Marking Space, Time & Movement

On the Landscape Paintings of Bronte Leighton Dore

In Andrew Benjamin's, '*What is Abstraction*', a comprehensive exposition on the nature of abstraction in painting is presented. Arguments regarding abstraction and its relationship to modernist painting, made by Clement Greenburg in his various essays, are critiqued and developed upon. Andrew Benjamin concludes artworks are simplistically interpreted to fit a misconstrued narrative of art history, one presented as a linear chronological development. It is erroneous, he claims, to regard the notion of abstraction as obsolete and have its avant-garde capacity rendered impotent. He affirms, rather than an exhausted genre, contemporary instances of abstraction continue to challenge the discipline of painting. Central to Andrew Benjamin's claim is that by identifying the function of time, as not only important to the historic categorisation of genres, temporality, should also be interpreted to be present within paintings itself. Allowing for the complexities of time provides the impetus for the continuous interpretive renewal for both individual paintings and at the disciplinary level. Applying the framework for understanding abstraction and the 'avant-garde', developed by Andrew Benjamin, it will be argued that the artworks of Bronte Leighton- Dore is an example of avant-garde abstraction in landscape painting today.

In construction of his argument, Andrew Benjamin identifies, Clement Greenburg preoccupation with the medium as the key characteristic of the modernist painting. Historically painting has played both a mimetic role as well as being seen as a didactic vehicle imbued with the literary connotations[1]. In each case it has been defined by its representative function through the reproduction of illusionary effects[2]. In the move towards modernity, however, as Benjamin interpretation of Greenburg's position pertains, painting gains a self-criticality and consequently self-definition of the discipline. This virtue of self-criticality, it should be expounded, arises from painting attempt at attaining a 'purity of form'- only concerning itself with what is intrinsic to the discipline. That is, the two-dimensionality of the canvas' surface and thus its flatness, a quality which should be reinforced by the materiality of the medium – paint itself[3]. The defining feature of modernity for Greenburg, is therefore in each artform search and progress towards self-definition[4]. Abstraction the most successful attempt at this ideal, accordingly, is placed on a podium by Greenburg as the flag bearer for the avant-garde.

In Greenburg's appraisal of abstraction, his conflation with modernism and self-criticality rests upon three claims as recognised by Andrew Benjamin - **1)** an interiority of form and its effects - that is, painting's compositional form nor its interpretive effects should be dependent on anything external, **2)** the primacy of the sensuous on the viewer and **3)** the invocation of the sensuous as abstract's painting ultimate (and arguable sole) function[5]. An autotelic or arts for art's sake philosophy is evidently advocated by Greenburg. This view is affirmed by his concern over encroachment of both Stalinist and Fascist ideology into the artistic domain and its subsequent hijacking for political agendas directed at the

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[1] Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," 298.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Benjamin, What is Abstraction?, 13-15.

[4] Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," 300.

[5] Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?,* 12.

masses[6]. It manifests in his hostility towards external dependencies, reinforcing his position on disciplinary autonomy for art, and the privileging of abstraction as such. Notwithstanding debate on the politics of art and deserved criticism of Greenburg's position as a promotion of an elitist reading of art, contrary to contemporary sensibilities, his initial positioning of abstraction is highly consequential.

The first consequence of Greenburg's position is that, to borrow a concept from the sciences, the bounds of the [interpretive] system shifts from a premodern representative one, incorporating the viewer, the art object, the artist and the external subject to a system defined by interiority that comes to only include the art object and the viewer. In the former system it can be illustrated that both the art object and the artist act as intermediaries through which an external subject matter is represented to the viewer. Furthermore, it should be stated that the viewer is a passive participant in this system. The exclusion of the artist in the latter system should also be noted, as their interpretive agenda in representing the subject matter would constitute an external influence itself.
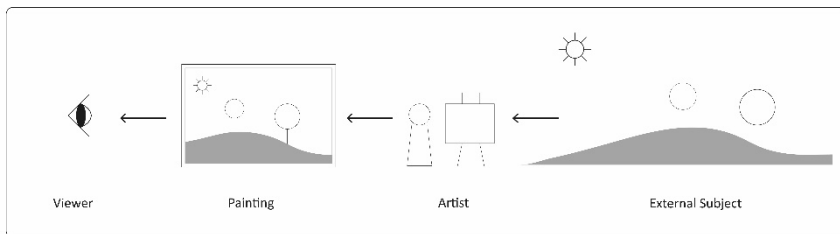

