

CATALOGUE ESSAY

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Trevor Richards is a quiet observer who trusts in serendipity. Although he is rigorously educated and has been an active participant nationally and internationally during his forty year career, Richards maintains that he is not fraught with overriding formal art concerns. His visual language, determined by pattern, shape, colour and tessellation, is most definitely part of the global Minimalist conversation, yet he – rightly – accepts that ‘we have a local dialect, dictated by many things; the glaring Western Australian sunlight, the big sky, the dryness. Local environment is inescapable but life has its effects, even when you try to transcend. It does seep into the work.’¹ In this, Richards acknowledges he is not alone, citing fellow locally developed artists such as Jurek Wybraniec and Helen Smith for pursuing ‘that sense of developing a personal language out of an international scene.’

It was inevitable that in the post-colonial era, southern hemisphere artists would respond to the various streams of art emanating from Europe and the Americas and Australians are no exception. In 1968, at the National Gallery of Victoria’s celebrated exhibition *The Field*, Dale Hickey hung a suite of minimalist, gridded paintings based on the patterns of banal ceiling tiles and ducts, his own wry commentary on Hard Edge formalism. For four decades, Imants Tillers has made a prominent career out of the challenges posed by regional image reception; Heather B. Swann currently dips her lid to the feminist dialogue of Louise Bourgeois; and in Western Australia, the celebrated duo Glick International recognised back in 1989 that under such conditions, there is a high probability that seemingly identical works of art may be created in different countries by different artists and over different time periods. Consider the multiple variations of Malevich’s black square. What Glick International also recognised is that even if all these works appeared identical, they would still be the individual solutions to a myriad of possible regional responses to an otherwise international conversation.

In an allied argument, the key aspect in the maturation of any artist is the training of their eyes. Once enlightened, the world inevitably becomes interpreted, analysed and celebrated as a continuing system of design and

IMAGE ON PREVIOUS PAGE
Recent Work 2009–12, 2012
Installation view
Turner Galleries, Perth WA



The terrazzo floors in Trevor Richards and Mary Burns' Fremantle home.

order, light and shade, possibility and impossibility, colour and shape, rationality and the absurd – the choices are endless. For Richards, pattern is his dominant inspiration, not simply as a decorative device (though much of his output is indeed decorative), but as indicative of interconnected systems 'grounded in repetition, at first tiresome to the mind but then fascinating as the rhythm takes hold.'² Writers who have visited Richards' house – a 1960s former home-showroom for a terrazzo marble supplier – inevitably comment on the dazzling floor patterns to be found within, and whilst they are indeed an unavoidable inspirational force, Richards actually finds stimuli wherever he looks. From floors to shop displays, vinyl records and Frisbees, light fittings to side tables, everything is grist to his mill and a potential template. Memorable past examples of such visual excursions include his extensive series based on circular forms from the mid-1990s to 2008; reconfigured chairs, floor fans and clocks from the early 2000s; op-shop veneer table tops heightened by solid colours in each corner (*BYOG tables* 2003); a matrix of black and white paintings inspired by a visit to the Cathédrale Notre-Dame d'Amiens in the town of Amiens north of Paris in 2013; and more recently, the sequence of augmented acrylic neon light diffusers discovered by the side of the road (*Lightwork* 2015) that he exhibited at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) alongside Wybraniec and Alex Spremberg.

A further serendipitous encounter was caused by a startling new building which has recently emerged from the banks of New York's Hudson River. Richards' chanced upon it whilst strolling during a visit to the city in 2015, the year of its completion. The new building is a storage shed for the salt supplies necessary for clearing snow from the winter streets and in a simple yet remarkable design twist, it is shaped like a salt crystal. Richards found himself fascinated by the Salt Shed's faceted 21-metre high profile, the 'brutal yet beautiful cubist concrete structure of its outer surface. It provided me with a new way of approaching making works where form and space could operate independently and in concert.'³ Designed and built as a 'singular sculptural object' by Dattner Architects⁴, it is not surprising the shed caught the Richards' eye. It also triggered a series of responses related to his own aesthetic interventions that have occurred both in and on buildings.

Many of these interventions were public building projects executed under the collective banner of the Australian Centre for Concrete Art (AC4CA), and Richards has recently undertaken other major commissions such as six interior walls and one large stairwell for the Fiona Stanley Hospital in the Perth suburb of Murdoch. The ability to extend his painterly ideas from the intimate to the grand informs his ongoing practice conceptually but also technically. For the large walls, tape is used to mask out the colour zones and Richards has also done this previously with his smaller canvases. However, in his domestic-scaled works inspired by the Salt Shed, tape has been abandoned and the outlines are now hand drawn, painted up to the line. His choice of colour has also altered. Richards is usually known for strictly adhering to his 'BYOG' palette ('very particular' tones of blue, yellow, orange, green) but suddenly found himself with litres of leftover paint from

1 Conversation with the artist, 30.11.16. All subsequent quotes from the same source, unless noted otherwise.

2 Trevor Richards, 'Notes for In passing', 2014

3 Trevor Richards, 'Notes on the Salt Shed works', 28 November 2016.

4 Amanda M Burden, quoted in: David W. Dunlop, 'A Building That Resembles What It Stores: Salt for New York City's Roads', *Building Blocks*, New York, 16 September 2015.

the hospital project. Always open to new inspiration, these colours have now been included into Richards' repertoire but only as 'bit players in a film. Much more playful.' This loosening was part of the impetus that resulted in *Lightwork* at AGWA with its eighteen acrylic light covers activated by paint applied via large brushes, proof that for Richards, 'serendipity triggers whole series of works. A body of work comes out.' In this exhibition *Trevor Richards: The Salt Shed Series* the results vibrate with patterned, chromatic intensity.

