DECENTERING THE SUBJECTIVE: 
THE TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE OF 
FORMLESSNESS IN AN ABSTRACT 
EXPRESSIONIST PAINTING PRACTICE.

HELE ELLIS

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts (Research)

Visual Arts, MECA:
School of Media, Entertainment and Creative Arts
Creative Industries Faculty
Queensland University of Technology

2017
KEYWORDS

Abstract Expressionism, Abstract Painting, Anthroposophy/Rudolf Steiner,
Colour Theory, Formlessness, Imaginative/Intuitive Practice, Practice-Led Research,
Sensory Immersion, Spirituality, Transcendence
According to Johanna Burton (Burton in Armstrong, Burton and Hickey 2007 p 56), transcendental impulses drive research into the practice of Abstract Expressionism. The mode of transcendence is assigned to immediate sensation of openness, non-identity and subjective decentering (Adorno in Gritzner 2016 p 639). This practice-led research project tracks an exploration of concepts of colour, gesture, texture, composition, tone, vibration and the experimental strategy of formlessness, a negation of objective representation, which potentially act as a pathway to sensory immersion and a transformative potential towards transcendence. Fundamental to this practice is the principle that material content without subject-matter creates a deepening of the aesthetic experience through slow viewing, which interferes with conventional cognitive perceptions of contemporary modernist arts including painting, music, poetry or theatre, and redirects the viewer back to an awareness of Self.

This research project employs a methodology of creative practice, consisting of two exhibitions that account for 75%, and an exegetical component that provides the remaining 25%. The project outcomes contribute to the understanding of abstract painting in wider contemporary art contexts, such as the current discourse on self-perception and spirituality.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Keywords ....................................................................................................................... i
Abstract ......................................................................................................................... ii
Table of Contents ......................................................................................................... iii
Table of Figures ........................................................................................................... iv
Statement of Originality .............................................................................................. v
Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................... vi

## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Autobiographical Context .................................................................................. 1
1.2. Overview .............................................................................................................. 2

## Chapter 2: CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

2.1. Abstract Expressionism and the Spiritual Dimension in Art Theory ...................... 4
2.2. Foundation of a New Aesthetic .......................................................................... 7
2.3. Artists of Historic Influence .............................................................................. 12
2.4. Abstraction as Ineluctable Presence through Layering and Gesture ...................... 15
2.5. Abstraction as Presentness .................................................................................. 16
2.6. Abstraction as an Instrument for Perception ........................................................ 17
2.7. Abstraction as a Search for Formlessness ............................................................. 17
2.8. Abstraction, Colour, and Subjective Reality ......................................................... 21
2.9. Summary .............................................................................................................. 22

## Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1. Early Stages of Studio Practice ......................................................................... 23
3.2. Immersion into Studio Production ..................................................................... 27

## Chapter 4: OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

4.1. Inland Exhibition ............................................................................................... 46
4.2. The Passage Exhibition ....................................................................................... 48
References .................................................................................................................. 54
Appendices .................................................................................................................. 58
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Barnaby Furnas</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Aida Tomescu</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Carles Azcon Jutgla</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bridget Griggs</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lynda Schlosberg</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Void B</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Journal Entry Excerpt</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Artwork Samples</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Flecks 1-3</td>
<td>32-33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Chaparral</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Orbs</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The Other Side A+B</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Prism 1-3</td>
<td>37-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Polar 1+2</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Dinky 1+2</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Verve</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Coma</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Bounty</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Majesty</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Portico A+B</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Works in Progress</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Inland Exhibition</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>The Passage Exhibition</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Excerpts Exhibition</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where the reference is made.

QUT Verified Signature

Signature:

Date:      May 2017
This practice-led research project’s central theme was that of a passage. Like most passages access was granted after a mastering of challenges and within that making this journey comparable to a rite of passage.

Dr. Leah King-Smith, my primary supervisor, provided intuitive understanding of my research concerns, encouragement and guidance. Dr. Victoria Garnons-Williams, my secondary supervisor, consistently offered wholeheartedly a smorgasbord of insights and motherly care. I thank both of them for their contributions.

I thank librarian Ellen Thompson for her positive approach, never ending patience and assistance. I also thank Jacqui Christians from Melbourne and Simon Bate from Byron Bay for their lasting friendship throughout my studies who both engaged in dialogues with me on art movements and artists. Thanks to especially to Jacqui for the graphic design and formatting work, as well as help installing The Passage. Thanks to Christian Long from Brisbane for his editing suggestions. Thanks also go to my family who gave me space.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

My upbringing and cultural background is German, a culture from which Anthroposophy, a philosophy founded by Rudolf Steiner, emerged. The term Antroposophy derives from the ancient Greek: *anthropos* (human being) and *sophia* (wisdom), and is concerned with the path of knowledge as a scientific method to the study of the spiritual (*das Geistige*). Waldorf schools, homeopathic medicine and bio-dynamic agriculture, to name a few key concepts, are based on Anthroposophy. After exposure in early childhood to Waldorf education I developed an interest in anthroposophical studies. I completed a BA at Kunststudienstaette Ottersberg (now HKS), Germany, where my arts practice strongly started to lean towards abstraction. In 1995 I was 32 and moved to Australia.

My first responses to Australia’s colour and light, space, time and atmosphere were instantaneously incorporated into my paintings, but abstraction was not readily shown at the time in the Byron Bay region. I was seen as being instrumental in pioneering a following for contemporary abstract art in the Northern Rivers (Lismore Regional Gallery, Retrospective *Abstract Moves*, 2009).

My 1998 artist statement echoes my current perspective and approach as an artist in terms of letting go of all areas of concepts and knowledge and being conducive to the culmination of processes during the creative practice.

“Only in the abstract form of art lies the opportunity for an emotional and spiritual response without the interference of the mind. Without the mimetic construct, the viewer experiences a pure event for the soul. When the mind is silenced and engagement with the work takes place, the heart opens. No Iconography is
preconceived during the work process, and in surrendering to the unknown, the mystery reveals itself in the event. This can be observed in the finished piece.”

The current research project provided an opportunity to document the trajectory of my practice and substantiate its underlying convictions.

1.2. OVERVIEW

This study is framed by my research question: **How is formlessness a transcendent experience in my Abstract Expressionist painting practice?** and links my contemporary creative practice with a deeper inquiry about perception and transformation “into a realm in which we live as participants, not observers … [with] total engagement, a sensory immersion...” (Berleant in Neill and Ridley 1995 p 163).

This practice-led research has given me the opportunity to investigate my studio art practice in ways that consider the effectiveness of using abstract painting methods to create awareness with deeper engagement with the work and using its methods to aspire to transcendence. The proposal is that abstract art has particular valence, as abstraction liberates from the physically material and brings closer the *spirit matter* (Kuspit 2000 p 66). I departed from my gestural abstract expressionistic painting style and specifically employed the experimental strategy of formlessness, with the primary aim to offer a deepening of the aesthetic experience through slow viewing with the objective to support a sensory immersion of art appreciation rather than offering analytical access.

Paintings created in the medium of oil on canvas explore the visual experiences made during this journey through colour, form (shapes or lines that appear through brush stroke application only) and formlessness, gesture, texture, composition, tone or vibration. The process of paint application emphasises the visceral immersion with
the predominantly formless nature of the art, developed through a focus on colour in lieu of shape within the composition that presents the painting as a single shape or field, therefore deconstructing abstract methods. The concept of Formlessness (L’informe, introduced by Georges Bataille) is applied in its looser interpretation that does not result in absence of form and a complete void, but it merely excludes representational forms.

The phenomenological and aesthetic aspects that arise from the work produced experimentally in studio processes aim at contributing to new understanding and art appreciation. Techniques and approaches generated works that developed a case for the intersection of abstraction and transcendence and have a wider significance for broad contemporary contexts that surpass art appreciation with the invitation to move, transform and revive one’s inner life.

In Chapter 2, I consider a number of abstract artists who work in a variety of mediums and provide a discussion of relevant theorists such as Donald Kuspit and Rudolf Steiner. Historical and contemporary abstract artists are discussed in view of their technical, aesthetic and theoretical approach, including the father of Abstract Expressionism Wassily Kandinsky. Particular attention is given to artists who forged their creative practice towards formlessness.

Chapter 3 investigates the methodology of practice-led research and includes an inquiry into my studio practice and how moments of stagnation and epiphany have initiated the unfolding of the studio processes.