Diagram 1: Pre-Modern Interpretive System

As mentioned previously, due to the exclusion of external dependencies, painting must find agency in the medium itself, and hence leading to the second consequence - the privileging of opticality in painting. To support his view Greenburg finds analogy with music. Just as sound is the intrinsic domain of music, the sense of sight corresponds to painting[7]. More accurately, what is intrinsic is the optical experience of flatness (as distinguished from a three-dimensional optical experience given by sculpture), using the medium of paint to both reinforce and overcome the two-dimensionality bounds of the canvas's surface. To conceptualise how this may occur the painting object can be thought of as comprising the painted pictorial space and the real two-dimensional plane of the canvas itself. In Greenburg's abstraction, as Andrew Benjamin interprets, the pictorial space and real plane of the canvas tend towards commensurability[8].Greenburg offers hints as how this may occur through '*the dissolution of the picture into sheer texture, sheer sensation, into the accumulation of a similar unity of sensation[9]'.* To reconcile the concept of opticality with painting's functional claim, as the presentation of a sensuous optical experience, follows to the third consequence - the introduction of temporality albeit one characterised by singularity, into Greenburg's interpretive system.

The relationship between a painting and the viewer becomes an important consideration in Greenburg's conception of modernism. The success of such a relationship, in his opinion, depends not just on the sensuous optical effect a

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[6] Greenberg, Clement. "Avant Garde and Kitsch",19.

[7] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*, 12.

[8] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?,* 13.

[9] Greenberg, Clement "The Crisis of the Easel Picture,"157.

painting produces but in its immediacy. Greenburg places emphasis on the term *unity of sensation* to ensure the irreducibility of the art object to anything external and the idea of 'unity' is consequently linked to conception of a temporal singularity[10]. *"The picture of statue exhausts itself in the visual sensation it produces. There is nothing to identify, connect or think about, but everything to feel.[11]"*. It can be argued that the unity and therefore instantaneous affect the painting bears on the viewer, precludes conscious thought and subsequent reflective thinking, regarded as an external dependency. In this conception a strictly one-way painting- viewer relationship is maintained. Similarly, as in the pre-modern interpretive system the viewer is only a passive participant in the experience of an art object.
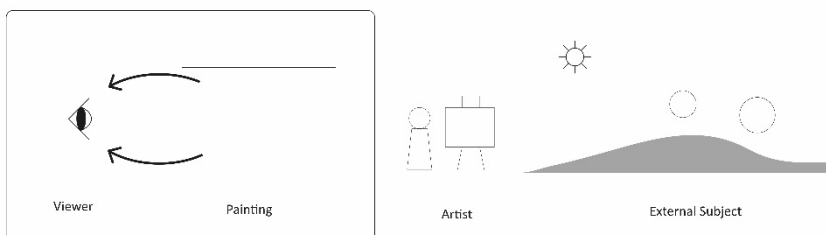

Diagram 2: Clement Greenburg's Modernist Interpretive System

While Greenburg's abstraction presents interpretive breakthroughs, notably on the conceptualisation of art's disciplinary autonomy and the introduction of a temporality, several problems remain. These can be categorized as follows: **1)** The reduction of painting to decoration **2)** The finality of art history and **3)** The question of representation.