In his *Sketch* series, aspects of Richards' methodology are laid bare. Cropped sections of the Salt Shed's façade have already been reduced to angled shapes, predominantly triangular with the occasional quadrilateral. The paint surface is relatively coarse, mimicking the rubbed concrete surface of the building itself. It is at this stage that colour sequences are also tested by Richards before the final selection is chosen. Even so, these transitory works retain a certain semblance to Monet's passage of time, weather and shadow depicted with his haystacks and River Thames. The arrangement by Richards of these series into modules of four amplifies this consideration as do the various colour choices, from his original BYOG palette (*Sketch 1*) through grey monochromatic (*Sketch 2*) and on to the pure blue treatise of *Sketch 4*. It is like observing a day's progress through contemplation of one piece of ever-changing architecture noting the tonal variations as clouds pass over the sun.

In the larger paintings, the original impetus of the Salt Shed itself has now given way to, even been transcended by, the observations and aesthetic choices that Richards has retained through the process of actual painterly

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process ('discoveries discover me as much as I discover them.') In this, it is worth noting Richards' own process when creating the sixty-panel series *An Index of Possibilities* (2016): 'Most divisions in the panels originate from the corners and half way or quarter way on the side of the picture plane. What interests me is the activity that happens in the mind while looking at this arrangement, how this arrangement invites the viewer to make sense of the

individual elements, by looking from one to the other, looking for similarities, building a pattern internally.'⁵

Consider, for example, *Untitled 2 (Salt Shed)* and *Untitled 3 (Salt Shed)*. Both paintings have followed a similar progression to their companions but Richards has made the decision to attach extra triangular panels to each and by doing so, extends the precepts of formalist Hard Edge and Minimalist art making. In both these traditions (for 'traditional' is what they now are), a salient concept is that the resultant object is hermetic, sealed from allusionary or emotional interpretation. Yet in these larger Salt Shed paintings, and knowing the painterly source, it is difficult not to see these additional shapes as shadows or even porticos, meaning that a coherent 'real world' narrative is actually retained. For a 'pure' art theorist from the 1970s, such action is akin to heresy.



The Spring Street Salt Shed (Dattner Architects, 2015), used by the New York Department of Sanitation, fascinated Richards and inspired his latest body of works.

To repeat, Trevor Richards is not fraught with formal concerns but is not ignorant either, commenting instead that since pattern and shape are unavoidable parts of his everyday lived experience, he has been 'following this line for long enough that I feel justified to own it.' 'I think this remoteness...loosens some of the restrictions that I would otherwise feel had I been living and working in a European center, for example, where options become limited (if one wishes) to establish an identity and foothold.' It may also be considered a positive experience, for artists in Western Australia have 'the distance and remoteness that provides us a detached view of the shifts and currents in contemporary art making and thinking. What we see we unconsciously bring to the art we make; we appropriate, perhaps imitate and more importantly assimilate. We make the cultural connection to this remotely located culture, but still we are not there.'⁶ This relaxed attitude makes possible the triggers, connections or relationships that animate Richards' collective panels, his series, diptychs and triptychs, examples which may be experienced as individuals or grouped in relationship with their companions ('There is a linear character to the work.'). It also allows such lateral aesthetic decisions as the incorporation of the multi-shaped panels within *Untitled 2 (Salt Shed)* and *Untitled 3 (Salt Shed)*, which were predominantly painted on pre-existing found or gifted canvas stretchers.

Richards' large-scale commissions undertaken over the last 15 years have inevitably augmented his artistic eye but in an inverse twist, he now takes his inspiration from these built objects transforming their own geometries into flat patterns; hence his instinctive reaction to the Salt Shed. The human eye's ability to perceive three-dimensionality is a phenomenon generally called 'shape from shading' and is one of the important cues used by the brain to comprehend depth due to its acute sensitivity to directional light and the effect it has upon a surface and shadow. Occasionally there are ambiguities in the signal and the eye cannot tell whether the surface is concave or convex. By rendering the Salt Shed's 'cubist' surface as flat pattern Richards is exploiting this anomaly through what is essentially a pre-Renaissance painterly technique, one of collapsing implied depth into a single plane of shapes⁷; and whilst the resultant paintings may be encountered as independent objects, it is still fascinating to compare them with images of the original source building.

Taking one step further, Richards has designed a detailed wallpaper panel based on emerging patterns from the Salt Shed studies. Perfectly sympathetic to its painted companions, the wallpaper 'pops' with its own visual intensity and even suggests another dimension. As the eye takes in the overall pattern, it registers a serendipitous (that word again) example of the 'rabbit/duck problem' in visual perception. Are there multiple light-toned or multiple dark-toned columns? This may seem an overly obvious observation, but when taken in concert with the total environment of the display, it is yet one more aspect through which the audience experiences the nuances, suggestions, play and serious enquiry that underpins all of Trevor Richards' sustained output.

⁵ Trevor Richards, notes on Lightwork 2015, 2016.

⁶ Trevor Richards, floortalk, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2016

⁷ Many thanks to Dr Simon Cropper, University of Melbourne, for this discussion.