Chapter 4 discusses the outcome of the creative work presented in two exhibitions. The first exhibition Inland was held at Lone Goat Gallery and my final exhibition The Passage consisted of 20 large-scale paintings, installed at the Frank Moran Gallery, QUT, on 1 October 2016.
“Our aesthetic forms explore the void, the blank freedom which come of the retraction (Deus absconditus) of the messianic and the divine. ... landscape enact[ing] the epiphany of a real presence ... proclaim[ing] the kinship of art with the calling on mystery in the matter of the world and of man, ... [abstract painters] reveal with no less authority, their encounter with a “real absence.” (George Steiner in Kuspit, 2010 p 264)

2.1 ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION IN ART THEORY

Despite an attempted postmodern debunking of the Modernist myth, Abstract Expressionism in painting continues to endure, with the power of painting “to evoke and convey what is subjectively fundamental in human experience” (Kuspit 2000 p 1). Abstract Expressionism, as a foundational practice in visual arts, acts as a model in which visual possibilities can be spontaneously generated, creating a freedom that comes from “somewhere else” and puts us in touch with that somewhere else (Frank Gehry in Kuspit 2000 p 1). Kuspit posits that painting arouses subjective experiences, experiences that may depart from a secularised sphere. The following aims to explore the “elsewhere”.

Theodor Adorno wrote that Abstract Expressionism requires sophisticated reflection, and the faculty of a spontaneous response (Adorno in Kuspit 2000 p 18). Having a spontaneous response is akin to having “a consciousness of life and self”, that may be otherwise unavailable in everyday life, which “preserv[es] the impulse to transcendence” in a secular society (Kuspit 2000 p 5). Gritzner (2016 p 633) claims that Adorno’s ideal “calls forth an altered subjectivity that opposes the withering of experience otherwise dominant in contemporary culture” and further argues that “the sublime aesthetic experience
foregrounds an awareness of non-identity ... a mode of subjective decentering as a result of our exposure to the impossible and the formless” (Gritzner 2016 p 639). Adorno alleges that immediacy creates consciousness and surpasses subjectivity as an awareness of non-identity. Exposure to formlessness in painting refers to a subjective decentering.

Donald Kuspit, one of America’s foremost art critics has continued to explore aesthetic developments for decades. His sympathy towards the Hegelian dialectic and Adorno in unique combination with Jung’s psychodynamic perspective, make his critical writings crucially current. Kuspit notes that in “the modern world abstract painting has become the instrument of embodiment of spiritual conversion”, conveying in a subliminal way the process of change he calls conversion (Kuspit 2000 p 63). He clarifies that the transcendental function in pure abstract painting is in the ripeness of the immediate moment. The phenomenon of “sensory translation”, a term John Deikman coined (Deikman in Kuspit 2000 p 73), supposedly generates the ripeness of immediacy, tearing the veil of representation away. The perception of experiences of light, colour and movement is described as a “dialectical fusion or cross-pollination of sensations and psychic actions” that Kuspit (Kuspit 2000 p 73) sees as correlating to Kandinsky’s colour symbolism. Kuspit concludes that great abstract painting is experienced as spiritual, which encourages instantaneous subjective participation via the pure form of unconscious psychic activity. One is invited “to meditate on the feelings aroused by and associated with primordial sensations” (Kuspit 2000 p 74). The all-encompassing immediate sensation or “subliminal uprush” William James sees as the phenomenology of pure immediacy, pure presence and the instrument of conversion coupled with a simultaneous experience of timelessness, “merge[s] in pure immediate sensation, bespeaking the sense of merger with the divine” (James in Kuspit 2000 p 74). This experience engages one’s sense to “being wedded to the universe as a whole” (Robert Motherwell in Kuspit 2000 p 74) in which time is altogether suspended, while confirming the mystical character of the absence of the familiar (Kuspit 2000 p 74). The above can be brought into perspective with what Hegel calls the ideational spiritual experience that reaches its climax of spiritual activity when the spiritual knowing itself becomes itself through sense experience (Kuspit about Hegel’s *Phenomenologie des Geistes* in Kuspit 2003).
Kuspit views pure abstract art as modern spiritual art which enables the direct expression of the spiritual unconscious. He portrays this as “the mirage”, the meaningfulness of life arising from the meaningless desert of the self and the world by actively “creating into” the emotionally charged experience. Kuspit concludes that the act of painting on the canvas extends to an “experience of transformation” (Kuspit 2000 p 75). Serious art engagement Kuspit views as “implicit in its attempt to aesthetically transcend and transform life” (Kuspit 2009). In a change of attitude, Kuspit declares that the spiritual unconscious has done its work, in disappearing and thus confirming the illusion all along (Kuspit 2000 p 75).

In summary, Kuspit uses psychodynamic terms for unconscious spiritual processes in an attempt to restore their credibility. He sees these concealed in the processes of abstract painting, nevertheless able to stimulate the impulse toward transcendence.

Maurice Tuchman, organiser of The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985 held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986, opens the catalogue stating that abstract art remains misunderstood if not meaningless by the majority of the viewing public (Tuchman 1986 p 17), because it does not appear to resemble their general understanding of reality. Even scholarship devoted to this genre, especially in the English language, often overlooks its spiritual significance. According to Kuspit (2000 p 80) abstract painting remains subject to humiliation: he sees the non-representational to be perfectly compatible with the ideas that affluent members of society may have about decorating their walls, as a payback for its power of resistance to be objectified; no matter how much the work communicates Kuspit views “abstract pictures” as incommunicado. However, he sees that abstract work can be restored to transcendental significance, locating it beyond experience and emotional import. Restoring spiritual significance in abstraction implies a matter of considered perspective and, above all else, opportunity to partake in the experience. Rosemary Crumlin, Australian nun, curator and writer on the Blake Prize, curated Beyond Belief, the most monumental National exhibition to date concerning modern art and the religious imagination at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1998 (Crumlin and Woodward 1998). Elliott’s introduction to the catalogue (Crumlin and Woodward
1998 p 28) advises exhibit visitors “not [to] reduce mystery to the rational clarity, but to integrate unknown and known together in a living whole … to transcend the limitations of our external self”. Chögyam Trungpa, Buddhist meditation master, succinctly summarises that art universally holds a basic sacredness, preceding the secular/religious split (Trungpa in Visser 2011 p 3). A recent large scale exhibition at MUMA in 2015 attests to this, with the abstract watercolours of Georgina Houghton asking us to “rethink the relationship between artistic creativity and alternative spirituality” (Larsen, Pasi and MUMA 2015) in a pursuit to map anew, contemporary interpretations regarding spirituality and abstraction in the field of modern art and its history.

2.2 FOUNDATION OF A NEW AESTHETIC

Rudolf Steiner, Austrian born social reformer, art historian and founder of Anthroposophy, integrated domains of art, science and religion which called for a renewed cultural production (Peterson in Cusack 2012 p 1). Steiner lectured at the turn of the last century about the transformative power of spiritually inspired art. He proclaimed that as long as we do not stop asking for allegoric symbolic answers, we cannot grasp true spiritual principles; instead we need to sense the living breath of the spirit intrinsic throughout the cosmos, by experiencing the colour via our own senses. The cosmic life is naturally entered through colour as the soul of nature and of the whole cosmos, connecting colour and soul life intimately (Steiner 1986b p 113).

Steiner contended during one of his lectures, which was published in The Evolution of Consciousness (1966 pp 88-95) that the term “conscious imagination” is the “divine-spiritual essence” of the world as revealed through Initiation Knowledge. Steiner affirms that between the physical world of the senses (sense-world) and the spiritual supersensible world (uebersinnliche Welt), a barrier that he calls the threshold of the spiritual world comes into play. Steiner defines this frontier as manifesting through the phenomena of visions, which are pictures that arise in the form of colour without corresponding to the external. For Steiner visions come about as pictures carried over into the waking world of what is experienced during sleep, and brought into conceptual form not unlike sense-perception.
Steiner claims that behind our chemical and physical forces lives what can be perceived as imagination, or experienced in the unconscious imagination of a dream, therefore the whole of nature would be that of dreaming. Nature’s way of thinking would not be comparable to intellectual thinking, but to that of dreaming (Steiner 1966 p 88).

Swiss born Carl Jung, who was a contemporary of Steiner, founded analytical psychology at the turn of the last century and was influential in respect of dream interpretations and the development of archetypes, which are described as universal images of the psyche that underlie all thought. Jung was influential in philosophy and religious studies, and therefore one could speculate that Steiner’s and Jung’s findings would correlate, especially since Jung’s dream theory was censored for being closely positioned to mysticism and the occult. Moreover, Steiner mentions Jung in respectful terms in one of his lectures in 1923 (Steiner 1966 p 195), albeit noting that Jung’s psychoanalysis does not align with spiritual research to the extent that Jung posits that, as humans, we have a disposition to believe, implying that one must therefore assume the existence of a spiritual world to preserve the soul’s balance. Steiner notes that according to Jung’s logic one is obliged to live with an untruth, because one is unable to live with the truth as there is no truth in theism for Jung, but one has to live with it (Steiner 1966 p 195). Gregory Bateson, one of the great philosophers of the twentieth century, developed the idea that the mind is just the medium we inhabit, rather than a faculty that inheres, thus decentering the subjective.