Perhaps the most apparent argument made against any move towards a pure interiority is in painting's potential trivialisation into decoration. The severance of all externalities and reduction of its sole function to simple optic presentation clearly deprives it of the scope for critical engagement on both the part of the artist and viewer. According to Andrew Benjamin's reading, Greenburg himself acknowledges this consequence, however, maintains the self-criticality inherent in the search for disciplinary self-definition saves abstraction from becoming mere decoration[12]. In contrast to the immediacy of the object-viewer relationship inherent in Greenburg's framework an opposing view by Walter Benjamin supposes that a critical distance needs to be maintained between the viewer and an object to be considered art. *'Art in the exalted sense 'begins at a distance of two meters from the body'.. Kitsch ... is ... art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption'.[13]* As the German scholar Winfried Menninghaus interprets, '*Kitsch offers instantaneous emotional gratification without intellectual effort, without the requirement of distance, without sublimation.[14]*' It is this intellectual engagement which is considered a distinguishing feature between works of art and the kitsch – an aesthetic Greenburg was ardently hostile to. Even if the exclusion of interpretive dialogue maintains art disciplinary autonomy, contesting claims of painting's frivolity,

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[10] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*, 12.

[11] Clement, Greenberg. "Towards a Newer Laocoön." Partisan Review, VII, no. 4 (1940): 306.

[12] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?,* 13-14.

[13] Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, 1996-2003, quoted in Winfried Menninghaus, On the 'Vital Significance' of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin's Politics of 'Bad Taste. (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 41.

[14] Menninghaus, Winfried. "On the 'Vital Significance' of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin's Politics of 'Bad Taste." 41.

Greenburg's reductionist, and absolutist position disregards the criticality art objects historically has evoked and, importantly, continues to have on the observer - it ultimately denies art of its historical and creative impetus at a disciplinary level.

If abstraction's self-critical interiority amounts to the avant-garde and thus is the highwater mark of painting, it begs the question, what comes after or more precisely what can come after? To navigate through this rhetorical impasse Andrew Benjamin cites the example of writing and the gesture of words as a proxy to expound the fallacy of art's autonomy and dispel the notion of its finality[15]. In writing, despite the precision of word selection in the articulation of intended thought, it is impossible for the finality of the gesture to be contained. Words are embedded in the context of a language which is situated in a dynamic cultural milieu, ultimately their interpretation is beyond the remit of original authorial intent. With this thought it can be argued that art and thus painting operates in a similar fashion. *"The continuity of art must involve the recognition that the finite cannot be equated with the infinite; art's work has to do with their productive copresence. It occurs as much with interpretation- the work being able to be regiven in and as the interpretive act – as with the actual production of art[16]."* In both the gesture of writing and in art the confine of their literal immediacy is transcended though historicity despite the bounds Greenburg attempts to impose upon it. It is with the notion of historicity that temporality can become a feature in act of painting and allow it to go beyond its initial (finite) act of production and initial reception. *"History is the recognition that each artwork has to repeat the conditions of possibility for it being art. Recognising the place of history means recognising the productive centrality of repetition[17]".* Just as the interpretation of writing shifts due to the ever-evolving definition of words, the reception of an artwork cannot be viewed in isolation to both the context of its initial creation and at the exclusion of time, which acts to change the milieu each subsequent interpretation is viewed from. The function of temporality therefore allows an artwork to be repeatedly re-presented and its creative potential to continue into infinity. It is not only in the act of retrospective interpretation that art's finitude is challenged but in the need for new works to emerge from the cultural milieu as a chronicle of humanity's progress. The misconstrued narratives regarding an absolute finality have been an underlying notion in the Western artistic tradition, arguably stemming from the philosophy of Platonic idealism. Despite the repeated appeals to authority, history has proven claims of self-assured absolutism mistaken, repeatedly. It is with the acknowledgment of time itself that the limits of absolutist thinking can be overcome. Similarly, traditional notions on representation in art is challenged through a framework involving temporality.

