



Paintings by Jennifer Moore on the left, print and paintings by Silas Clifford-Smith on the right. Photo by Gabrielle Bates

ABSTRACT ASSEMBLIES Artist Talk: A Summation

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On the last day of the exhibition, 10 of the 11 exhibiting artists of *Abstract Assemblies* met at WAYOUT with a handful of hangers-on to discuss the exhibition with curator Gab Bates and guest Dr. Billy Gruner, director of the 8th International Biennale of Non-Objective Arte, Pont de Claix, of which this exhibition was a satellite. Like most good conversations about art (and especially painting (and especially abstract painting)), our discussion clung closely to the stories that artists tell about making art, pausing in moments of reflection that collected like pools of generality no one quite agreed on, along which we slowed our pace but never stopped for.

The conversation began with Greg Hill's statement that what he pursued in his work was simplicity. The reluctance with which he made even this minimal statement revealed what I took to be a profound discomfort in speaking about his work. If the rest of us felt called to speak, he remained with the paintings he made, uttering this single word as though even this was too much, and then fell silent, not saying much more in the conversation that ensued. This silence was to sit beneath the conversation that it started. I find it always present in conversations about abstract art, and it is still present, beneath the words I am writing now, a kind of

admonition that I must shrug off in order to keep producing words about an artform that is intent on shedding representation.



Painting by Leo Cremonese. Photo by Gabrielle Bates

Luckily for me though, the other artists were willing to talk at length, and I am a little relieved of my bad conscience. Billy Gruner, known for talking as much as I do, picked up the cudgel and drew out this notion of simplicity, relating it to the reductive impulse in art, the desire to reduce what you are doing until:

“You are suddenly making work that doesn’t communicate directly, Its asking people to take leaps, it’s asking people to consider more what’s happening to them”

And there is something of this in all art, the insistence on the unspoken, the requirement that in the inescapable privacy of your experience of the work you are invited to discover an affect, an idea, a meaning that has no objective authority other than the one you project into it. The fact is, it is unspoken and so you have no assurance that your experience is shared, you are condemned to your subjectivity and yet there you are in the world you share with others, facing an object that they also face. Abstract art suspends its experience between the sense that you

read into it something that is yours alone and the suspicion that you share, at least partially, your experience of the object with the artist and the other people who view the work. There is no experience of the objective without this, this solitude which is yours which is the only thing you can rely on as yours and which is madness or idiocy if you are the only one who experiences it. Reductive art pushes this experience toward its purity, stripping the object of those conventions through which we assure ourselves that we share it, leaving us to experience the unspoken as the ground of our shared reality.



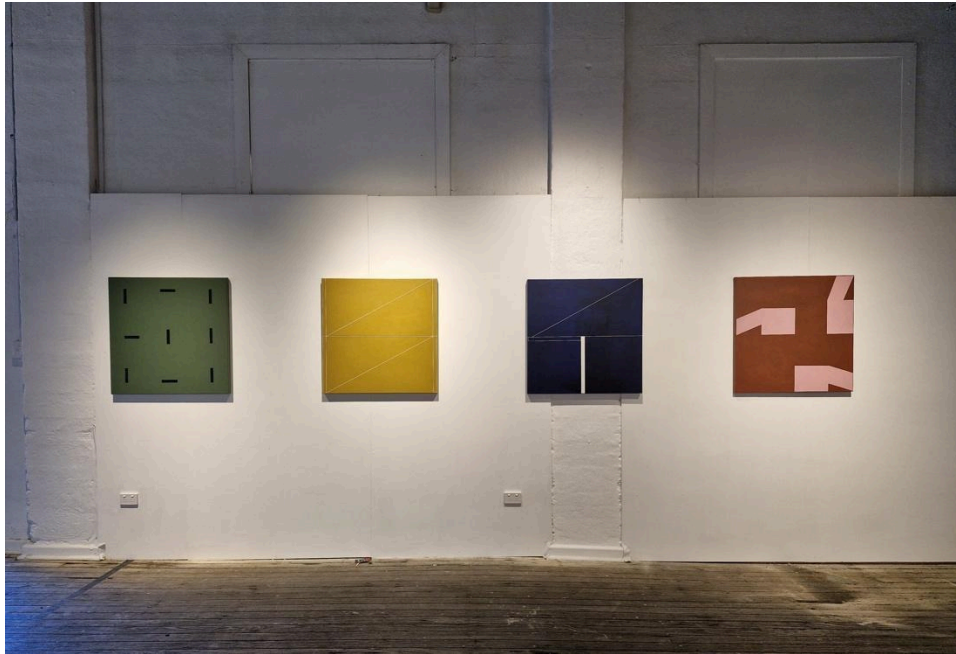
Paintings by Georgina Pollard, artwork by Ian Milliss Photo by Gabrielle Bates

