

MICHAEL JOHNSON TWO DECADES THREE CITIES

On the eve of his new exhibition, senior Australian artist Michael Johnson gives *VAULT* an insight into the two decades and three cities that irrevocably shaped his career.

By Michael Johnson

LONDON 1960–1966

After my 21st birthday, I didn't want to wait two years to get a residency visa for New York so I sailed to Europe via the Suez Canal. Before I reached London, I saw work that was formative to the abstract work that was to come.

In Greece, I was fascinated by the Byzantine church frescos and their grid-based geometry, which had been chipped away by the crusaders. In Italy, I studied the major works by Uccello. Perhaps some of the dynamics in Uccello's *Battle of San Romano*, with those long poles at dramatic diagonals, surfaced much later in my 1970s works. These are connections that people don't immediately make when they are looking at minimal geometric abstraction, but every gallery in that journey created a deep impression. Outside Bologna, I visited a near-blind Giorgio Morandi and saw the bottle collection in his studio. At the Venice Biennale, I saw work by Philip Guston, Hans Hoffman and Franz Kline. The Americans. Then in France, I was struck by Rodin and particularly Giacometti. All of this was the prelude to hitting London in the autumn of 1961.

At the start of the 1960s, London was the hub wheel of international art – museums and commercial galleries. The commercial galleries predominantly exhibited emerging artists and the diversity was intense. On Mondays, we'd see the current shows then stay up all night arguing about the freshness of our adventure and our encounters with the work. Naturally there was also adaptation: digesting the work into our own studies on paper. My journals from this time are full of tiny thumbnails that range from ancient Chinese calligraphy to hardedge abstract compositions and colour notes. I recall being in a state of complete overstimulation. It's as if that city in this moment opened the doors to the studios of the world. At openings you met the senior artists and on Saturday mornings our generation congregated at the pub in Notting Hill Gate at the top of Portobello Road. Abstract art was one of the central arguments.

The show that opened my mind to scale, geometric relationships, colour and proportion was *Vanguard American Painting* at the American Embassy in 1962. But it might be a bit simple to suggest that this was my prime influence. I was also looking at quite folksy painters such as Milton Avery and Albert Pinkham Ryder, artists whose colour and light were subtle and distilled from nature. It is tempting to see abstract art as a purely manmade invention or almost a mechanised distillation of form: the flat colour, the clean lines. Yet, I was always interested in the cleaving between the natural and the urban. You can see this tension in many of the great works by Piero della Francesca, where very formal architecture and perspective is punctuated by lyrical and intense patches of sky and landscape. The same dance is going on in a painting such as *The Red Studio* by Henri Matisse. When the interior and the exterior merge – when the wall paper becomes the tree outside – that is a moment of abstraction, and it is these sort of relationships that I was refining into my work in the early 1960s and that I am still engaging with.

The shaped canvases that I made in London and subsequently exhibited in Sydney were influenced as much by quattro cento religious art as they were by contemporary American artists of the time. The luminosity of pure pigments in early painting and the mathematical purity of the compositions were both qualities I explored in large frontal works with experimental colour relationships. Barnett Newman touched on this in his *Stations of the Cross*, but I was working with colour and more importantly scale.

One critical aspect of the 1960s work was its intense, almost pulsing colour. I had been teaching colour theory as one of my first jobs in London and I looked at colour as a mathematical energy. Colour was always on my mind. As a teenager I worked with oil pastels because it was straight pigment on paper and easy to alter or change. When I discovered pigment in London, I started making my own paints with poly-vinyls. My wife Margot helped me mix them and it was a laborious job. But the scale demanded very even pure colour true to the spectrum.

At that time, the Pop colour palette was dominating art, but I think my range was less synthetic and more mutable. Some works were very nocturnal (*Night*, 1964); others had the blazing heat of pure sunlight and I probably brought an entire childhood of colour memories to London. Fundamentally, my work is about nature even though it often appears ruthlessly abstract. You can spend a lifetime having to explain this fairly basic point.

SYDNEY 1967–1969

In London in the 1960s, I never had to explain my work. The modern audience didn't want a dialogue; they just wanted to react. In Australia at that time, it was more provincial. They put beer cans on my constructions and threw food at them. Critical reception was turgid and it still remains a somewhat resistant environment for abstraction.

Despite this baseline hostility, I managed to have nine shows in Sydney in the space of two years. The first show was an exhibition I sent back from London to the Central Street Gallery. The Field show in Melbourne was born from Central Street – the nucleus of artists at this small gallery in an alleyway off George Street. And this gallery was a gathering of artists who had all met in London, so in some regards it was a continuation of my time there. It was also a place that welcomed very modern art.

When I moved away from this somewhat concentrated environment, I showed at Gallery A in Paddington. Max Hutchinson was a Melbourne-born gallerist with an ambitious vision. He believed in my work, he was so enthusiastic he'd hang it on the ceiling if he ran out of wall space. It was a powerfully positive time for a young artist. Most of the work I made in Sydney was dominantly three dimensional and born from sketches I had made in London. The work became more optical and I was no longer working in purely chromatic single colours.

By 1969, the pull of New York City was still strong so we moved there. And Max came along as well to open a new gallery.

NEW YORK 1969–1977

I arrived in New York (a few months ahead of my family) in the dead of winter and bought the lease on a studio that was Willem de Kooning's old loft from the 1930s. There are no lifts in Manhattan's older buildings, so I had to make some of these works in modular pieces to get them down the stairs.

In America, every street corner seemed to have an artist. I met more abstract artists in New York than any other time in my life. The texture of the city was very different, very vertical. I was often photographing building sites and bridges in Manhattan. It was very much up, down and across. Even though I was inspired by the spectacle of the vertical city, the work I created there was conceived aurally. The canvases were on the floor and I dropped the forms around (literally long lengths of specially cut wood) like fiddle sticks to generate movement in the composition and tension.

Like the work of the 1960s, mathematics was still key, but a sense of the random gesture was entering the frame; even if it was calculated, I was looking at the impact of chance. When leaves fall in a gum forest, they hit the ground and the wind arranges them randomly. There is some of that in the New York work. I know that sounds very incongruous to making work in a metropolis, but wherever I have worked I have never alienated myself from nature. I've always been interested in the dusk and the pull of the moon, shifting light, changing conditions.

The seasons on the east coast of America are very distinct. Perhaps that had some impact on my colour. I have always tended to work on two paintings at once, almost like a couple, and they are often a meeting of opposites: warm/cool, day/night, masculine/feminine. The idea of a counterpoint didn't always translate into the way the works were exhibited (or collected), but they are made within that dynamic and perhaps that is how I make sense of such a long train of thought through decades of work.

New York was a test of my aesthetic, in that it was a time when conceptual art was the avant-garde and the basis. I didn't adopt that because I am not a theoretical painter and I don't have theoretical arguments. I am not attracted to clinical non-objective abstraction – even Ellsworth Kelly looked at nocturnal light and Mondrian painted flowers in his early work. Abstraction, for me, is not about the 'new'; it's a location within the psyche and when I create a work it's also intensely physical. The scale and proportion and span of the movement of my limbs is within every painting. ▼

Michael Johnson shows at Metro Gallery, Melbourne from April 7 to May 4, and Annette Larkin Fine Art, Sydney from May 3 to June 14 2014.

metrogallery.com.au
annettelarkin.com

Michael Johnson at work, Ladbroke Road, London, 1963