In Greenburg's abstraction, as acknowledged previously, the pictorial space is made consummate with two-dimensional plane of the canvas with painting aiming towards a *sheer texture*. Jackson Pollock abstract expressionist paintings, the most famous work being *Blue Poles* (1952) and similarity works by Barnett Newman, *Onement I* (1948), are held up by Greenburg as the epitome of such an aesthetic[18]. As Andrew Benjamin highlights, Greenburg denounces the 'abstract' paintings of Piet Mondrian, by contrasting them to the works of Barnett Newman. The argument he provides is that the development of Mondrian's abstraction, in which reality is gradually reduced to its most basic geometric
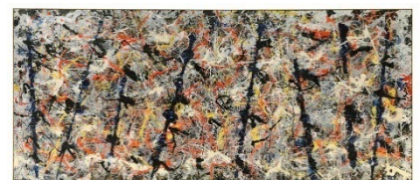

Image 1: *Blue Poles*, Jackson Pollock (1952)

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[15] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*,37.

[16] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction*?,38.

[17] Ibid

[18] Greenberg, Clement "American-Type Painting" Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, 219-227.

constituencies is still characterized by a logic pertaining to representation[19]. While Mondrian's paintings do not contain recognisable figures per se, they are still derived from external forms. The emphasis is on the logical operation here. Just as Mondrian reinscribes forms using only lines and colour planes, an equivalence would be said of an artist in the history painting tradition, for instance, re-presenting a scene according to their interpretation and artistic repertoire. From this reading Mondrian's paintings are consistent with a premodern interpretive system introduced earlier. In premodern painting, however, the pictorial space tends towards an equivalence to real external space. While flatness could be perceived as an attribute of Mondrian's later paintings, according to Greenburg's judgment however, the intrusion of the external into pictorial space renders it incompatible with the pure interiority of a single unified texture found in 'true abstraction'[20]. In this reading, abstraction is positioned as the negation of representation, leading to a discrepancy between Greenburg's definition and genres, such as cubism, widely acknowledged as abstraction[21].

To address the problems highlighted, Andrew Benjamin proposes a new framework for understanding abstraction in painting. Central to this new 'economy of abstraction', as he terms it, is the introduction of a complex conception of temporality and accordingly spatiality. It is this complexity as opposed to temporal singularity which enables abstraction to be both disciplinary self-defining and freed from being simply representation's negation. Andrew Benjamin's economy of abstraction can be conceptualised to compose two components, a micro system, and a macro perspective. The macro perspective incorporates the painting- viewer relationship in relation to art history based on chronological historical time, while the micro system concerns the painting-viewer relationship with temporality within the work of art itself.

From a macro perspective stance, a temporal dynamism can be inscribed to how an interpretation of an artwork shifts when set in relation to the evolution of art history. More accurately, interpretation becomes a continuously iterative process, one where, once a position is established for a specific work, it comes to inform a perspective on the discipline or another work, which subsequently reworks the original position etc.[22]. It is a procedure which is repeated across all artworks as well as across historical time. Interpretive movement could be seen as analogous to the interdependencies and dynamism resulting from these linked flows within an economic system or the structure of language. An iterative and repetitive interpretative system stands in stark contrast to the linear chronological developmental view, commonly subscribed to art history. The notion of art's finality is challenged as well as the categorisation of paintings as static reference points within a singular evolutionary narrative, such as in the conceived movement from impressionism to abstraction. Ultimately, it is a framework which allows for divergent and unique interpretive narratives to be construed from a continuously evolving discipline.

In relation to the micro viewpoint, positioning abstraction away from representation's negation establishes a two-way viewer-painting relationship while also allowing the interpretive agenda of the artist and the external subject to be present in painting again. The commensurability of the pictorial space with the canvas plane also remains a central aim in Andrew Benjamin abstraction. Reconciling these two concepts means that recognisable objects and thus

Image 2: *Onement I,* Barnett Newman (1948)

Image 3: *L'arbre rouge*, Piet Mondrian (1909)
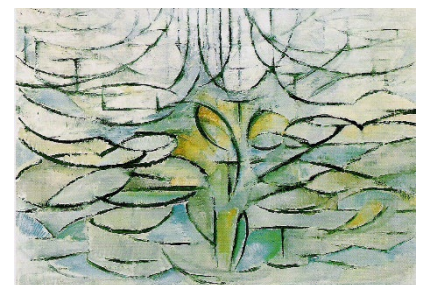

Image 4: *L'arbre gris*, Piet Mondrian (1911)

Image 5: *Pommier en fleurs*, Piet Mondrian (1912)

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[19] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*, 18-19.