Steiner, in Kunst und Kunsterkenntnis: Grundlagen einer neuen Aesthetik (Art and Art Knowledge: Foundation of a New Aesthetic (Steiner 1986b p 172), builds his foundation for a new aesthetic significantly on the evolutionary and morphological ideas of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe that call for a development of an inner form of sight (Cain 2016 p 4) and applies Goethe’s term, “contemplative judgment” (anschauende Urteilskraft). Steiner reveals that only via a “listening to nature’s becoming”, can the hidden be seen (Steiner 1986b p 124). Movement and metamorphoses are key terms to Goethe’s understanding of the archetypes of the mineral, plant, animal and human worlds; and in beholding the
individual, one senses or recognises the principle of formation in its variety of possibilities. Goethe rises to contemplations of creative principles, the laws of life. Without the instinctive ability to grasp ideas, the objective before us will not disclose itself, since all within the world does not exist by itself, but is part of a larger context (Steiner 1986b p 21).

Steiner notes that the movement of the will - the creative impulse - forms visions with the unconscious and tries to interrupt these into thoughts. Once the visions are translated into a vital force, manifesting for example as colour combinations, thoughts are held back. This is what Steiner calls artistic achievement. Art for Steiner is a continuous salvation of the mysterious life that needs to be extracted out of nature and to be raised up from its dead form (Steiner 1986b p 114). The artistic process Steiner sees as conscious, and the creative impulses as unconscious. The visionary or prophetic (das Seherische) sinks consciously into what the artistic fantasy receives as impulse (inner reality). True artistic production (kuenstlerisches Schaffen) penetrates the spirit and stands spiritually before the consciousness. Steiner sees that the task of the arts is to pollinate the vastness of the horizon of the second sight and that humanity must find its way again into the true realm of art (Steiner 1986b pp 161-164). Steiner is convinced that we are entering an epoch in which the powers of the human soul that lie dormant at present, can systematically be obtained. Steiner describes this as an elevation of consciousness (schauendes Bewusstsein), where not only the objects and transactions of the physical reality appear, but a spiritual world is unveiled.

Once art unveils its secret, that it is to be experienced via sense-perception, allegoric-symbolic descriptions naturally fall short (Steiner 1986b p 111). The direct sense-oriented imitation of the world he views as illustration only, with “true” art beginning where nothing is reproduced. Steiner argues that the replication of nature’s principles (Naturwahrheit) - by echoing scenes of day-to-day life - treats art as an object and not as an appearance in its transitory nature, and refutes naïve realism with its basic principle that everything which is perceived is real (Steiner 1986c p 108). Steiner sees the production of objective realism in art as an admission by the artist that they must borrow from nature and are unable to follow the demand of
aesthetic culture or the principles of art (*das Kunstwahre*). Goethe (in Steiner 1986b p 59) summarises that an art work in its completion is work of the human spirit, and that a work of nature is not so much an embodiment of the natural, transcendental or supernatural, but a transformation of the natural to reverberate the supernatural. The work of art in its form must not represent reality but the innate possibilities since the realm of art has no reality: “*Der aesthetische Schein ist das durch den schaffenden Menschengeist durchgoettlichte Sinnliche*” (“The aesthetic appearance is the supernatural sensuousness perceived through the creative human spirit”, Steiner 1986b p 40). To be appreciative of art, one needs to live in the work, to surrender one’s senses to the world, “if they are to mediate between him and the world” (Steiner 1961b p 85), thus heightening their perception of the concealed spirit of which the physical eye knows nothing – “listless towards space, time and self and lost in the work when sensing the nuances of characteristics thereby refining his inner soul life” (Steiner 1961a p 68).

Steiner’s lectures in *Das Wesen der Farben (The Nature of Colours)* between 1914 and 1924 (Steiner 1986a) give insight into the nature or essence of colour. He emphasises that as an artist one has to understand to live with the colours and their inherent life force (*Lebekraft*) or the *élan vital*, a Bergsonian term that links evolution with consciousness and is conducive to Steiner’s context. He describes this movement as a diving into the spiritual floods of the forces of nature, behind which the spiritual forces are positioned. One needs to experience how for example red or blue “floods” and how the flooding of the colours (*Farbenfluten*) instantaneously becomes alive (Steiner 1986a p 86).

In Barnaby Furnas’ (FIG 1) 2006 series *Floods*, Furnas painted in light blue and blood red, what Saatchi Gallery (2016) sees as construing the “transcendental as sheer power”. The works “are not trying to reconcile chaos and ecstasy, or an ending and a beginning ... where reason or logic is powerless ... swept along the contours of waves into our own meditation of the sublime ... Instead, they force us to dwell, indefinitely, on such tensions formally and conceptually” and “… the onus falls solely on the viewer to contend with the tensions and emotions provoked by the painting” (Burnett et al. 2009 p 31).
Steiner advises to give our soul completely to what is speaking to us out of the colour. He specifies that the world of colours cannot represent the world’s actuality, instead he sees the coloured world as nature’s own image in illustration. The subjective impression in beholding decreases through entering the colours’ living presence in their objectivity (Steiner 1986a p 24); the soul penetrates the spirit beholding colours (Steiner 1986a pp 172-173). Based on the example of pictorial colours (illustration nature or Bildwesen) Steiner depicts the image of the dead as black, the living as green, the enlivened as peach blossom and the spiritual as white (referring to the mineral, plant, animal and spiritual kingdoms respectively). He outlines the fruitlessness of viewing colour subjectively, if one is inclined to acknowledge the objective intrinsic colour qualities.

Steiner’s approach to colour resembles Goethe’s underlying concept of colour classification. Goethe’s colour wheel based on his colour theory builds on the premise that within all colours polar opposites of light and dark are at play. Blue is acting as the first lightening of the dark, explaining why the sky appears blue, and yellow as the first darkening of the light, crowned by magenta for its pre-eminence in unifying the two ends of the colour spectrum within itself containing no shade of yellow or blue. This approach was in opposition to Newton’s earlier findings of the prism theory that white contains all colours. As a painter working with pigments the prism theory trialled with light proves useless as white in its physicality does not contain all colours, whereas Goethe’s findings have practical relevance. However, presently both theories are recognised side-by-side by scientists.

Steiner (1986a p 87) ordinarily positions form - in comparison to colour - as stationary, as that of composure. The form gets torn away from its lethargy when invigorated by colour, which is the world of the soul (Weltenseele). In effect Steiner sees form as being developed by colour, enacting the characteristics of the colour’s nature.

Traditionally the anthroposophical approach to painting sees multiple layers overlapping translucent colours applied, typically creating shapes or forms. This is called veil painting, a colour layering that alludes to potentiality, an opportunity to see possibilities that lie beyond.
Artists such as Danish Arild Rosenkrantz (Rosenkrantz Arendrup n.d.) or Italian born Beppe Assenza (Assenza Balduino n.d.) painted by extracting from colour. Assenza in particular experimented with inherent varied possibilities of colours contracting, expanding or relaxing and followed the colours’ dynamic properties through which the appearance of form naturally took shape.

Steiner’s role was decisive in transmitting last century’s philosophy to contemporary artists. His anticipation of an elevation of consciousness is as yet to be realised and therefore his fundamental tenets of Anthroposophy are more imperative than ever, superseding most contemporary thinkers to date.

2.3 ARTISTS OF HISTORIC INFLUENCE

The first wave of European protagonists in the twentieth century who saw the passage to abstraction as an “inner necessity” (de Duve 1996 p 157) were Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Franz Marc, Piet Mondrian and Hilma af Klint - all influenced by the spiritual movement of Theosophy and later Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy. They were optimistic that society could “be awakened to the spiritual truth by means of abstract painting” (Kuspit 2000 p 71) through the renunciation of representation, resulting in a joie de vivre concerning the dynamics of colour, gesture and space. Kuspit viewed their move toward a subliminal transcendence of the world by conjointly discovering the self’s spiritual nature. The creative works of Kandinsky and his contemporaries aimed to make the spiritual dimension visible via shapes, symbols and an atmosphere created through gradations of colour, which Hans Hofmann describes as “the emotional and intellectual synthesis of relationships perceived in nature” that reflects the desire to articulate spiritual ideas that were unable to be expressed in traditional pictorial terms (Hofmann in Chipp 1968 p 538). Consequently artists of the time incorporated involvement with esoteric thought by drawing from impulses such as cosmic imagery, vibration, synaesthesia, duality or sacred geometry (Tuchman 1986 p 32).
Kandinsky published one of the most influential doctrines *On the Spiritual in Art - Das Geistige in der Kunst* over a century ago (Kandinsky 1911 [1963]) which equated to the formal beginning of Abstract Expressionism and the coming of a new utopia. According to Kuspit (2003) the issues that motivated Kandinsky to write *On the Spiritual in Art* have over time not been solved but become greater, therefore his essay would need to be considered as prospective and prophetic rather than retrospective and rationalising.

As a representative of this new idealism, Kandinsky attempted to make the “inner aspiration” visible, pointing to a spiritual reality behind corporeal forms through the “exclusion of accidental stimuli” with an interest “to produce vibrations in the beholder” and accordingly employ the art work as a vehicle for experiential involvement (Ringbom in Tuchman 1986 p 137).

