

## Louise Forthun: Unlocking the grid

Three paintings, each like and yet unlike each other. They are not so much variations on a single theme as intersecting meditations. One is a complex symmetrical structure, powerfully organised yet as delicate as a magnified snowflake; the next a conversation between sumptuous jewel colours in overlapping grids; and the third a scintillating yet disciplined concatenation of superimposed patterns of dots, as elegant in its restraint as it is provocatively vernacular in its colours. Madly, wonderfully sensual, these three works nevertheless share a stringently applied, clearly related, but differently expressed logic.

This is the inexorable (but not inevitable) road to a clarified abstraction. Louise Forthun is not making non-objective paintings here, because each work is richly allusive, refining a highly distilled and simplified abstraction from available images. Their sources? Varied and cross-referencing. At one local level, Forthun drew on the intricate engineering of the Eiffel Tower, seen unexpectedly from below, experienced from the traveller's close-up rather than the postcard's perspective. But this icon of metropolitan Paris shares its elaborate elegance with natural structures like flowers or butterflies. Rather than making a picture of something in the world, Forthun has found a reference point in a discourse shared by natural objects, scientific investigations and artistic speculation.

This work of overlaying references strikes me as taking place on both physical and metaphorical levels. The purple underpainting in *Stars*, for instance, is dense. I am struck by the physicality of the piece, by the dry intensity and opaque resistance to interrogation. At first I sense, rather than decipher, an amalgam of impulses brought together on the one plane. Later I chose to read the complex dichotomies registered there. I find at one and the same time a sweet impact on the senses and understand the rigour of an applied discipline, a willingness to be open (to show, to image) and a restraint demanding closer inspection. It is as if I am gradually able to work myself into the structure of the painting, only a hand-hold achieved at first, a closer embrace permitted later on. I face alone this mystery of a painted surface as broad as my arms' span, close at hand and yet just out of reach. Blatantly public yet still retaining some part of its privacy - how can one know another's mind? - the very simplicity of the work is suggestive.

This urge to interpret is, after all, the only option open to me since the discourse of the paintings is self-contained, not exactly untranslatable but certainly requiring the rich work of analogy. Louise Forthun is quintessentially a Melbourne artist, participating in the most cerebral speculative tradition in Australian art. The culture of Melbourne is distinct, rich, and self-conscious, a country still secure in its heritage and populated by artists confident of shared concerns. The grid is Melbourne's emblem, mapping its enormous territory, enabling movements of populations, facilitating social life and simplifying - though not masking - complex class geographies.

Most effective at the heart of their densely crossing avenues, most fascinating at their ambiguous edges and confusing boundaries, both continuous and discontinuous, enabling and limiting, Melbourne's grids are powerful in structuring social life. Most importantly in this context, these structure at a subconscious level, an image of experience as amenable to rational discourse and to explication. This is one source of the creative cartography of the city; the form offers a metaphorical structure for intellectual life. Thus order is brought out of urban confusion and complexity, out of crude metropolitan agglomeration; a framework is made for the remarkable intersecting contradictions of glamour and grit at the heart of a great city; and the artist navigates her way, like a sailor by the stars, through the intricacies of practising painting in the late twentieth century.

Julie Ewington