



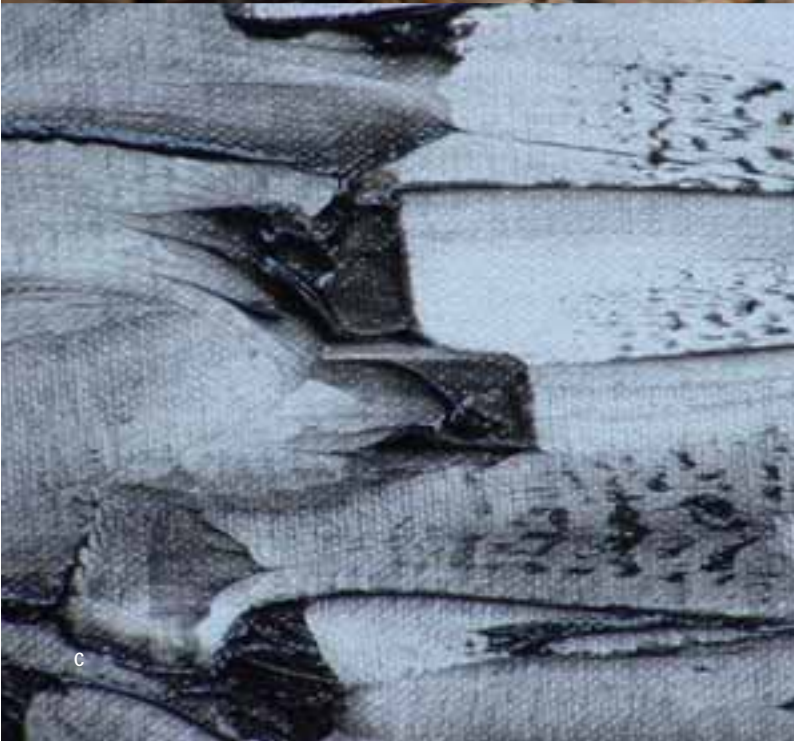
A



D



B



C



E

shrouded

Chrysalis Seed Trust
group exhibition

CoCA Centre of Contemporary Art
Christchurch, New Zealand
30 October–18 November 2007

Jonathan Baker
Janet Chambers
Jessica Crothall
Joanna Osborne



The experience of seeing

The task of painting is to render visible forces that are not themselves visible. (Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation*)

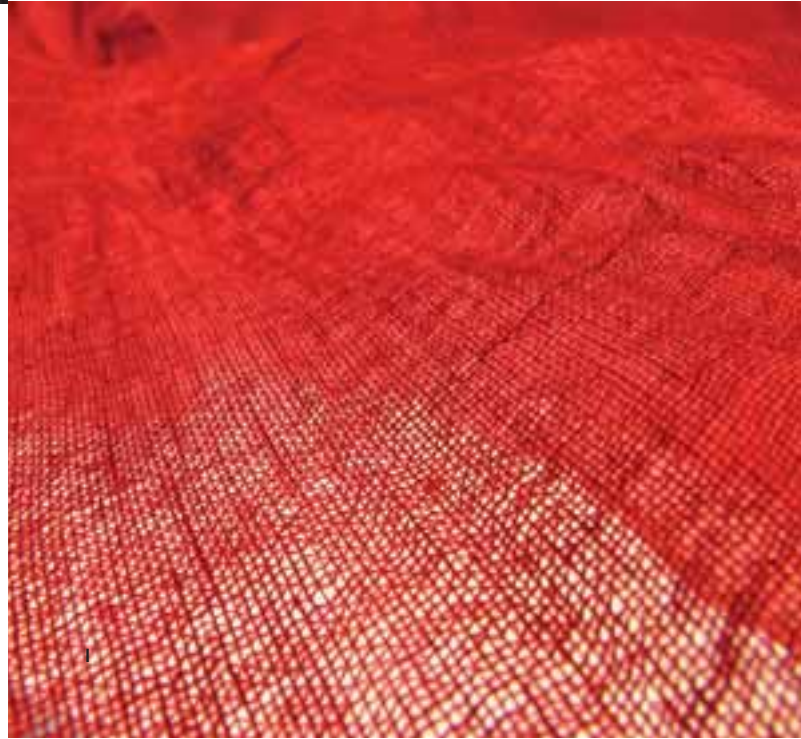
Deleuze is quoted in Laurence Simmons' publication *The image always has the last word* (2002). This series of essays on New Zealand art draws attention to the friction and dynamics between the visual arts and the written word.

In one essay, Simmons discusses Milan Mrkusich's abstract expressionist-inspired images.¹ He maintains that Mrkusich's concern is with our experience of viewing a painting and heightening consciousness of that encounter by constantly shifting our perceptions of space, surface and form, as we move forward and around the art work, seeking to connect with it in the gallery space.