In 1945 Kandinsky’s New York exhibition drew emerging artists such as Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko closer who became the second wave of abstract pioneers “searching for expressive means appropriate to their generation” (Tuchman 1986 p 49). Their spiritual source was not Theosophy or Anthroposophy, but they rather associated themselves with native and non-Western cultures such as Zen. The development of abstract painting in the United States moved from interpreting an art piece to creating an event through the activity of painting as a gesture of liberation.

Abstract Expressionism in the United States was initially framed by Clement Greenberg in the late 1930s, who identified key movements in the history of modern art which later came under the analysis of Michael Fried and was followed up by Donald Kuspit. Abstract Expressionist painters such as Helen Frankenthaler, Newman and Rothko broadly abandoned emotional content and moved towards a formalist flatness concerning colour in an attempt “to evoke the infinite and the sublime in their large chromatic abstractions” (Dalrymple Henderson in Tuchman 1986 p 233) with Rothko being seen as the spiritual provocateur. Greenberg organised a Post-Painterly-Abstract exhibition in the mid 1960s at the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art out of which Colour Field Painting was born. Adorno remarks that
“the more spiritual works of art are, the more they erode their substance” (Kuspit in Tuchman 1986 p 315). This rings true for James Turrell’s work that is predominantly concerned with light and space and therefore appears almost substanceless by creating a silence which could be understood as an eroded substance of a completely spiritual work of art.

Painting at the time may have been viewed as an end in itself, but abstract expressionists saw the medium as also ideal to express a poetic vision articulating the “inwardly plastic character of matter” (Pousette-Dart in Kuspit 2000 p 105), using its material nature to extend spiritual possibilities. Thierry de Duve (1996 p 201) recognises this in Frank Stella’s creative practice which is consumed with the “… necessity of painting … [the] paths of brush on canvas [and that] these paths lead only into painting” with traces of this event to be beheld by the audience. Kuspit sees both silence and alchemy as a demonstration of the unity of the immaterial and the material. The German installation and performance artist Joseph Beuys noted that “man does not consist of chemical processes, but also of metaphysical occurrences” in order to bring together what has come apart (Kuspit in Tuchman 1986 p 315). A basic tenet for Beuys was that creativity is the point of union between the human and the divine. Beuys’ approach was to bring forth an expanded concept of art, similarly to Steiner’s focus on the human consciousness which combined art and life, spirituality, philosophy, natural science and the social sphere from mankind to the cosmos. In 2007 the National Gallery of Victoria staged Imagination Inspiration Intuition (Holland 2007) showcasing Beuys’ and Steiner’s blackboards side by side, a method and medium to communicate where boundaries between intuitive knowing, extra-sensory perception and artistic creation crossed over or were newly established. Beuys called his black boards “lecture actions”. Both Beuys and Steiner share the emphasis on “seeing the phenomenon”, informed by Goethe’s approach to develop a “new organ of perception” in order to gain a holistic perception of the world. This participatory path of knowing unites the viewer with the viewed where the process of engaging creates an inner image transforming oneself and “challenges the dualistic Cartesian paradigm that fragments everything into parts” (Sacks in Holland 2007 pp 23-37). With the development of holistic perspectives and the fall of rationalist veils, one becomes a witness to a revolution in seeing and what Beuys called
“We are the revolution” (Holland 2007 p 44), confirming the transformative and regenerative power of art. His well known maxim “Jeder Mensch ist Kuenstler” (“Everyone is an artist”) is Beuys’ appeal to bring about change by consistently highlighting the downsides of society (see Fettecke). Beuys through his position as a lecturer brought forth a number of important artists such as Joerg Immendorf, Anselm Kiefer and Sigmar Polke. Joseph Beuys’first major exhibition in the United States after his death in 1986 at the age of 64 was called Thinking is Form (Temkin, Rose and Beuys 1993) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Philadelphia in 1993 and demonstrated an optimistic attitude towards formlessness. The proposal to abandon thinking by abandoning form was triggered by the catalogue title and seemed a necessity for my research project, considering the anthroposophic notion that art needs to speak to one’s perception or sensation (Empfindung) and not to analytical cognition.

2.4 ABSTRACTION AS INELUCTABLE PRESENCE THROUGH LAYERING AND GESTURE

Aida Tomescu’s (FIG 2) layered and tonally complex canvases generate a sense of movement, energy and a sensation of light (Osborne 2016 p 14). What seems monochromatic is actually a multi coloured layering that appears to take on an ineluctable presence, akin to the work of medieval icon painters “when the holy spirit became manifest in the work” (McDonald 2006 p 107); work that moves away from and is more than its subject, developing its very own concern. Spanish painter Carles Azcon Jutgla (FIG 3) uses space and colour to make visible elements and processes of nature that cannot be seen, but exist and are felt (Saatchi Art n.d.-b); such an approach appears to be analogous to the transformative processes or metamorphoses Steiner indicated. Canadian Bridget Griggs acknowledges nature and its creation, accrediting the artist as co-creator (FIG 4). Griggs follows in the practice of gestural brushwork and autonomy of the Abstract Expressionist legacy and simultaneously identifies with the artistic rhetoric of figures such as the German artist Gerhard Richter (Saatchi Art n.d.-a). Richter sees art as a “binding back” to the unknowable
transcending reason (Richter and Obrist 1995 p 38), although Kuspit regards his work as
decadent and spiritless and views Kiefer as one of the last spiritual holdouts (Kuspit 2003).

Regardless, I am specifically interested in pure abstraction, painting as an “event
process”, generating a sense of movement and light, creating a space and time field,
and within that space, timelessness and making transformative processes assessable
for the viewer as co-creator by being directly engaged in the creative process, akin to
Participatory Art. In short, I see the approaches of the aforementioned artists as the elements
of an amalgamation which has formed the avenue I took for my own creative processes.

2.5 ABSTRACTION AS PRESENTNESS

According to Michael Fried, “presentness” would be the more suitable term for the quality of
artwork “filling the field of experience … absorbing the viewer …” (Fried in Elkins 2001 p 146)
and not “presence” via a conceptual foundation of colour that one feels consumed by. Sweet
(Sweet on Fried 2012 p 1) describes the creation of “presence” as consequential to the legacy
of Minimalism. The genre of participatory art with its constitutional dependency on the presence
of the audience carries forward the project of Minimalism into the contemporary gallery setting
(The Artist is Present, Marina Abramovic, 2010). Bourriaud (Bourriaud 2002 pp 18-20) considers
Relational Aesthetics as less construed: he claims that art on the whole is a state of encounter
with form coming about in a setting of elements, therefore defining a lasting encounter that keep
moments together in time. In consequence, formless works are timeless or in their immediacy
ever present. Fried asserts that Minimalist works have presence, Abstract Expressionist works
have presentness, are present instantaneously and completely (Uensal on Fried n.d.). Yet
Tuchman (Tuchman 1986 p 51) remarks that after the heyday of Abstract Expressionism major
developments in abstract-spiritual art often pertained to Zen ideas, referring back to Minimalist
approaches. However, for the sake of the research inquiry, Fried’s distinction between presence
and presentness is of particular interest as by deconstructing my typical artistic approach
and employing minimalistic elements I simultaneously aimed at a presentness of the work.
2.6 ABSTRACTION AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR PERCEPTION

In 1959 Bernard Berenson (Berenson in Kim 2011 p 6) spoke of the artist/spectator relationship when he expressed that “in visual art the aesthetic moment is that flitting instant, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at. He ceases to be his ordinary self… the two become one entity; time and space are abolished and the spectator is possessed by one awareness. In short, the aesthetic moment is a moment of mystic vision”.

The above propositions correspond with Kandinsky’s conviction of addressing the beholder when he affirms that “the world reverberates ... the matter is living spirit” and “pure art speaks from soul to soul...” (Eddy in Tuchman 1986 p 17). In other words, the authenticity of an art piece may transcend its mere creation by becoming an instrument for both perception and reception by the viewer. Rapaport’s (1997 p 83) perception is pertinent: “The Aesthetic does not come about in consciousness as a response, however intellectual, ... but could be said to be in retreat from this kind of encounter even to the point of stillness indicative [of] what Heidegger calls oblivion”.

2.7 ABSTRACTION AS A SEARCH FOR FORMLESSNESS

The American contemporary artist, Lynda Schlosberg, (2016) (FIG 5) describes her approach to her work and the relationship between form and formlessness as “navigating a space between the physical and non-physical … an invisible field of consciousness and energy that permeates and connects all things … collapsing into a vibrating energy … creat[ing] an ineffable whole”. The basic material approach to art making is transcended in favour of an essence beyond form and hinting at the essence of the sublime. Schlosberg portrays a return to the world as an organic whole via digital technology incorporating spiritual aspects.
FIG 1: BARNABY FURNAS - ‘Flood (RedSea)’ 2006, 330 x 762cm

FIG 2: AIDA TOMESCU - ‘Melt’ 2004, 184 x 154cm

FIG 3: CARLES AZCON JUTGLA - ‘Drawl’ n.d. 21.7 x 15cm
FIG 4: BRIDGET GRIGGS - *Infinity Series* ‘Flourescent Green #2’ 2015

FIG 5: LYANDA SCHLOSBERG - ‘Re-routing Lateral Frequencies’ n.d.
Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard and Parret 2010 p 30) illustrates the space between the physical and non-physical as a beginning to see without looking for it: “between the gaze of humans and colour, there is a very old affair going on. They seduced each other, they love each other ... they can read the secrets of each other’s hearts and drink together to the glory of the world”.