[20] Andrew, Benjamin, What is Abstraction?,18-19

[21] Andrew, Benjamin, What is Abstraction?,20.

[22] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*,30-31.

representation is not precluded but also that abstract painting moves away from the recognisable space of external reality[23]. Articulation of this idea can be achieved by further developing how the three spaces concerning painting interact, that is - **1)** the real external space **2)** the pictorial space and **3)** the real canvas space. As previously explained, in mimesis 'pictorial space' seeks to moves towards equivalence with the 'real external space', without any conception of a 'real canvas space'. In Greenburg's abstraction, commensurability is sought between 'the 'pictorial space' and 'real canvas space' with a total negation of the 'real external space'. It can be argued that Andrew Benjamin's framework enables the possibility of a dual function to occur, in one instance reconciling 'pictorial space' with the 'real canvas space', while also allowing the possibility of the 'real external space' to intrude 'pictorial space', seemingly paradoxically.
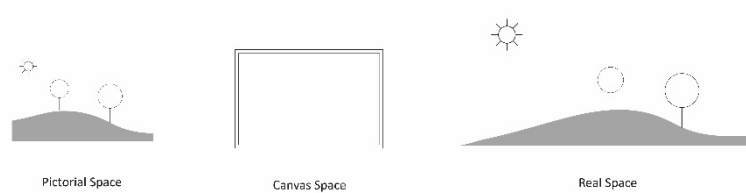

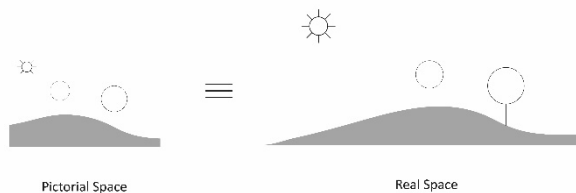**Diagram 3:** Distinction of spaces concerning painting

Diagram 4: The move towards equivalence of pictorial space and real space sought in mimesis.
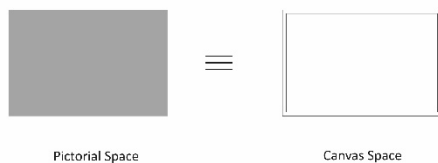

Diagram 5: The commensuration between pictorial space and canvas space in Greenburg's Modernism

To understand how this visual mechanism operates Andrew Benjamin sets up a counterexample utilising the dichotomy of the figurative and literal. The term literal in this interpretation refers to how closely depictions in pictorial space are visually recognisable to their corresponding objects in real external space. Simply understood, the figural is positioned in opposition to the literal if placed on spectrum. On such a sliding spectrum, abstraction therefore is seen as a movement away from the literal and at its most extreme all reference to the literal, that is real external space, is erased[24]. The figurative, however, not only concerns strict visual representation but also encompasses the viewer's interpretation of a painting, such as metaphorical or symbolic registers etc. This common interpretation not only limits abstraction within the confines of a figurative and literal dichotomy but presupposes the literal as the *initial priority*

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[23] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*,16.

[24] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*, 29.

state- abstraction can only subsequently occur after the literal has been established[25].

It can be stated that the foundation of Andrew Benjamin's interpretation is the reworking of the 'literal' through a Deleuzian reading. In Andrew Benjamin's framework, it is critical to recognize that the literal shifts from being a signifier, of a state external to itself (e.g. the pictorial space as a representation of the external real space), to become the situation itself or in Deleuzian terms an Event[26]. Painting or more precisely the 'pictorial space' becomes the site for a complex set of interactions between both the viewer and the external space, meditated through the medium of paint and set against the backdrop of the 'real canvas space'. The literal is therefore a perceptual and accordingly a temporal singularity in an ever-changing perceptual presentation[27].