In the instance of Mrkusich's 'Corner paintings' of the late 1960s and 1970s, Simmons appears to argue for the supremacy of the viewer's experience of the art work over interpretation, or the written word. It is the dialogue between Mrkusich's paintings—as we discover them within the art gallery and approach, retreat and reconsider their surfaces and

Artists' works (all details)

A	<i>Of unknowing</i>	Joanna Osborne	inkjet on cotton fabric
B	<i>We shall all be changed III</i>	Janet Chambers	unfired local clay, wheat seed
C	<i>Diagonals (bondage)</i>	Jessica Crothall	acrylic on canvas
D	<i>Diagonals (NZ)</i>	Jessica Crothall	acrylic on canvas
E	<i>Untitled</i>	Joanna Osborne	giclee on paper
F	<i>Child's Play VI</i>	Jonathan Baker	collage mixed media on MDF
G	<i>Shakkei III</i>	Jonathan Baker	collage mixed media on MDF
H	<i>The Curtain</i>	Janet Chambers	muslin, acrylic paint
I	<i>The Curtain</i>	Janet Chambers	muslin, acrylic paint
J	<i>Diagonals (bondage)</i>	Jessica Crothall	acrylic on canvas
K	<i>We shall all be changed III</i>	Janet Chambers	unfired local clay, wheat seed
L	<i>Untitled</i>	Jonathan Baker	collage mixed media on MDF
M	<i>On this mountain</i>	Joanna Osborne	giclee on paper
N	<i>The Curtain</i>	Janet Chambers	muslin, acrylic paint
O	<i>Untitled</i>	Jonathan Baker	collage mixed media on MDF
P	<i>The Curtain</i>	Janet Chambers	muslin, acrylic paint



spatial illusions—that is paramount to the artist's integrity and vision and our appreciation of these. Simmons also goes on to state:

‘Our consideration of Mrkusich's art is encouraged as an experience that invites a conscious awareness of seeing. . . the dissolution of the defined subject and of a stable place for the gaze is in a way the pre-condition for new and interesting, and heretofore non-existent, unknown things to appear. This, it seems to me, is the challenge and ultimate reward of Mrkusich's painting.’²

Representing the unrepresentable

Simmons establishes an association between Mrkusich's abstract works and abstract iconography in Renaissance art—in particular, the Quattrocento annunciation paintings of Piero Della Francesca and Fra Angelico. An idea more than implicit in these artists' work is the supremacy of the word, at the moment the angel Gabriel announces that the Holy Spirit 'will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you'.³

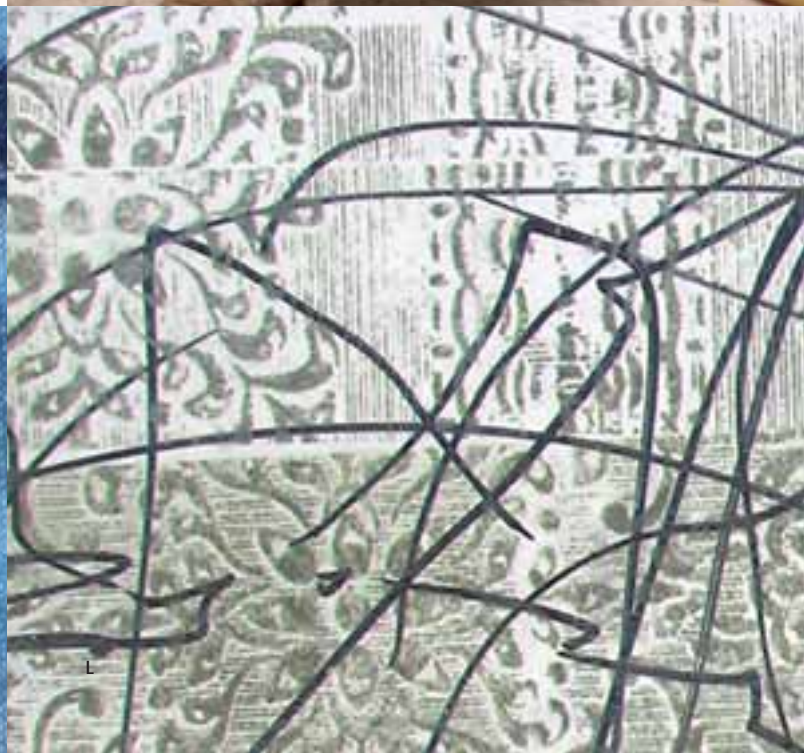
In a typically Renaissance description of events, Fra Angelico's



K



J



L

Annunciation (c.1440) initially seems to give ascendancy to the power and authority of the word of God, appearing out of the angel's mouth in gold and traversing the space between the Virgin and Gabriel.