Artist Timothy Gierschick (Gierschick 2006) concurs with the notion that the modern expression of art, Conceptual Art, is in its form the formless, the idea, therefore paradoxically the “form-of-the- formless”, since a visual shape is a metaphor for conceptual form (Institute of Artificial Art Amsterdam: Department of Art History 2005-06). Yves-Alan Bois and Rosalind Krauss (Bois and Krauss in Hegarty 2003) trace back to form as “to be somewhere in the vicinity of formlessness for there to be any informe/formless”. Gierschick (Gierschick 2006) argues that the idea behind formlessness was shaped by artists wanting to strip away the tropes of expression to nothing through chance-based art “in the guise of pure bodily movement”. Gierschick sees the “incredibly focused power” on nothing as somewhat empty, since “the spirit of creation itself” is formless. Gierschick further distinguishes between a looser interpretation to absence of form that deviates from the strict application of the concept in regards to the absence of shapes offering unlimited freedom of colour and line, which is a deliberate intention of abstraction to accentuate its ethereal nature. Gierschick was most likely prompted by Ringbom’s elaborations: Ringbom (Ringbom in Tuchman 1986 pp 136-137) sees the crucial role of Theosophy in the emergence of nonrepresentational art as increasingly clear due to the importance that Theosophy places on the interpretation of the spiritual as formless in a physical sense. Steiner expanded Goethe’s colour theory and developed a technique by which shadows and lines were eliminated, so that forms would just occur within colour (layering) itself (Fant in Tuchman 1986 p 158). Painting without contours Steiner called “painting out of the colour” and refers here back to formlessness.
2.8 ABSTRACTION, COLOUR, AND SUBJECTIVE REALITY

In summary, Kuspit distinguishes between two modernist uses of colour: firstly the symbolic-unconscious, which implies transcendence through an “emotionally resonant sensuality” (Kuspit 2000 p 98), as characterised by Kandinsky’s approach to Abstract Expressionism. Secondly, the transcendental-self-conscious, which embodies a “transcendent dialectic of being and nothing” leading to self-communication through renunciation of colour (Kuspit 2000 p 97) is also reflected in Ad Reinhardt’s Art-as-Art colourlessness, where geometric control foregoes expressionist character which invite to inconstant perceptual experiences. Kuspit thinks that the use of colour within abstract articulation refers to either a subjective reality or in its very conceptuality brings about a sensation of stasis in the absence of colour defending itself against emotional recognition (Kuspit 2000 pp 80-97). Steiner and Kuspit agree on the ineffectiveness of viewing colour subjectively, however, Steiner affirms that colour bears objective intrinsic qualities in conjunction with movement and metamorphoses - a key role in perceiving the hidden being transitory - whereas Kuspit concludes that the only option to transcend the unconscious is to renounce colour (Kuspit 2000 p 95). Steiner postulates that transcendence may be seen as an active act or movement when the spirit is penetrated and stands spiritually before the consciousness (Steiner 1966 p 94). Kuspit in contrast sees transcendence heralded via intention. Abstract articulation with the implication of transcendence is viewed by Steiner as an active movement and by Kuspit as a conceptualisation. Kuspit suggests that the spiritual in art looks bleak in our materialistic times (Kuspit 2003), but Steiner’s view on the contrary is visionary. He proposes that through colour and form a divine revelation takes place, indicating the scope of the spiritual world beyond the material world which builds a bridge between the arts and supernatural understanding (Steiner 1986b pp 234-235).
2.9 SUMMARY

During the course of the research, my studio work progressed and intensified towards formlessness within the abstract approach. A passageway formed *en route* to colour, contrast and light, by my advancing towards complete autonomy from form to subsume thinking, and reference to the outer world. Mapping my position in the field as an artist in consideration of the research project took considerable (studio) time and engagement with other artists’ approaches. Kandinsky, Stella, Furnas and Tomescu informed my research as cornerstones due to their concepts and applications being revolutionary and field-changing, extending or transforming the ontotheology through which sense is made of the world. Kandinsky’s view on pure abstraction, Stella’s approach to painting as an “event process”, Furnas’ colour flooding, Tomescu’s sense for movement and light, but also Jutgla’s and Griggs’ approach to make transformative processes accessible all assisted in crystallising my approach towards formlessness and fruitful studio work simultaneously.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH AND CREATIVE PROCESS

My research is inspired by meditative and spiritual forms of connection. What Maria Popova calls the “osmosis of consciousness and unconscious, voluntary and involuntary, deliberate and serendipitous work” (Popova n.d.) forms the basis of my practice-led research, in which I essentially ask: How is formlessness a transcendent experience in the practice of Abstract Expressionist painting?

3.1 EARLY STAGES OF STUDIO PRACTICE

In the early stages, I established a number of specific guidelines, as a presidio to rely on. First I determined the number and size of the canvases. I envisioned approximately a dozen canvases similar in dimension to doorways, at 72” high by 33” wide. By doing this, I wanted to establish my compositional framework, and make canvases large enough to be experienced viscerally. I surrendered to the discipline of working in daylight which rendered an authenticity and naturalness to my artistic practice resisting the medium and causing the unfolding of inevitable progress. I am an improviser, a bricoleur. Aside from establishing certain guidelines, my painting practice appears to be undisciplined, vastly unconscious and chaotic due to the seeming absence of evident structure. Processes of association are taking shape in a subdued and meditative manner, which leads to bringing to the surface conscious ways of working. In cyclic terms, the processes I use are akin to Graham Wallas’ four stages of the creative process: preparation, incubation, illumination and verification (Popova n.d.). Firstly I made some formal decisions in regards to the compositional framework and prepared the canvases, but I did not start working immediately. I accumulated and gathered instead, waiting for the right moment. My way of working exposes itself through the process, with structure evolving through selection and improvisation until the direction is illuminated and the process itself becomes the indicator for verification. De Duve (de Duve 1996 p 162) captured this process accurately by saying, “Art means making and making means choosing; ... art means choosing”.
For months I worked with the immediacy Barnett Newman (Newman and Strick 1994 p 13) sermonises over. He views the immediacy as the imminent subject matter in search for something to paint, therefore bringing the artist back to first principles by establishing the artist as a creator and a researcher. Hase Shoto (Shoto in Visser 2011 p 3) explores immediacy further, commenting on Keiji Nishitani’s view of art production “as the ground from where both self and the world are opened up in immediacy”, as “the locus of the profound mobility of imagination” which arises out of contemplation or compelling force. I worked as always with compelling force through the canvases until all critical rationale was gone, experiencing free flow, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes as a timelessness termed Flow. I continued with meditative and improvisational approaches that had been established in my previous practice which enabled me to fully merge with the work and its environment. Zimmermann (Zimmermann in Neumann 1990 p 34) states that the artistic process concerns a dialogue between inspiration and the physical encounter with the substance - and not the execution of an idea – bringing via the artistic impulse the innate spiritual into a sensory manifestation.

I started my studio practice by making three oils on canvas: white on white, with shape and colour cut away leaving a latent appearance of tonations formed through the layers (FIG 6) Journal entries about the first triptych read: “Innocent step towards a concept - first series to clear the mind, layers of white and pastel and white and white, reaching depth over time, months of nothingness, a beginning of nothing captivating”. For the body of work shown at the final exhibition I came full circle and revisited consciously the ‘white approach’ (Verve, FIG 16). Lyotard (Lyotard and Parret 2010 p 23) muses similarly in Like the Paintings of a Blind Man, writing:

“to the fullness of emptiness … to the infinite and ineffable … to open the pictorial space, with delicacy and grace, to white, to silence”, and “white turns around on itself, vaguely … quivering with tension and potentiality, expansive veil beating against the wind, pushing the biomorphic forms back to the parameter … waits patiently over [its] uncertain establishment looking for its rightful place … maybe ‘seeing’ is just an illusion and the eyes are blind … bring out all the perfumes of a silence that was hidden in our chatter with visible things, and that we knew nothing about … at the same stroke, allow us to hear just how precarious these delicate polychromies are, that they emanate from a blind void and are going to vanish in it …”.
I did not entitle the triptych *Void* after I read Lyotard; rather I read Lyotard because I experienced the void just as he experienced Sam Francis’ whites. I used the white to silence my mind, to open the pictorial space and to open to all potentialities.

