

LISA WOLFGRAMM AT TURNER GALLERIES

Andrew Nicholls and Travis Kelleher, October, 2007

For the past decade, Lisa Wolfgramm's practice has comprised of a series of formalist explorations into colour, and how it can be used to create optical effects. Her densely patterned works are renowned for their often-startling illusion of depth and movement, and they have won her due recognition as one of this state's most prominent and prolific abstract painters. This is her final Western Australian showing before relocating to Darwin in late 2007, and is a fitting acknowledgement of her ten-year contribution to the rich field of Western Australian abstraction.

Beginning her career as a figurative painter, Wolfgramm has focused her energy on non-representational work since 1999. Her early abstract works comprised stripes and scraped lines in complementary and non-complimentary hues, overlaid to create an effect reminiscent of woven textiles. More recently she has focused on building up her paintings from hundreds of dots and daubs of paint in varying sizes and colours; standing over a flat canvas and moving methodically from one side to the other, applying layer after layer of translucent paint in varying grid formations. Some of her major works have comprised up to fifty layers, their complex surfaces seeming to warp and shimmer before the viewer's gaze. In her most impressive works – such as Painting #217 included in this exhibition - the optical effect is nothing short of mesmerising.

Wolfgramm's new paintings, created specifically for the cavernous Turner Galleries, see the dense colourfields of her previous work give way to more open compositions in which the brush-strokes themselves are of greater prominence. Whereas in her earlier works small, individual brush-strokes are subordinated to the composition as a whole, much larger daubs in these new paintings result in an almost decorative motif. In Paintings #231 and #232 in particular, this results in a strangely floral effect. In other works, such as Paintings #220 and #227 more prominent bands of colour divide the paintings' surface – almost as if we have focused in upon a detail of one of her larger works. These are the most challenging of her new series and are a tantalising suggestion of the next direction her prolific and varied exploration may follow.

Alongside her abstract canvasses, this exhibition also presents the first drawn works on paper Wolfgramm has exhibited for several years. A series of monochrome graphite renderings of rhythmic fields of pattern, the works initially appear almost to be miniature, stylised versions of her paintings. They are in fact rubbings taken from various everyday surfaces around her home and studio, parts of her domestic surroundings the artist views on a daily basis, including her bathroom linoleum, kitchen tiles and frosted glass bathroom windows. Created with the same meticulous precision as her canvasses, they reflect the artist's pragmatic approach to working with whatever is at hand and subtly encapsulate the intermeshing of an art practice with daily routine. They consciously further the ongoing link between Wolfgramm's work and the domestic realm, (many of her early works recall textiles, while her very dense compositions can appear reminiscent of terrazzo). These drawn works will additionally form mementos of Wolfgramm's Western Australian home of five years after she relocates.

Whether drawing or painting, Wolfgramm's working process is resolutely systematic. Small deviations in pattern and tone may occur during the creation of each work, but these are never allowed to stray too far from the artist's predetermined structure. However, despite the formality of this approach, there is nothing cold or clinical about Wolfgramm's paintings. The works seem to exude a sensuality and intimacy, probably as a result of the evidence of labour, the sheer number of layers, the deftness of brush-stroke and the materiality of the paintings as a whole. The over-riding effect of Wolfgramm's work seems to reside in just this tension between a controlled geometric abstraction and an intimacy established with the viewer through the minutiae of detailed markings on canvas. As such, Wolfgramm's work holds the viewer in a space that fluctuates between viewing and inhabiting the world of the painting, a space between immersiveness and distance.