However, it would be incorrect to believe that Simmons perceives that Fra Angelico is simply affirming the authority of the word in our experience of the arts. He argues that the angel's message may be understood '...only through its implicitness as the logic of a secret, a logic that must in the end go beyond any explicit enunciation in mere words'.⁴

Indeed, Simmons maintains that Fra Angelico's concerns are as much with the mysterious or spiritual dimensions of events, and that this is evident in the enigmatic nature of the space and environment that the Renaissance artist's figures occupy. Simmons points to the interior of the Virgin's quarters and the typical way in which Fra Angelico has treated and defined the room. The description of abstracted marble-like surfaces seem to dissolve space, perspective and volume, creating ambiguities in the physical relationship between the angel and the Virgin. The figures appear to be both in this world and disconnected from it.

It is not so much the displacement and confusion of the room's



M

environment that is of primary concern, it is the way that the abstraction of the interior draws attention to the 'non-representable: the Incarnation'. Of these areas of vibrant, abstract colour Simmons observes:

'...they do not imitate anything precise, and are strange non-figurative elements for the painting of their time. It is difficult to describe these elements in the composition of Quattrocento and Cinquecento *Annunciations*, difficult to find a word which encompasses the components of the admixture of mineral and spiritual in their stains.'⁵

A welcome metaphor

It is this 'giving over' to the experience of the artwork, at the expense of interpretation and the written word, that is implied and celebrated in the exhibition title *Shrouded* (though Simmons ultimately manages to have it both ways by acknowledging that it is the 'silence of the mute word' that is vital to the annunciation paintings).

Most immediately, *Shrouded* may simply suggest associations with concealment, protection, cloaking, or veiling. However, equally implicit is the notion of allusion, envelopment and discovery, or the contradictory metaphor of confinement and security. All of this suggests that it is this open-ended relationship between the art work and the gallery visitor that is of greatest significance.

Certainly, on one level, shielding and protection are of interest to Jessica Crothall's painting and her expressive descriptions of the cross motif. Crothall's seemingly spontaneous gestures upon the surface of the picture plane are as ordered as they are instinctive, inviting a subtle reading of her work.

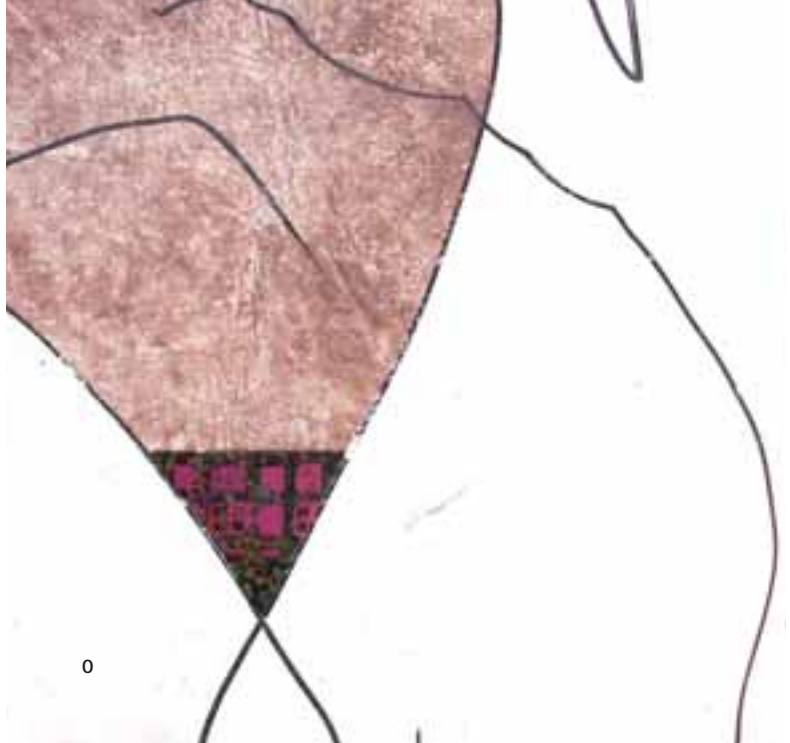
Jonathan Baker's images may appear to bring together disparate items, motifs and forms, yet the profundity of an underlying formalism seems to request that we establish a logic and resolution in our reading of them, even if this is ultimately one that is entirely subjective.

Similarly, Joanna Osborne's abstracted and figurative images reveal and celebrate as much as they allude to and veil, while Janet Chambers' interest in the visual and spatial validates the importance of the gallery visitor's tangible engagement with and experience of her work in establishing its reading and interpretation.

Shrouded should be assumed to be a welcome metaphor for an exhibition that protects, illuminates and reassures, but also—more importantly—veils and implies, encouraging the gallery visitor towards further interpretations and comprehension.

Warren Feeney

Director, Centre of Contemporary Art



1 *Mrkusich's Maculae*. Laurence Simmons, in *The image always has the last word—On contemporary New Zealand painting and photography*. 2002, Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

2 *Ibid.*, p124

3 The Bible, Luke 1:35 (New International Version)

4 *The image always has the last word*, p111

5 *Ibid.*, p113