My research approach was led by the practice itself. I had to become firmly enmeshed with the work, not by “trying to nail jelly to the wall” (Dietrich 2015 p 13) but “to let the brain’s computations occur in the ill-lit basement of the unconscious” and trust that even without engaging in a specific activity that the brain will actively produce predictions to anticipate future events (Dietrich 2015 p 117).

Journal entries were generated concerning impasses or epiphanies, acting as a memorandum towards insights into moments of crossroads (FIG 7). This acted as a reflexive tool rather than as a carrier or generator for creative flashes. I accepted that observations would be obtained only retrospectively as creativity in itself would defy empirical enquiry. This echoes Francoise Gilot’s outlook (Gilot in Pfenninger and Shubik 2001 p 52) that painting is a language without words. According to Krauss (Krauss 1985 p 158) the domain of the visual will not permit the projection of language, resulting in silence and a listening to the beginnings of art, exclusively allowing for a “stream of consciousness” (Walsh, Bickel and Leggo 2015 p 25) as an awareness to only witness the making. My journal recalls: “I must get away from the aim to achieve any reality matching the research … questions cannot stand in the way. The creative approach must carry itself without thought form. Not all produced will need to be part of the research. No procrastination, no preparation, just be there and do it, float in the doing, forget time and space. Engaging is preparation to engage”. David Rogers (in Pfenninger and Shubik 2001 p 51) accentuates this: “the process; you never have more to work with than when you started”. He illuminates this with a quote of a carver of Buddha figures in Kyoto (in Goleman, Ray and Kaufman 1992 p 8): “When I carve, I look for the Buddha in the wood. And, when I am carving, I need to bring the Buddha out of the wood. I have to be very careful not to cut the Buddha”. Although I had to just paint, to “do studio time” and to vanish in it, I had to at least bring the research atmosphere out in the open, without destroying, disturbing or disconnecting from it.
By the same token I had to work towards a research inquiry, a dilemma Eric Weitz (Weitz in Mag Uidhir 2012 p 91) portrays distinctly: “The Open-Endedness of Art: imaginative abilities cannot be hostage to a concept … what we call art, may have strands of similarity only, no common properties; … noting similarities … between instances of the concept”. Clement Greenberg (Greenberg in Crumlin and Woodward 1998 p 10) adds: “you cannot figure art out, coming to terms with it through pure intuition, the way a mystic apprehends the beyond …” Hans-Georg Gadamer, German philosopher and scholar of Heidegger’s, similarly views our being as forever fluid, open and undecided with everything around us as always underway and within that art and facilitating the unfolding (Gadamer in Sandywell and Heywood 1999 p 22).

According to my journal entry at the end of 2015, I felt continuously stretched between the processes of thought and the work in isolation. Howard Gardner (in Pfenninger and Shubik 2001 p 133) defines this juncture: “This is a highly charged moment … becomes isolated from her peers and must work mostly on her own. She senses that she is on the verge of a breakthrough that is as yet little understood, even by her”. John de Ruiter (2016) states in detail: “The greater the difficulty that you are in, the deeper the resource you draw from”. And Kuspit (Kuspit 2000 p 72) specifies this when stating “The pure abstract artist remains profoundly alone … other abstract artists … would interfere with … development rather than encourage it …”. I had to acknowledge that I was alone in this project, a project that even I had yet to understand.
3.2 IMMERSION INTO STUDIO PRODUCTION

I concluded that associations take away immediacy, that every outline or mark creates a shape and is followed by an idea. I literally pushed form to the periphery and to the edges of the canvas with only colour variations creating depth. This proved to be a promising entry point, seeing the colour presence evolving, with the colour simultaneously acting as object and subject, similar to Robert Delauney’s statement that “colour alone is form and subject” (Delauney in Chipp 1968 p 310). I deconstructed my typical approach (FIG 8) deliberately and systematically by radically abandoning the structural basis and by simplifying the brush applications on the canvas. As Krauss (Krauss 1985 p 239) put it, lines became colour, contour became field and matter became light. With the application of a variety of colours, there is no escaping form; tone-to-tone application automatically creates a shape. I experimented with different size brushes (up to 14” in width), inviting variables and determined that the wider the brush (stroke) the more evident is the appearance of abstract form. I reduced the colour palette from canvas to canvas to minimise contours, akin to Colour Field Painting, yet still any nuance given promoted the appearance of either straight or curved silhouettes. Tens of layers of colour application created depth and shine, condensing the colour palette into nuances of formlessness, shades of the very tone vital for the overall composition to create vibration and light. Kenneth Heilman (Heilman 2005 p 12) claims that detection of colour and luminance are located in different parts of the brain therefore are independent from one another. Visual depth can be brought forward by increasing or decreasing luminance independent of colour, creating shifts or movements on the canvas surface. The finishing layers that regard the body of work for the research refined all shades to tones (Tön [German], in reference to sound and shade), hinting at colour harmonies that may appear musical. Kandinsky (Kandinsky in Crumlin and Woodward 1998 p44) refers to colour and form singing in abstract rhythms of interdependence.
FIG 8a: ‘Vertigo’ - 184 X 214cm 2007

FIG 8b: ‘First Paradise’ - 136 X 82cm 2008

FIG 8c: ‘Secret Order 3’ - 106 X 152cm 2011

FIGS 8: RECENT ARTWORK SAMPLES BY HELE ELLIS
I finally accepted after months of experimentation that form comes and goes, as do thoughts since I experienced both as related. De Ruiter (2015, as stated on de Ruiter's unpublished site) specifies the amorphous succinctly: “The formless cannot be based on the form. The form needs to be based on the formless.” Steiner enhances this in noting that through colour and the characteristics thereof form finds its shape (in Steiner 1986a p 87), a method he called “painting out of the colour”.

This reverberates exactly with what I did in the course of my studio work; I let the colour speak. I worked freely without formulations and produced canvases with the intention of affording, according to German philosopher Friedrich Schelling, a direct gaze into the realm of Platonic Ideas (Baldessari, McEvilley and Cranston 2004 p 10).

The choice for the canvas to either be painted on its own or in a series was inherent to composition. Flecks 1-3 (FIG 9, FIG 21 bottom) for instance demanded a bigger area for impact as the colour elements of only a single size canvas would have been insufficient in number to create an imaginary endless flutter, consequently Flecks is presented as a triptych. This very triptych was requested to be shown at the QUT's Visual Arts postgraduate show, Excerpts, in October 2016 (FIG 24), a group exhibition showcasing diverse outcomes that are developed out of the university's unique Open Studio model. Flecks is not my favourite series produced for the research as the apparent grid and simultaneous looseness seem to grind onto one another tearing open the layers of fluid transparent paint. A juxtaposition that offers no resolve, despite its technical decoding.

Chaparral (FIG 10) and Orbs (FIG 11) in comparison can hold themselves as single pieces. The uninterrupted black brushstroke around the edges of the canvas restrains a spilling of the elements over the borders, a formal choice I made as an amendment to the previous composition in Flecks. This resulted in the experience of colour being held back against a void and yet another series was produced with elements that pull in diametrically opposed directions. Prism 1-3 (FIG 13) presents the primary colours in a way that has been typically painted as a triptych by a number of artists such as Kazimir Malevich or Aleksandr Rodchenko, progenitors of Minimalism in response to Modernism’s momentum,
who reduced painting to its logical conclusion (red, blue, yellow) in reference to superimpositions in Suprematism that led to the monochrome or Color Field Painting.

Purposefully some canvases were painted not in lustre colours (the three primary colours including secondary colours) with active character and sheen nature (Glanzwesen), but in pictorial colours (Bildwesen) or shadow casters (the four colours white, black, green and peach blossom) that are not glowing, vivid or vibrant within themselves (as in The Other Side A+B, FIG 12) and to which the access is naturally made difficult due to their passive character (Steiner 1986a p 51). The Other Side A+B is indeed my favourite series, as despite being painted in predominantly pictorial colours I was able to achieve a deep glowing vibrancy which is from a technical point of view next to impossible to achieve.

All of the sets of canvases shown present with specific colour combinations positioned on the colour wheel (such as complementaries, as demonstrated in Polar A+B, FIG 14), emphasising contrasting tension within the dance between foreground and background (as in Dinky 1+2, FIG 15), light and dark, active and passive and contribute to a dialogue between the colours using their characteristic qualities.

