can sometimes be somewhat predicted but can never be controlled — the power of the earth’s elements and their potential for creating natural disasters. In the studio, staying true to the materials, I have eliminated any intermediaries and have zeroed in on the basic elements: mixed pigment and mediums, poured onto primed canvas. I control the materials, but they are also free to move, as they will, like the weather. As Newman eloquently said in his essay From “Jackson Pollock: An Artists’ Symposium, Part I: ‘The awakening
had the exaltation of a revolution. It was that awakening that inspired the aspiration — the high purpose — quite a different thing from ambition — to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before. It was that naked revolutionary moment that made painters out of painters’ (Newman, 1992, pp. 191–2).

In the painting process, once my feelings or my thoughts prompted me to start pouring, and indicated on which area of the canvas to start, I had to keep the paint moving until it ran out or I felt that there was enough paint on the canvas. The paint then ran into unexpected areas, which led to me mopping up some of the ‘flood’. During this process, I questioned whether this act could be considered interference in the emergence of an organic image. Perhaps I should leave the painting un-tampered with to remain true to its materials. The painting became its own entity, yet, while I was involved as creator in the actual process of the creation, I felt that I was a part of the painting. I therefore decided to work with the emerging image, by following my intuition during the course of the experiment. Once the decision was made that the painting was finished, I did not touch it again. As Rothko, in his 1947 essay The Romantics Were Prompted, insisted: ‘…the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended’ (Chipp, 1968, p. 549).
I began to alter the technique in order to prevent the fluid paint from flowing all over the canvas and, to some extent, to control the form. Rather than wetting the entire canvas, I initially used a wide brush coated with a subtle, pink glaze to paint a single line onto the primed canvas in the shape of a ‘C’ from one edge to another. For me, the pink is a quiet reminder of the heart chakra, the chamber through which we feel things in our being. I then poured black paint onto the surface, over the line of the pink glaze, following the shape. The heavier pigment in the paint seemed to adhere to the ‘band’ of pink, and flowed with the more diluted medium towards the ‘inner’ part of the ‘C’, forming a vein-like texture. The elemental quality of the image that emerged from this process reminded me of the poetic traditional
Chinese ink paintings of nature that have so moved me (see Figs. 10-13).

Fig. 11 Forming Form 6 55 x 89 cm Oil on canvas 2010

Another set of 55 x 89 cm canvases, entitled ‘Forming Form’, can also be displayed as a set or individually (see Figs. 4, 10, 11, 12, 13). On each canvas a black form —
consisting of mixed ultramarine blue, Prussian blue and black paint, turpentine, glaze and medium — creates a ‘C’ shape on a primed white background. The form moves off the canvas in several areas, alluding to a continuation of its form into the invisible space beyond the canvas, possibly completing as a circle off the canvas in the imaginary space. The separated pigments and mediums create a variety of colours and tones, and allude to cracked earth, rivers and streams as seen from a great height, veins, or large expanses of moving water. The positive space held by the black form is counterbalanced by the negative space in the centre of the canvas. This aspect of form and space was intended to create the opportunity for the observer to visually move through and around the form. It is evident from the spontaneous black forms that the paintings were greatly influenced by Chinese Zen art, not only aesthetically but hopefully also in terms of their meditative aspect. Max Gimblett refers to the Zen ink drawing process as ‘Inherently mysterious; it is a form of meditation’ (Kirker, Queensland Art Gallery, 2002, p. 30).

**Fig. 12** *Forming Form* 7 55 x 89 cm Oil on canvas 2010
Yutang includes the theory of a Chinese artist Shen Tsung-ch’ien in his book *The Chinese theory of art: Translations from the masters of Chinese art*, in which he outlines the ‘deeper problems of form and style and psychology of art’.

A scholar painting starts out with nothing in his mind, but when his spirit begins to move the brush, forms of objects present themselves on paper, for it is the circumstance of a moment, totally unexpected, and hard to explain with words. In a brief moment the depths and heights appear, all well expressed by the brushwork, and the disposition of different objects is perfect too, better than the actual scenery. This is because the grand idea [of the universe] has been thereby expressed. (Yutang, 1967, p. 204)
During my recent visit to China, I felt an instant attraction to the simple black Zen brushstrokes which, although apparently simple, have taken artists years to master. The simplicity, boldness, energy, movement and impulse, combined with the meditative element of the Chinese artwork, entered my being. This became another compelling influence on the evolution of the controlled pouring technique with
which I was experimenting. On viewing the completed paintings, this influence is obvious, evidenced by the sweeping curve and the movement of a loop — effects that I had previously been achieving with a paintbrush.