Ian Milliss went in a more historical direction with the notion of reduction, describing the course of his own career within the history in which it participated as a cultural logic that stripped itself of its own conventions. Ian was painting geometric abstraction as a teenager in the 1960's when this was already an advanced form of late modernism. Having begun from this already highly reduced position, his development took part in the transition from the reduction of the formal elements of the artwork to the conceptual and social context in which he made his art. As he explained:

“What I was focussed on were issues of what are you doing when you are being an artist, and so it became a question of how much I could pull this apart and take things out and throw them away, kind of like dismantling a car and seeing if it would still run... I chucked out the stretcher and there was still aesthetics until I was playing with the environment... I was starting to get rid of this and trying to work out what this activity is? How much can I take away until I have taken away everything? It started to become an issue of social context and that is why I was doing what was eventually called social practice. I was doing it by 1973.”

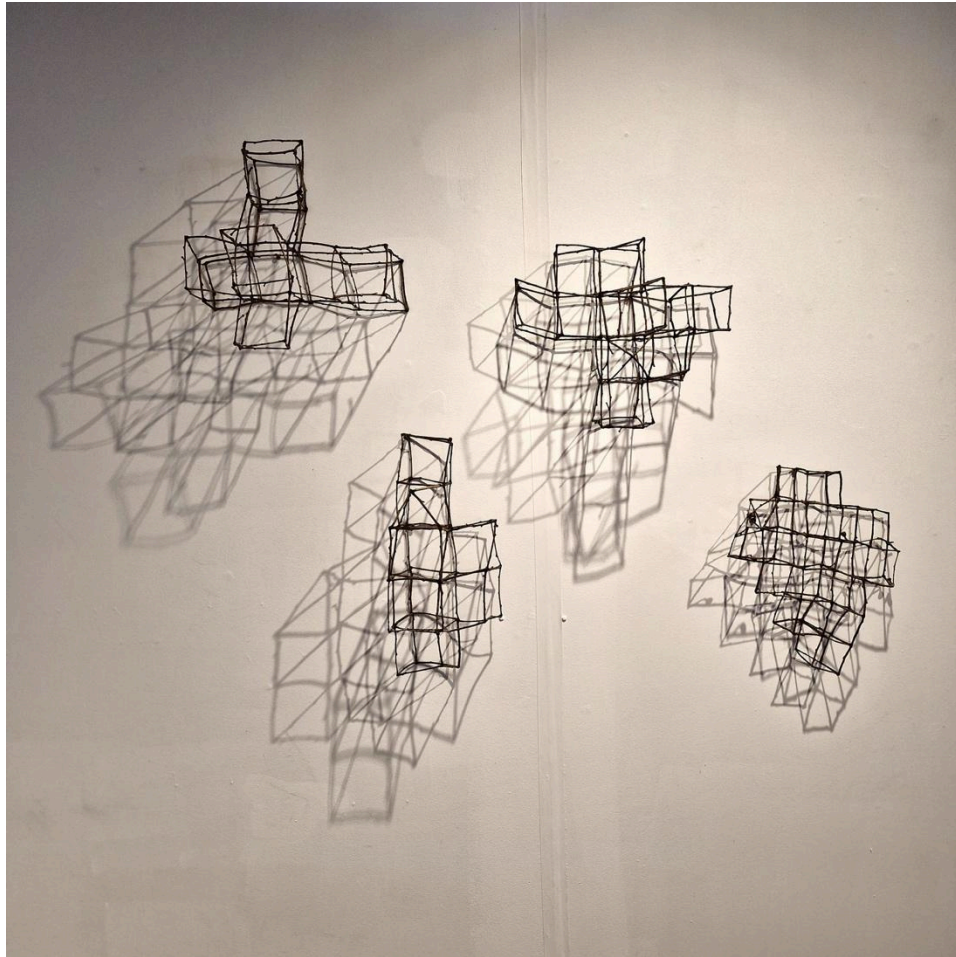
Clement Greenberg described this same process of reduction, in what he saw as an essentialising movement in a theory that came to dominate the art of its time as Formalism. The strange story that he told was that artists challenged every convention that was extraneous to the medium in which they worked in order to give it an identity that was self-sufficient, that

maintained its meaning as inherent to itself. The problem with this story is that the artists didn't stop the process of reduction when they came to the limits of their medium, in the end they pushed past the limits that even their artform presented until they were making paintings that looked like sculpture, or in Ian's case artworks that looked like farming. This context is important, because Abstract Assemblies takes place in the mess left after Greenberg's story fell apart. Our culture is a culture of aftermath, and every artist in this exhibition has made the things that they made in the wreckage of that sufficiently coherent story that bound American modernism into something unified enough for the world to accept as its culture... for a time at least.