I certainly experienced difficulties during the making of Coma (FIG 17) as every paint layer was absorbed without a trace of the brush stroke, and only after many repeated layers (about 50) a differentiation between tones and shine appeared to hold the integrity of the colour composition. In regard to the use of colour, Kuspit (2000 p 92) makes reference to Reinhardt’s Black Paintings in that the “convention of colour (and light) is not essential to the viability of painting - that painting is more itself without colour”, and that “Reinhardt made us aware that modernist painting … was a dialectic of colour and colourlessness”, with colourlessness implying a transcendence radically different from what the material world could afford. This is a probable view I considered when aiming to transport the darkness of pure blacks in Coma into a painting of sheer presence, “free of the perceptual vicissitudes responsible for the sense of space and time … eternally constant … through complete absence of mutually conditioning colours” (Kuspit 2000 p 92) and comparable to Lyotard’s musings: “the descent towards darkness is the passage towards the utopic, uchronic, immaterial space-time-matter that constitutes the There is of the artwork” (Lyotard and Parret 2010 p 30). Still, the work with Coma was a reluctant affair due to having to deny any expressionist character innate in abstract painting. Without a doubt with this
Lesson of Darkness (on Sam Francis’ work in Lyotard and Parret 2010) I was about to lose my soul as a lover of colour (Lyotard and Parret 2010 p 29) - the very reason I generally avoid engaging with black in my work. Bounty (FIG 18) - unlike its violet brother Majesty (FIG 19) - bore similar difficulties as yet another pictorial colour without inherent hues and a colour particularity that seeks form within the formless. Those works took months of reworking to achieve the eventual shades and colour qualities that were required.

The deliberate slow application of colour not only challenged the notion of a spontaneous approach, but the studio became cramped because several large canvasses were being worked on simultaneously. I had to abandon the studio space for a larger arena, which meant using the natural open space of the backyard (FIG 21). I soon came to appreciate the wide open plein air space which allowed me for one thing to consider each work in a larger context as part of a compositional suite and additionally allowed for a sudden change in the environment, which required my immediate attention. This change was further ruptured by playing loud experimental aleatoric (chance) music. I worked on the canvases lying flat on the ground until their finalisation on the easel. As leaves fell upon my drying work, traces of my newfound working environment were becoming embedded in the canvases. Formlessness was furthermore emphasised without the structure of four studio walls, and the compositions were kept open and endless, yet coherent: plein air work supported and affirmed the content of the research project naturally through being in nature.

Over time and through the production of sequential work I experienced relief towards the research inquiry as both facets (studio work and ways of framing the research) started to align. I experienced a merging of concept and colour. I entered into a dialogue with the canvas having a phenomenal reality of its own (Pfenninger and Shubik 2001 p 170) shifting “the paradigm of knowledge from one of knowing to not knowing … learn to serve the art work” (Walsh, Bickel and Leggo 2015 p 67). It was necessary that the concept emerged through the work with colour in this unexplored external environment, which was being a signifier for the unknown. This is what happened with Portico A+B (FIG 20, FIG 21 top). I started off with vertical brushstrokes in ultramarine, magenta, carmine and zinnober red. This was a return to red and back to blue, chasing the vanishing in their interplay, purple. Over time and many layers, ultramarine and magenta morphed into dark tones without real definition with white areas left standing on the canvas that called for yellow and orange.
FIG 9a: HELE ELLIS - ‘Flecks 1’
FIG 10: HELE ELLIS - ‘Chaparral’

FIG 11: HELE ELLIS - ‘Orbs’
FIG 13a: HELE ELLIS - ‘Prism 1’

FIG 13b: HELE ELLIS - ‘Prism 2’
FIG 13c: HELE ELLIS - ‘Prism 3’
FIG14a: HELE ELLIS - 'Polar 1'
FIG14b: HELE ELLIS - 'Polar 2'
FIG 15a: HELE ELLIS - ‘Dinky 1’

FIG 15b: HELE ELLIS - ‘Dinky 2’
FIG 16: HELE ELLIS - ‘Verve’

FIG 17: HELE ELLIS - ‘Coma’
FIG 18: HELE ELLIS - ‘Bounty’

FIG 19: HELE ELLIS - ‘Majesty’
FIG 21: WORKS IN PROGRESS
TOP ‘Portico A + B’ OVERVIEW AND DETAIL
BOTTOM ‘Flecks 1-3’ OVERVIEW AND DETAIL
The metaphor of an arcade or covered walk became evident: Porticus (Latin), a passage, with magenta and “purple supporting the process and passage between light and dark” (Steiner 1986a p 157). I noticed the advent of illusory tones appearing as vertical thin lines in lilac between the nuances of the dark shaded purple and orange, lines I did not place there and are clearly visible for anyone who finds themselves visually immersed. With reference to transmutation when gazing at a seed and its inherent life force, Steiner (1961a p 62) suggests that “the invisible will become visible … evoking the same feeling that one has when under the impression of the color lilac”. In the interplay between light and dark the invisible becomes visible, indicating an opportunity for the taciturn to be communicated and for the invisible to be made conscious.

The last series of the works produced, Portico A+B, Flecks 1-3, Chaparral and Orbs, fell into place, since the aspects initially latent in these works completed the series as a whole. This included the overall integration of interrupted and uninterrupted brush strokes in either straight or curved applications in a variety of brush sizes in the most colour variations possible as seen in Goethe’s colour wheel with its Glanz- and Bildwesen.

These works aim at supporting the viewer to perceive formlessness as a pathway to sensory immersion, creating awareness with deeper engagement in response to this abstract art.
CHAPTER 4: OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

EXPLORATIONS ON EXHIBITIONS AND PRACTICE- LED RESEARCH RESULTS

My project engaged with and aimed to examine the role of my contemporary abstract painting practice within the questions of the sublime and its interpretations, colour and formlessness and the accessibility of the processes as a visual experience. The areas of research cover the creative practice, alongside the research question and methodology that flowed out of it, with associated exhibitions, the creative articulation and the exploration of relevant texts. In the course of this research project, I staged two exhibitions in 2016: an interim show mid-year at Byron Bay’s council regulated Gallery, the Lone Goat Gallery; and at the end of the year, a final show at QUT’s Frank Moran Gallery, Kelvin Grove, Brisbane. Having an interim show was valuable because it enabled me to exhibit my work in my own community, to connect with the gallery-goers of my community, and to receive indicators and direction for the conclusion of my project from the many responses toward my practice.

At the forefront of the research was my studio approach and within that a deconstruction of my typical professional work which I accessed intuitively without illustrating a concept in an a priori assumption. Once the core of the project was presumed and the paintings had reached a stage of immediacy or “sense presentation” (Alfred North Whitehead in Kuspit 2000 p 63) I returned to a strong formal cohesion. This engendered formlessness with reference to the works in an inevitable progression towards a pathway to sensory immersion. The aim was to prolong the viewer’s engagement with the artwork.
4.1 INLAND EXHIBITION

The intention for an interim exhibition *Inland* (turning inward) at the Lone Goat Gallery in my hometown of Byron Bay, NSW, from 2-15 June 2016 (FIG 22) was to probe the viewer’s response to formless work. The exhibition showcased a series of dated works (2013) in which I abandoned form at large without conceptualisation. This comprehensive set was accompanied by fresh works and half of the suite later exhibited at the final exhibition at QUT’s Frank Moran Gallery. These later works carry the deliberate and conscious spark of a deconstruction of my artistic approach. The opening of my interim exhibition found the space bathed in improvisational music by a Japanese guitarist. Through the music’s capacity to delay any sense of resolution, being produced continually, the sound played a significant role as a “vertical signifier” (Roland Gerard Barthes on John Cage [1976] in Armstrong, Burton and Hickey 2007 p 66) as in catalysing a conversion experience (Kuspit 2000 p 63) and demanded the paintings to be heard. The sound certainly contributed to transporting the attendees into another realm with the exhibition space transmuting into a multi-dimensional experience by employing the patron’s sensory and spiritual responses. I encouraged slow viewing by providing bean bags and a sizable futon bed for the duration of the exhibition which was welcomed and well used throughout the show.

I was in attendance for most of the opening hours of the exhibition, which offered valuable insights into the perception of gallery-goers that impacted on my research practice. I engaged in lively discussions with visitors concerning the progression within the sets of the works shown, particular pieces and their reception. An arbitrary selection of the most engaging points of the exhibition included a mention of movement, rhythm, aliveness, calmness, quietness, freedom, intensity, connectedness and space, complexity and simplicity, moment and time but also a mention of the “assault of colour” was made. It was noted that the paintings were participating (with the viewer), would be touching on other dimensions (of self) or appeared musical. Someone had a “spiritual renaissance” or felt challenged to “let go”. 
FIGS 22: INLAND - EXHIBITION - LONE GOAT GALLERY, BYRON BAY
One gallery-goer lifted a painting off the wall in order to find out whether a light was placed behind the canvas illuminating it. Guest book entries seemed naturally less authentic with previous comments copied; predominant wording contained “really” and “beautiful” and were consequently of little use as feedback in furthering my research. Some viewers who know my work showed disappointment, since I took the storyline away with the content to be found elsewhere. These comments confirmed that I was on the right path for the research and proved to be an encouragement to forge forward with elements not yet addressed, for example, upsizing of brushes, therefore reducing shades (tonations) and work with pictorial colours.