Fig. 14  Forming Form 3 & Forming Form 2 55 x 89 cm Oil on canvas 2010

It seemed to be a natural progression to combine the black forms with colour. Due to its symbolic association with a higher state of awareness, and in keeping with the theme
of the Zen-like paintings, I chose the colour violet. The third colour I chose was yellow, in
order to represent brightness and light, and also due to its association with the solar plexus,
the supposed centre of our being and our will. This developed into the suite of paintings
‘Being 1-4’ (see Fig. 15). The semi-transparent colours washed over the canvas in layers. I
had allowed each layer to partially dry before adding the next. Patterns emerged that
resembled the patterns on the animal furs or butterfly wings that I had been studying. On
two of the canvases, I dropped flecks of gold leaf that fell randomly on the image. Aside
from a personal association with the notion of the sacred, the use of gold leaf is also a
metaphor of alchemy — turning base metal into gold, stone and therefore pigment into
paint, and a painting into a space of transcendence (Elkins, 2000).

Fig.15 Being 1 & Being 2 55 x 89 cm Oil on canvas 2010
Rather than pertaining to a representational picture, the image portrays the
dynamism of the essential form, stripped down to its raw essence. The colours
against the white background are used to create a vibrant and rich association with
the movement of energy. The image is also a reflection of the delicate subtleties of
the elemental aspects of space and luminosity. The images have begun to correlate
with my inner visions and research into concepts of consciousness. My work is
intended to evoke a sense of transcendence that is sourced from direct personal
experience rather than from any doctrinal influence. I now refer to a summary a
selection of Newman statements, by John P. O’Neill, the editor of *Barnett Newman:
Selected writings and interviews*, that expresses Newman’s wish, similar to my own,
that the observer of his work can enter into the sense of transcendence through the
non-verbal message of his painting:

Certain themes prove constant: that the artist … makes a work of art not through a
series of objective design decisions but by creating the formal elements that express
his subject; that he must work in a state of freedom, free from artistic or
philosophical dogmas as well as from social or political constraints; that he must
always be guided by “high purpose”. Newman’s statements do not belie but rather
underscore his lifelong faith in the possibility of communicating felt experience
through visual abstraction, in the possibility that an educated audience could
comprehend his intensely personal, subjective, nonverbal message. (Newman, 1992,
p.177)

The final set of works, consisting of two large canvases as well as the other series
of smaller works, were the culmination of my research. It was planned to include these
works as part of the exhibition entitled ‘Meditation and Materiality’. The large canvases
were intended to create a space in which the observer could come into personal contact
with the qualities of the form. I hope that the immense size of each canvas will allow the
observers to experience an expansion of space and the magnitude of the cosmos and,
through a bodily experience, identify themselves as a part of that space. To add to this, I
borrow further words from Newman:

‘There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures
in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance.’ (Newman, 1992,
p.178)

I had intended to use Fibonaccis’s numbers when calculating the dimensions for
these canvases in order to create a sense of harmony in counteraction to the chaos on the
canvas. However, due to a mistake in the measurements, they are not made according to his
calculated numbers, although the proportions are very similar. I likened this ‘accident’ to
the seeming mistakes made in nature where the apparently ‘correct’ form is not followed
and yet an element of beauty and a sense of perfection often remains. We learn to accept
these imperfections in ourselves and each other. The painting ‘Dancing Yellow and Black’
(300 x 180 cm) has an under-layer of pale pink, and elemental black and yellow forms
dance over the canvas (see Fig. 16). The black invokes notions of cosmic space; the yellow
glides across the surface and, interweaving with the black, creates a sense of flight and
movement. The array of feathered areas, cracks, and pools where the paint has culminated,
mirrors the topographical effects of the earlier smaller paintings. By touching the base of
the canvas whilst also reaching to the top, the black form gives the image a groundedness
as well as a connection to the sky or space. There is a sense of stasis and movement in the
image; this connects to my initial meditative experiences, visions and intuition and also
relates to my understanding that existence consists of vibrating particles of space rather
than what I would perceive as solid objects.
In ‘Elemental Form’ the movement of the black form across the immense white primed canvas is an expression of the understandings I gained through meditation of the way energy flows, and also represents the notion of eternal change (see Fig. 17). The colours and form were certainly influenced by Chinese paintings and ink drawings. The physical movement involved in pouring the paint is paralleled by the physical movement that precedes a stage of silence and non-movement in some of my meditations. The painterly materials were used to express the notion of consciousness, with the intention that the image would evoke feelings of transcendence. The process of meditation was to activate a state of higher awareness or transcendence. Both painting and meditation were undertaken as a way to experience myself as a human being and as an integrated whole — of mind, body and spirit.
Overall, the work integrates all the aspects of my research in terms of the sourced literary material, the use of materials in the studio process and my understanding of the interconnectedness of all things. The work also incorporates an aspect of the duality of opposites — to me, that is materiality and immateriality. This is expressed as a unity by Fritjof Capra in his book *Tao of Physics*:

Like the unity of opposites experienced by the mystics, it takes on a ‘higher plane’, i.e. in a higher dimension, and like that experienced by the mystics it is a dynamic unity, because the relativistic space-time reality is an intrinsically dynamic reality where objects are also processes and all forms are dynamic patterns. (Capra, 1975, p. 150)

The experience of extensive external travelling also mirrors my lengthy and in-depth journey of the spirit. The rhythmical, fully integrating, colourful approaches to art making that I learned at the Rudolf Steiner School influenced my broad and fluid use of colour, and my meditative experiences inspired the approach and choice of reading material. Aside from my life influences, I have discovered that through the experience of this painting process, a simple notion has arisen:

The moment that the material has touched the canvas, form has appeared from formlessness.
Fig. 17 Elemental Form 300 x 180 cm Oil on canvas 2010
Conclusion:  
Resolutions and a Sustainable Painting Practice

This research has explored the integration of the materiality of paint with concepts of universal interconnectedness using the deep experiences and insights from meditation practices as a reference point and focus.