Paintings by Greg Hill Photo by Gabrielle Bates

All the work in Abstract Assemblies, despite the single unifying fact that none of it attempts to represent anything other than itself, is heterogeneous. I would have thought this was intentional if I didn't know that it was inevitable. That every object in the exhibition possessed its own logic, despite the fact that it was all made from the same field of cultural detritus, in the same aftermath of modernism, even post modernism, and even what we now call contemporary art. The disparity of the work, the distinct logic, identity and story of each object competes with the sense of familial relationship in a coherence that is the other of Greenberg's overarching narrative. This is what makes the exhibition so interesting. This is the moment we are making art in: not within the "main/stream" of an art movement like modernism but as the fragmentary remains scattered like remnants left by a receding tide.



Sculptures by Cate McCarthy Photo by Gabrielle Bates

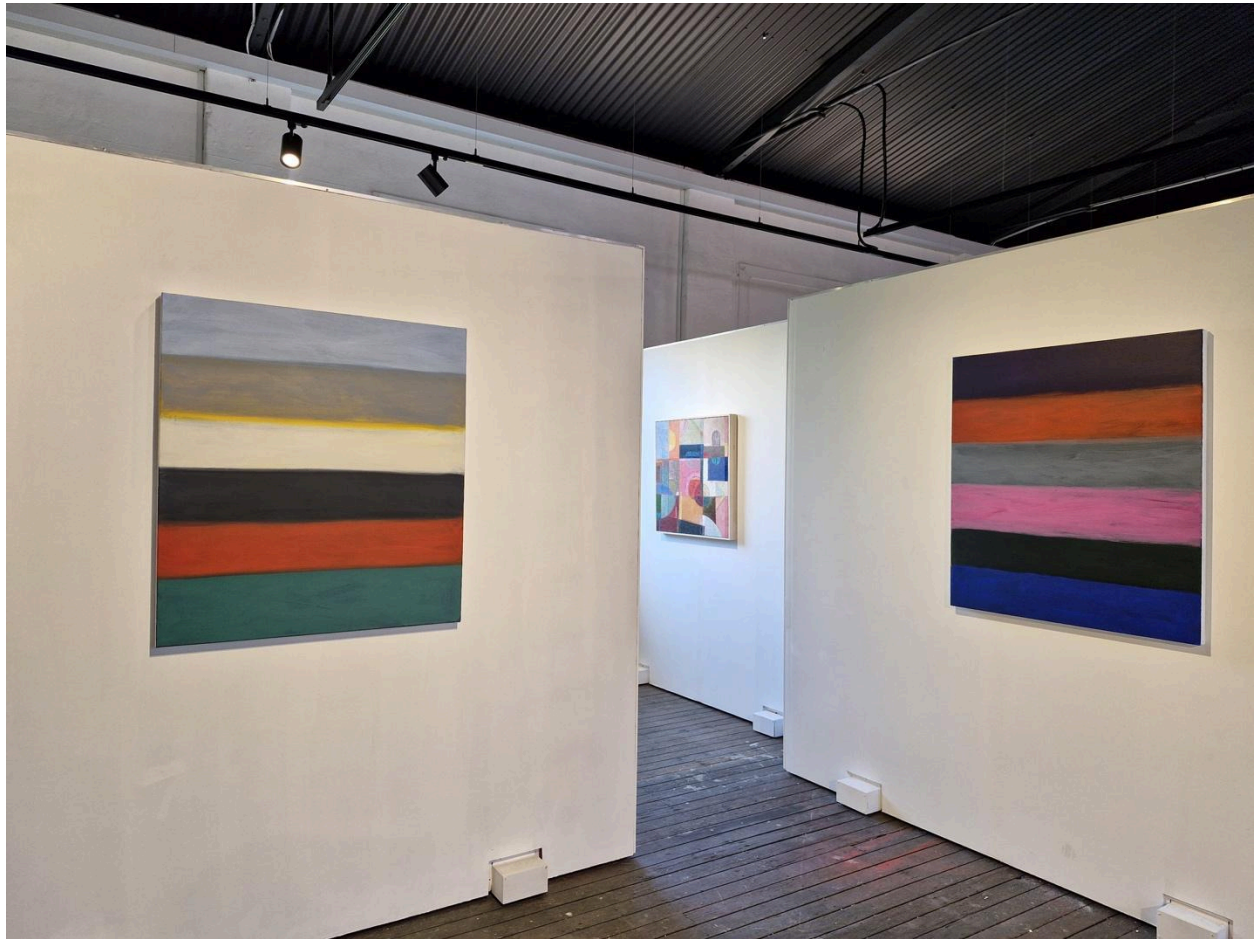
From the reconstruction of Ian's historical works, to the mute geometries of Greg Hill and Georgie Pollard's contests between the geometric and the gestural, to Jennifer Moore's domestic tapestries, Cate McCarthy's sculptural drawings, Maralyn Bennett's geometric design doodles, the exhibition is a gathering of objects that all owe a genetic debt to the same cultural history, and yet are all diverse enough to look on one another as relative strangers