4.2 THE PASSAGE EXHIBITION

The final exhibition for the research project The Passage, hinting at a journey, was installed at QUT’s Frank Moran Gallery on 1 October 2016 for a duration of 6 days (FIG 23). For the body of work - 20 vertically hung pieces, each the size of a passage way - the space was considered as an extension of the aesthetic valence, boosting the encounter with the exhibition as an event by bringing together potentialities for meaning (Davey on Hermeneutics in Sandywell and Heywood 1999 p 22) through forming an autonomous architecture in itself. The average size of the gallery compressed the paintings into close proximity which I used to my advantage, so that the works effectively vibrated not only within themselves, but also off one another, creating a web of mingled colours. The choice for hanging was not just an unrestrained celebration of chromatic couplings, but was to be perceived as a carefully considered, purposeful colour palette. This saw sets of work in complementary chromatic composition specifically positioned next to one another as an ingenious clash to articulate their expressive urgency generating tension across the gallery in which the visionary moment seemed to rise above and rule it. Flecks 1-3 was placed on a separate wall for maximum charge of its antithetical context. Prism 1-3 was hung in a position of the gallery that allowed them to be looked at from the longest distance, a necessity, as it was painted with the finest brushes with naturally the greatest index of my hand remaining and contained the most multidimensional elements of all sets that otherwise would have been lost in a close-up viewing experience.
FIG 23: THE PASSAGE - FINAL EXHIBITION - QUT GALLERY, KELVIN GROVE BRISBANE

FIG 24: EXCERPTS - VISUAL ARTS GRADUATES EXHIBITION - THE BLOCK, KELVIN GROVE BRISBANE
Verve and Coma I positioned in a dead corner of the gallery, almost as if to treat its likeness comparable to a homeopathic dose, similar to simile. Polar A+B, Portico A+B and Flecks 1-3 gave the most energy off to the other series and were therefore placed in a triangular position across the gallery. These works were produced with wider or the widest brushes and with the consequential erosion of my artist’s hand their independent force was not to be discounted. Every single work of the suite shown had its part to play, emerging with force through their very nature and their colour. Colour, here within this journey, The Passage, was to behave like an action, self-generating by taking on its own life and not acting like a fixed descriptor. Titles and captions placed next to each series - apart from giving them their own aesthetic presence - was to open up the imagination of the viewer like flood gates. The descriptions contained both the general and the specific in an appeal for the viewer to intuit the living image within the already given. The Passage aimed at an overall experience towards sensory immersion. A direct relating to The Passage was intended, to simultaneously be enveloped by the format of the exhibition and to perceive the environment from within by “looking not at it, but being in it ... as participants ... [with] total engagement” (Berleand in Neill and Ridley 1995 p 163). A sense of “being there” and feeling physically part of the space depends on “sensory absorption within the environment” (Mitchell 2010 p 99) assuming a reality within a reality. In a space where artist and audience convene through art, a dynamic link is created between the viewer, the work and the artist’s process translating to a creative process in itself. New patterns of perception, such as sensory immersion, are intended to result in new structures of thought or shifts in consciousness (David Bohm [1998] in May 2005 p 21).

The public was invited to view the show, but the building was only accessible via key card and the lack of guestbook entries attested to the shortage of visitors. Again, entries referred to intense use of colour, movement, meditation and freshness, but also echoed the strong impression of spatial use, described as “flowing in space” with “works bouncing off each other’s energies” to having hung the exhibition in a “cohesive fashion” sending the viewer around the room on a “wondrous journey”. Final exchanges with students who felt drawn to
the exhibition space during night time de-installation indicated that the processes of the main concepts were refined with the project appearing to be fulfilled, akin to James Elkins’ (Elkins 2001 p 117) supposition that the more self-interpreting or self-evident art work becomes the more it knows its potential and limitations and the less subjective the work appears.

The final exhibition at QUT’s Frank Moran Gallery was a statement of intent to promote self-consciousness within the viewer via a transcendent experience of formlessness in an abstract expressionist painting practice. I aimed to redirect the viewer back to self in meditation on primordial sensations assisted by the completely pure and unconditional presentness of the work. I combined my abstract expressionistic painting style with the non-subjective character of Minimalism which has been to date insufficiently associated with the spiritual in art. The vocation of art is defined by its special place in the progress of Spirit, a purifying process that identifies with Nothing (Krauss 1985 p 237). The Nothing that Krauss sees as emerging from this play of oppositions is “absolutely beyond picturing”. Nishitani (in Visser 2011 p 3) sees our self-awareness in us as our own absolute self-nature, “the locus of absolute emptiness” and openness. Once openness fills the field of experience, one is absorbed in the moment and simultaneously enters the eternal. Formlessness in the abstract approach of art making aims to function as a bridge to a transcendental experience.
In conclusion, the research project that is concerned with the question **How is formlessness a transcendent experience in the practice of Abstract Expressionist painting?** was grounded in my individual arts practice that detailed the shifts that occurred during the research towards formlessness within abstraction, a departure from my typical professional practice. The works produced link inherent colour qualities, without emotional recognition and therefore decentering the subjective, with the opportunity for an experience of the interior world in adopting a transformative potential towards transcendence. What is materially actualised as colour and heightened through a renunciation of form stimulates the development of a divine revelation where colour and soul can be observed as being intimately connected. The pure abstract works presented connect immediacy with timelessness, the mystical with pure sensation leading to a non-discursive experience.

The purpose of creating awareness through deeper engagement in response by means of an absence of subject-matter, leaving only content, positions the research project in wider contemporary contexts that go beyond a dialectical approach towards art appreciation. This aesthetic brings forth a new consciousness of Self, leading to self realisation through a new way of seeing as an *evoluting* movement in absoluteness of absorption through sensory immersion. In experiencing these deliberately formless abstract works one is invited to move, transform and revive one’s inner or spiritual life.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Prism 1 - 3
183 cm x 84 cm x 3, oil on canvas, long curved colour application with small size brushes, first series
Late Latin Prisma The three primary colours (yellow, red, blue) are lustre, radiant or active colours with hues inherent in themselves, dispersing light into the spectrum (optics), secondary and tertiary colours consist of at least one primary colour, here: the organic flux

The Other Side 1 + 2
183 cm x 84 cm x 2, oil on canvas, short linear colour application with medium size brushes, second series
Pictorial, image or passive colours (such as green, white and black(ish) (including peach-blossom, but not in application here)) are taking hues from outside of themselves and are therefore representing the other side to the primary colours, here: the pictorial viable

Polar 1 + 2
183 cm x 84 cm x 2, oil on canvas, long linear uninterrupted and short curved colour application with medium and larger size brushes, third series
Medieval Latin Polaris, directly opposite in character and tendency, polar opposites on the colour wheel, here: the embrace of the pink

Dinky 1 + 2
183 cm x 84 cm x 2, oil on canvas, short curved colour application with medium size brushes, fourth series
Scottish dialectal Dink, referring to small or undersized, referring to the brush stroke length for paint application, here: the entwining of foreground and background

Coma
183 cm x 84 cm, oil on canvas, fully curved colour application with medium size brushes, fifth series, Part B
Greek Koma, a lack of response to stimuli, here referring to lifelessness in colour, hue taken from outside itself (pictorial colour), colour tone variations are absorbed, colour of the dead, here: the ethereal

Verve
183 cm x 84 cm, oil on canvas, fully curved colour application with medium size brushes, fifth series, Part A
French Enthusiasm, vigour towards artistic or spiritual work, psychic appearance of the spirit (R. Steiner): white, pictorial colour, colour tone variations support movement, here: the vigilant
Bounty
183 cm x 84 cm, oil on canvas, fully curved and linear colour application with medium size brushes, sixth series, Part A
Latin Bonitat, the gift, the lush, the good, but bound within, earthly life or incarnation, here: the fixed and the dynamic

Majesty
183 cm x 84 cm, oil on canvas, fully curved and linear colour application with medium size brushes, sixth series, Part B
Latin Majestas, a colour regarded as spiritually significant: purple, magenta, or purpur (according to Goethe) uniting the two ends of the colour spectrum, pre-eminent in containing no shade of yellow or blue, here: the fixed and the dynamic

Portico A + B
183 cm x 84 cm x 2, oil on canvas, long linear uninterrupted colour application with large size brushes, seventh series
Latin Porticus, arcade or covered walk, a walk way, a passage, magenta and purple supporting the process and passage between light and dark (R. Steiner), here: the advent of illusory tones (vertical lilac)

Flecks 1 - 3
183 cm x 84 cm x 3, oil on canvas, short linear colour application with large size brushes, eighth series
German Fleck, small patches of colour, Colour Fleck Field, colours rotate through the colour wheel, starting with yellow, here: the migration of the spectrum

Chaparral
183 cm x 84 cm, oil on canvas, fully curved and linear colour application with all size brushes, ninth series, Part A
American English from Spanish Chaparro, shrub thicket of various sizes closely entwined together to prevent passage, all colours and brushes of the series brought together, here: the unattainable

Orbs
183 cm x 84 cm, oil on canvas, fully curved application via cloth, abandonment of brush application, ninth series, Part B
Latin Orbis, a sphere, or heavenly body, a three-dimensional extension of a two-dimensional shape, veiled or lucid application, here: the meteoric