

## Stephen Bram explores space and form at the Anna Schwartz Gallery

April 16, 2014

**Stephen Bram**  
**Anna Schwartz Gallery**  
**185 Flinders Lane**  
**Until April 26**

**Waldemar Kobusz and Zac Koukoravas**  
**Flinders Lane Gallery**  
**137 Flinders Lane**  
**Until April 19**

At first glance, Stephen Bram's pictures look like abstract paintings. Forms of no recognisable shape splash across the picture plane, bristling with jagged edges that run helter-skelter over a dark greyish underpainting.

Before a minute is over, however, you realise that these geometric blobs behave according to perspective and that they spell out the orthogonals of an architectural interior. The blobs at the bottom indicate a floor while the blobs at the top indicate a ceiling. Those to the side are walls. Each composition becomes a picture in spite of the initial appearance of random form.



Stephen Bram's *Untitled (two point perspective)*.

Taken as a proposition of space, the shapes lose their blobbiness. The flat forms with jagged edges behave according to perspective, introducing angles by means of their staggered outline. Their chaotic disposition is scaffolded onto a grid of two-point perspective, where twin vanishing points are situated out-of-frame to the left and the right.

In the past, Bram used this rigorous system from the Renaissance to reconcile it with hard-edge abstraction. His works almost effortlessly married the Cartesian apparatus of space with the intellectual apparatus of its deconstruction in flat painting. The project was simple, because the illusion of space on a flat surface always had flatness built into it.

In his new work, however, Bram invokes gestural abstraction, which has different connotations. The blob - the untranslatable *tache* in French - pays no intrinsic respect to systems of perspective. The genius of such splatter is random, the unpredictable outcome of a flick or a toss. Any painting with blobs in it doesn't tell a story of construction but a drama of muscular agitation and reflex.

The options are still current and part of the language of formalist painting. Check out the handsome paintings of Waldemar Kolbusz at Flinders Lane Gallery, where large areas of application insist on their spontaneous patchiness by means of runny paint and rough outlines.

The result of this patchwork of paint variously flung or caressed upon the canvas is a set of dynamic relations that have appeal to music, as the essayist Marguerite Brown reminds us. But the artist still wrestles with the forms that are produced by impulse, which gives them a strange "glyph-like" unity, as Brown calls it.

In the next room at Flinders Lane, Zac Koukoravas shows the other side of abstraction that Bram refers to in its origins. Koukoravas paints on glass, which affords the sharpest edges: his hard edge forms are rigidly triangular, with no overstrike.

Still, each triangular plane contains transitions, as if to propose how the shapes behave in a light-source. Even if they look purely theoretical, the geometrical configurations seem folded together, like paper sculptures made from a single sheet. Koukoravas' paintings also have a strangely three-dimensional quality because the flat application sits on different levels of glass.

Abstraction is always a tiny bit figurative; and many painters have identified the overlap of abstraction and figuration as a source of paradox and frisson. Of all artists in the genre, Bram knows how to Bram it up. He deliberately makes a flicker at the edge, where a shape crosses from flatness into illusionistic space.

Bram's pictures are riddled with a crazy gap in dark grey - the part where the coloured shapes don't connect - which is like the opposite of line in drawing. It's the neutral ground upon which the shapes stand out but also the place where the shapes make sense as illusion.

From a distance, the works look settled and even muted. Like many abstract expressionists, Bram has a bias in his palette, preferring warm earth colours, plus red and a warmish green. But this gentle balm of soft and soothing colours, appealing to a lyrical grand manner of chromatic formalism, cracks under the pressure of the illusions.

In many pictures where the blob at the top is a ceiling and the blob at the bottom is a floor, there's also a blob in the middle that has a fold in it, either vertical or horizontal. Never before have such calming aesthetics made so much hiss and splutter over the conventions of space.

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