This was demonstrated by Leo Cremonese in his response to Ian's story of the artwork disappearing into its social context. For Leo it is the artist that disappears, reducing the limitations of stylistic expression until he can look at the painting and say "that wasn't me"

"Where for Ian the painting disappeared and the human appeared, to me it's the painting. As Kandinsky at the beginning of what we are calling non objective art said, lets take everything else away and just look at the painting. To me painting is, I am in the painting still, to me its the painting."

The strange metaphysics we argued over was difficult to locate. For Ian, the artwork disappeared into the social context and for Leo the artist disappeared into the artwork. And yet, the artist for Ian disappears also into the web of social relationships in which s/he is involved. I don't think this is the same disappearance that Leo was talking about. In fact there is something insistently human about Leo's position, to refuse to be reduced to the relativity of his context, to

be dissolved into so many social influences, there is an insistence on something that exists unreasonably outside of the relativity of language.



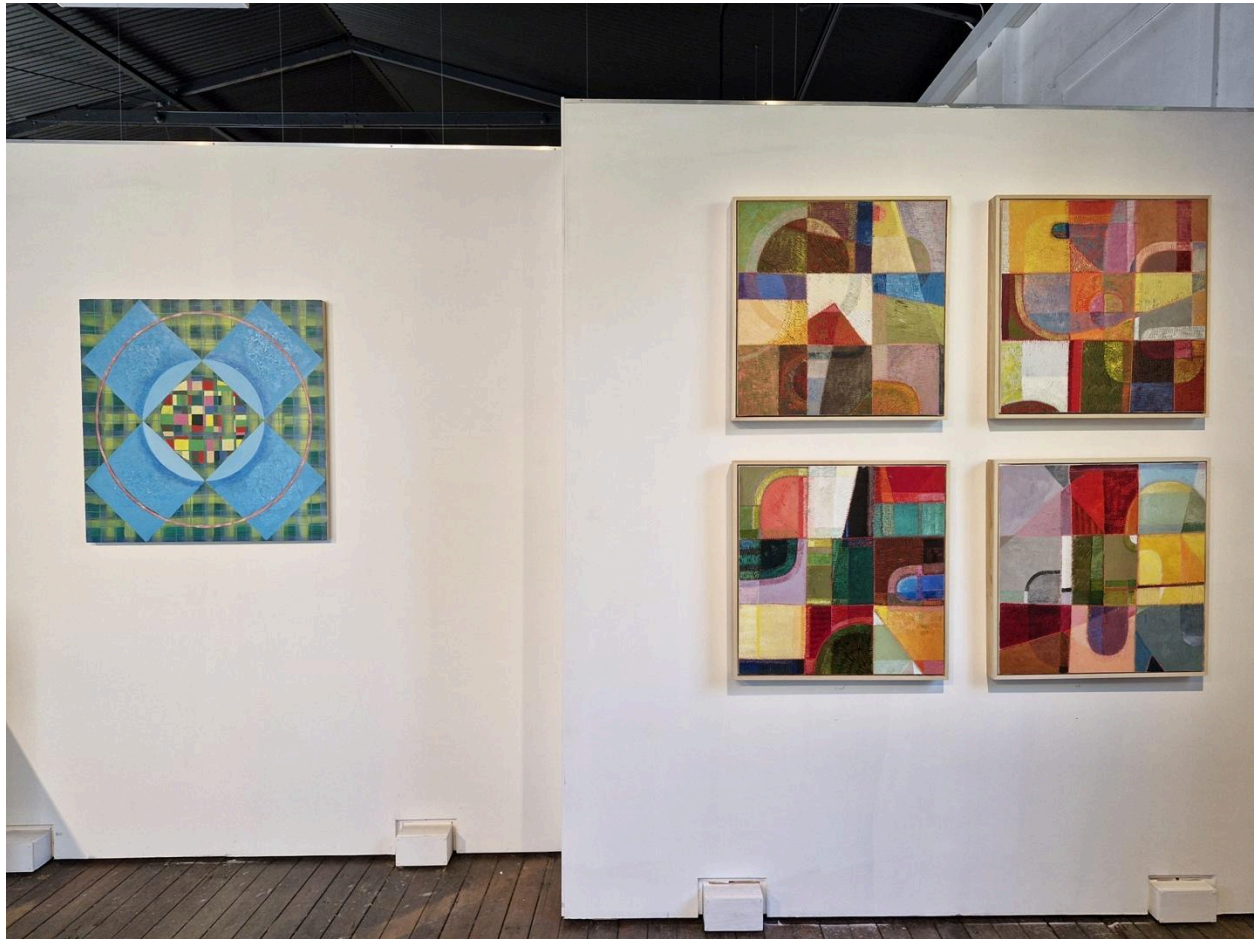
Painting by Stephen Hobbs Photo by Gabrielle Bates