The extensive cross-disciplinary reading program — in particular, the philosophies of Eastern mysticism and aspects of scientific discovery — expanded the breadth of my approach to the utilisation of my studio materials. Through this process, it also became apparent that the boundary between the inner and outer journey is no more than an intellectual paradox.

In my research, I was fortunate to find many examples of abstract artists from the twentieth century who had been engaged in the search for the spiritual in art, including the Abstract Expressionists and Suprematists. that provided me with a context for my work. Consequently, this research was structured around a combination of contexts, including science, philosophy and spirituality.

Physicist and systems theorist Fritjof Capra has been an important reference point for this project. In his book The Tao of Physics he expresses the problems that scientists and Eastern mystics have also found in translating and communicating the subtle yet nonetheless powerful and real observations, and discoveries, they have made in their respective fields:

In the state of deep meditation, they can transcend the three-dimensional world of everyday life, and experience a totally different reality where all opposites are
unified into an organic whole. When the mystics try to express this experience with words, they are faced with the same problems as the physicists trying to interpret the multidimensional reality of relativistic physics. (Capra, 1975, pp. 150–151)

Capra’s ideas helped clarify the questions that arose throughout the research project, and formed one of the foundation stones of this study. One discovery that I made in my research is that there is indeed a parallel between studio practice and the practice of meditation. That is, the sequences of events involved in each practice includes a ritual of preparation, acknowledgment of a sacred space, action and witnessing. Further than that, I found that the aspect of oneself that exists as a self-conscious witnesser could be brought forward into the ordinary acts of daily life. This process of self-reflection consists of a continuous questioning of who we are as conscious, sentient and physical beings.

In the studio, I was able to observe how the mixture of the raw, primary elements, in the form of painting materials and colours, by means of the alchemical nature of the process, manifested in a higher form. From the results of my experimentation in the studio I have come to a resolution. The dual aspects of our being — physicality and spirituality — are of the same substance; ultimately there is unification and wholeness. Thus, form and formlessness are two aspects of the same essence and composed of the same material we call consciousness. Altogether, the development of the end point of this visual enquiry has created, for me, a new language with which to express this notion.

In the process of the rhythmical and repeated act of pouring paint onto a primed canvas, it became apparent that my body turned into a vehicle in order to enact the physical process of handling the materials. This process was echoed in my meditations, where the body was again a vehicle or a channel, which was active in various ways during the practices. In this way, a flow of spontaneous creativity in the form of imagery
and cognitive understandings was brought to my conscious self or mind. It is these understandings and visions that became manifest as embodied subjects on the painted canvas. The painterly language imbued the material properties with the elements of a self-organised system. In an observer’s mind, the emergent patterns created images that unintentionally echo aspects of nature, such as amoebas or foetuses, veins and arteries, skeletal dried leaves, or topographical views of rivers and cracked earth. This imagery also alludes to the concept of interconnectedness and the notion that all things are reflected in one another.

Max Beckmann poignantly articulates, for me, the challenging journey that my painting process has been, in searching to convey the ineffable: the invisible, visibly on canvas with paint.

Painting … absorbs the whole man, body and soul … there are two worlds: the world of spiritual life and the world of political reality. What I can show in my work is the idea which hides itself behind so-called reality. I am seeking for the bridge which leads from the visible to the invisible, like the famous cabalist who once said: “If you wish to get hold of the invisible you must penetrate as deeply as possible into the visible.” My aim is always to get hold of the magic of reality and to transfer this reality into painting — to make the invisible visible through reality. It may sound paradoxical, but it is, in fact, reality which forms the mystery of our existence. (Chipp, 1968, p. 187)

The outcome of this research project is a suite of abstract oil paintings on canvas that evoke an elemental quality, setting a tonal sensibility for the poetic visual journey in contrast to the earthiness of the materials. Using this new language as a foundation, I intend to continue developing the contemporary painting practice that now has its ground.
Personally, I seek to invite the viewer into a visual binary interplay between the materials and the metaphor of the poetic image — for the observer to sense their own being in the space and/or in the colours of the canvas. I also promote the notion of self-consciousness through the spatial dynamism of the paintings, and encourage the viewer to extend the visual periphery of the two-dimensional image beyond the three-dimensional canvas and into the hypothetical fourth dimensional space.
References


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