

**There in Black and White: Jeena Shin's *Motus* series.**

Janine Randerson, Two Rooms Gallery, Grafton, December 2014.

The simplest thing that I could say about Jeena Shin's 2014 *Motus* series is that the paintings are black and white. Yet this is also the most complex thing I could say. The black and white forms, and the negative spaces that are left, should define the figure-as a shape and the ground as a background; but instead the paintings confound these differences.

As soon as I approach the paintings as black and white, my eye discovers an entanglement of multiple layers, a shimmering optical vibration that unsettles the receding planes and the planes that are seemingly above. Which is 'figure' and which is 'ground'? There is a sense of surface that has been approached precisely, yet the effect is a scattering of form that creates ebbs and flows of density and a compression of time.

In earlier works Shin dematerialised shapes through ever more ambiguous shades of white within a white painting, or black within a black painting, or shades of yellow within a yellow painting – but here, miraculously, the same dematerialisation is happening between the opposite colours of black and white. Black-white becomes white-black within a very limited tonal range.

Take painting no. 1 for example, the predominantly white painting. A triangular shape, the figure, is painted white and then a slightly different shade of white is painted over this layer that indicates a new layer of time. The face of the triangular shape determines the initial layer and establishes the figure and the ground, while the next layer is meant to dismantle and react to the first layer. Different tints of black are painted around the shape in ever more dense spatio-temporal layers. A perceptual mix happens within the eye; where the gap between information received on first impression will shift over time.

In painting no. 2 the ground is left white and the negative space is painted in black to allow the white background to become the figure. Contrast is created through the two tints of black. Black gloss is also deployed, so a lively play of light animates the paintings further when viewed in natural sunlight.

As shapes are layered on top of other shapes, as the series develops, an intensification of the pattern occurs. The triangular form and its' infinite variables create movement, a fundamental part of the work which I will return to later.

Another immediate impact on the viewer of these new works is the scale of the canvases. The works are of a size that only a few painters approach in contemporary New Zealand art. (One visitor noted at the opening on Thursday that it felt like walking into a New York gallery.) Yet Shin is of course no stranger to scale. The large-scale wall paintings that she has created throughout public galleries in New Zealand and Australia culminated in the immense *Fractus* in 2011 at Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Curator Aaron Kerisler wrote the following about this painting;

By far, Shin's most ambitious work to date in terms of scale and complexity, this mesmerizing painting draws out the temporal and spatial qualities of the site. Although familiar with this location, Shin initially mapped out six different propositions for the wall drawing, each variation articulating the tumbling triangular form in different levels of complexity, as it arced across the wall. (Kerisler, Dunedin Public Art Gallery website, 2011)

For this latest painting series entitled 'Motus' for *Two Rooms* we see four propositions that demonstrate how a frame of 2.4 by 1.8 metres in size can be approached through the same triangular form. They are hung in an off-set configuration so they do not 'face off' against each other, or create matching sets. Instead the paintings each build in intensity within the set frame of the canvas size and send us spinning around the gallery from one to the next.

The dictionary definition of the work's title 'Motus' derived from the Latin is as follows;

**mōtus** m (genitive **mōtūs**);

1. A movement motion.
2. (*by extension*) An advance, progress.
3. (*figuratively*) A movement, operation, impulse, passion, disturbance, sensation.

While earlier works from the 'Fractus' series clearly suggests a shattering of form or a fragmenting of the image; the title 'motus' is about movement but also about sensory vibrations.

The triangular form evolved from Shin's fold model; a form that she has been working with for many years. The triangles emerge and recede, glints of edges hide behind other shapes;

there are microscopic details in the ambitious schema. The triangle was a favourite shape of mine in school geometry. The scalene triangle, you might remember, has sides that are all unequal and all angles are unequal. There is also an infinite range of variables within the placement of the triangle on the canvas. This ceaseless rotation creates the movement in the works.

While one lineage of geometric abstraction is often historically positioned as reflecting the new power-narratives of emergent American global corporations; there is also the deeper lineage that traces back to the Russian painter Kasimir Malevich or the Russian constructivists such as El Lissitzky, who in the 1930s deployed abstract form for radical purposes. The triangle served as a wedge to fracture open conservative regimes and to rethink conditions of possibility for living.

Certainly abstraction can present a shift in modes of perception. Jeena draws on scientific and philosophical concepts of space and time in her thinking around these paintings. The temporal and spatial displacements that take place within the figure-ground relationships *and* separations have been informed to some extent by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. In *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, (1983) Deleuze uses a cinematic example to illustrate this term, but the following phrase could equally be applied to the background and shapes that slice up a painting. Deleuze writes,

The space covered is divisible, indeed infinitely divisible, whilst movement is indivisible, or cannot be divided without changing qualitatively each time it is divided. The spaces covered all belong to a single, identical homogenous space [let us think of this as the 1.8 by 2.4 metre canvas] while the movements are heterogeneous, irreducible amongst themselves. (Deleuze 1983)

While the edges of Shin's canvases maintain their set boundaries, the vibration between shapes and layers acts as a destabilizing force that undoes the regimes of logic of our day-to-day existence. Shin refers to the Deleuzian concept of a 'time-slice', where the paintings might be understood as reorganising a slice of the world and fragmenting ordinary, 'by-the-clock' time. Through processes of crystallization of moments, reflection and refraction of the oscillating triangles, as they exchange with negative space, we can sense a section or slice of the universe that reorganises our perceptual experience.

Focused time in the studio has allowed Shin to develop a system of shapes and layers which might be understood as an ‘autopoietic system’; or a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself. The term was introduced in 1972 by Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela to define the self-maintenance of living cells.

The concept of autopoiesis has also been applied in sociology and to practical disciplines such as urban planning to better understand how supply chains might perpetuate themselves, or how traffic flows might become self-managing. In literary studies, texts have been argued to be self-generating feedback systems that cannot be separated from the reader who manipulates and uses them. To apply this idea to our current experience of looking at these paintings – I can sense a system, an internal logic, but I can’t see a beginning or an ending. I want to know how to find an order in this vibrating chaos of form – I want to locate where it all starts and ends but instead I encounter a radical open-endedness that just leads on to the next painting and back around to the start again. I perpetuate the system begun in this dance of black and white that continually generates its own organisation in an endless turn-over of geometric components.

So, to conclude, it is all there in black and white – but it is a black and white that throws everything into question. The abstraction is suggestive of a flickering of form such as light through leaves; or the facets of a crystal viewed through a microscope, or a flock of birds. I could look at these paintings for a long time and still keep discovering new moments and new configurations of form.