Kate McCarthy shifted the position slightly in a way that adopted both positions and complicated the argument further.

“When I’m working it’s about getting away from being human and instead being in the place or space that I am at. Trying to listen to what is around me and to express that rather than feeling the emotion, the changes, the flux that’s around me all the time in every way so it’s more about the relationship with life and not just my life but the planet.”

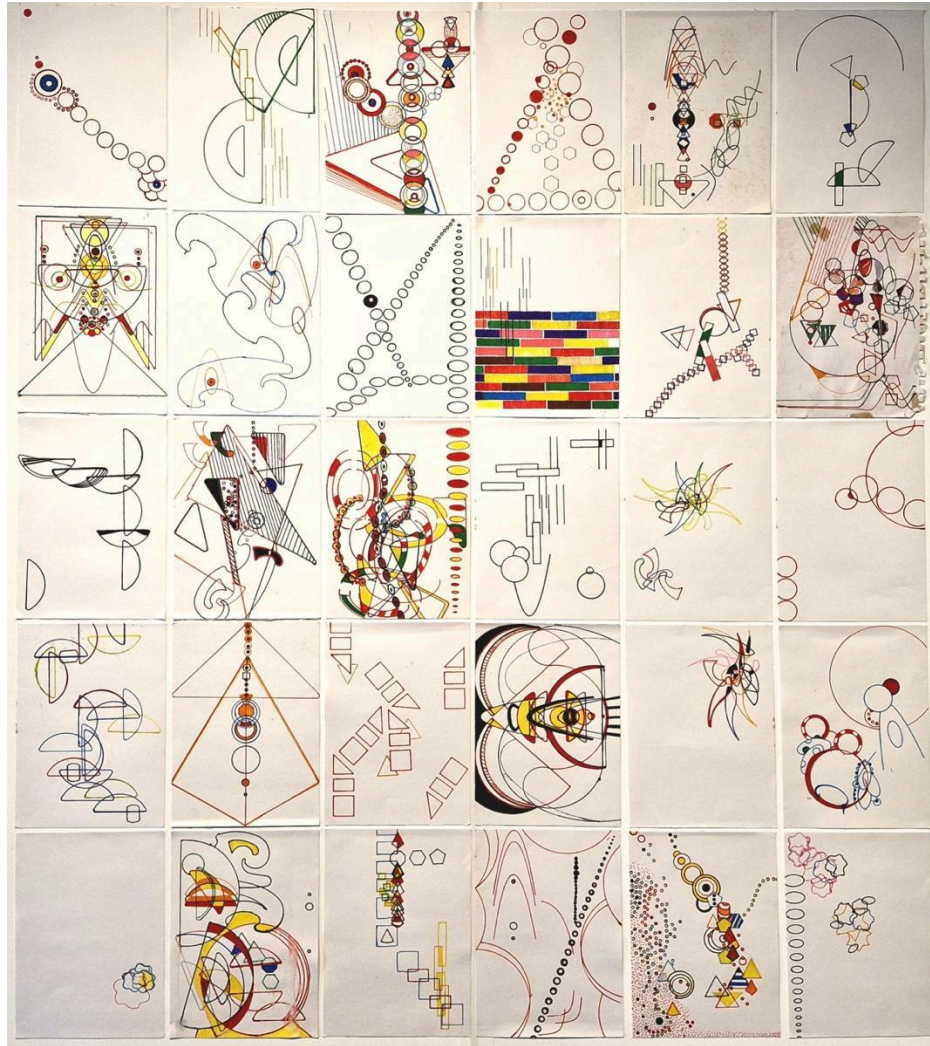
Kate, like Leo, discards her ‘humanity’ but only to become her context. Of course this is not the social context that Ian was talking about, but the present physical world in which Kate is immersed. I don’t think Leo would disagree with Kate’s statement and as Ian commented, there was a sense in which they were saying the same thing but in a different language. Ian’s own practice was about removing the artwork so as to bring the viewer into an awareness of the world around them, even if that world was only an empty gallery. But I think that amalgamating these perspectives in this way does the conversation a disservice - because yes Ian is right, all three artists are talking about the same thing, but each one is experiencing this same thing necessarily from a different position. Is this not the value of the conversation, that we share the object of that conversation, unlike the solitary experience of art described above, we test our

subjectivity against one another, we both agree and disagree and in talking about that which we experience outside of language, we hold the world, and each other in common?



Painting (left) Georgina Pollard, Paintings (right) Rachel Hanan Photo by Gabrielle Bates

It is this difference that I keep returning to. The sense that these works, though they all draw on the broad wake of the main stream of modernism, sharing the common history of abstraction, they each occupy it from a place that is particular, located and subjective. Rachel Hannan told the harrowing story of her return to abstract art through an hallucination she had experienced while under insufficient anaesthesia during a medical operation. That she experienced this hallucination as a loss of self should not surprise us at this point. Even Ian, who participated in the historical project of mid 20th century abstraction, finds his work deposited in the same flood plane as one amongst the motley of stories being told at WAYOUT. Jenny More spoke of a childhood prank with the rote embroidery patterns she had been assigned as the origin of her tapestries, and Maralyn Bennett explained the origin of her own practice as the coincidence of a set of architectural stencils left by her husband.



Drawings on paper by Maralyn Bennett Photo by Gabrielle Bates

In the wake of the grand narrative, the scattering of individual narratives. I mention this only to observe it. I am not suggesting that it is a project of its own, though who knows, perhaps one day it might congeal into something. Maybe it won't. At this moment though it seems more useful to observe it: the fantastical fate of abstract art, which at its height was the vehicle of a universalising cultural expansion that came to dominate a globalising society has become the home of humble particularity. Abstraction as the last refuge of the concrete, its pretensions to universality serving to feed the fires of individuals struggling with a world that no longer feels shared.

Georgie Pollard summarised this dynamic in her own obscure way, by drawing out the motivation in her own body of work as a kind of play and argument with the community of non objective artists that she knows and loves. Her work was made in direct contradiction to the formal strictures of that community, combining gesture with geometry, challenging the notion that the geometric is intrinsically universal and that the gestural is the trace of subjective emotion. In this challenge to her community, the artist individuates, but this individuality is derived from the context of that community. The difference between the individual artist and the community is that space between the subjective experience of the artwork as the unspoken

ground of our shared reality mentioned above and the artwork as it is shared through language, bounded by context and rendered relative in the conversation.

I hope I will be forgiven for not drawing the threads of this conversation into a neat bow. It was a conversation, not a thesis, and its interest is in the teasing out of threads that entangle into knots and dissipate into silences without ever reaching resolute conclusions. This conversation reminded me of what I love about abstraction: its power to compel thought and entice conversation deriving from the drive toward simplicity and silence. I am always amazed at the rich content of human thought that can be generated out of the muteness of a square of colour, a simple shape placed in delicate relationship to another shape, a floating gestural mark intimating a feeling for which there is no word, challenging the notion as to whether it can even be shared. How is it that artworks stripped of their capacity to reflect the objects of experience consistently yield such a rich description of that world? It is almost as though the artwork contributes silence to the conversation, creating a void which calls us to speak into it.



Textile by Jennifer Moore photo by Gabrielle Bates