It is this dynamism at work within the painting which Andrew Benjamin identifies the literal *as the oscillation between the resolved and yet to be resolved[28].* Such a dynamism is identified to compose of two movements. **1)** The continuous capacity of the work to be re-presented and **2)** Movement due to the ontological instability of the actual painting marks and their indeterminate relation to objects in real space[29]. In the first case, rather than the picture exhausting itself in a single instance and arguably the repetition of the same effect upon subsequent viewings, a repetition of difference occurs. The capacity of the painting to continuously re-present a different effect is due to the establishment of an active viewer- painting relationship. This could be characterised as an interpretative dialogue, in which the painterly effect is initially given, received by the viewer, while subsequently shifting their interpretative perception, as to allow the same painterly effect to be re-given through a different perceptual lens – an indefinite back and forth oscillation occurs as such[30].

In the second case, oscillation occurs when there is an interpretative inability to determine the identity of the actual painting mark itself. The concept of the 'priority state' or more precisely the lack thereof becomes important in this instance. In one sense the painting mark is itself that (e.g. Simple two-dimensional marks in 'canvas space'), while in the other sense the marks conceive of a new pictorial space that could relate to the 'real external space'. It is imperative to clarify that the marks are not representing an external per se. In other words, the initial priority state is not the literal real and the painting is not a movement from this but rather the mark produces an original effect only in relation to an external[31]. Perceptual oscillation therefore occurs between the real external space, the pictorial space, and the real canvas space, as the identity of the painting mark is never fully resolved in any one space- the painting is in a constant state of becoming[32].

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[25] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*, 29-30.

[26] Deleuze and Felix. What is Philosophy?33

[27] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*,30.

[28] Ibid

[29] Ibid

[30] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?,* 28-30.

[31] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*,31.

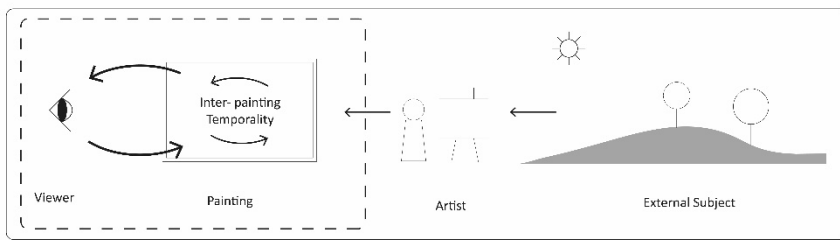[32] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction?*,30-31.

Diagram 6: Andrew Benjamin's interpretive framework

Using Andrew Benjamin forementioned framework, an argument can be made of Bronte Leighton- Dore's landscape paintings and the avant-garde nature of these works. While it is certainly too ambitious here to provide a comprehensive discourse on the 'avant-garde', attention must still be given to a definition in a contemporary context before proceeding. This is especially the case from an art historical understanding where the denotation is typically associated the development within modernism and critically if one is to accept the position that art's evolutionary finality no longer holds true.

According to Deleuzean philosophy the role of art is the creation of percepts and affects composed through the negotiation of artistic variables such as technique and medium [33]. From an art historical view, the percepts and affects that artwork produced evolved over time, such is the academic exercise of identifying and delimiting the bounds of such broad shifts. While these marked disciplinary shifts may be retrospectively identified, there is an added difficulty in such an exercise when performed at the vanguard of historicity, especially within the contemporary milieu of artistic plurality. In the case of such pluralism and from the forementioned notion of art's role, the 'avant-garde' should not be restricted to define a specific genre[34]. This is Andrew Benjamin's claim. Rather the 'avant-garde' should be a term used to distinguish artworks which generate novel percepts and affects from those works which merely reproduce visual sensations of historical precedents. To define the 'avant-garde' as the sole production of novel visual sensations (the optical) would be too simplistic, however, and a reversion to a somewhat modernist understanding of chronological finality. As Andrew Benjamin pertains, the term 'avant-garde' should encompass works that generates impetus on two fronts, firstly in their capacity to advance interpretive dialogue within the historicity of art and secondly concerning experimentation in artistic production[35].

It is incorrect to state that historicity is to be disregarded in Andrew Benjamin's position, rather he repositions the 'avant-garde' from a mere social-historical demarcation to a philosophical concept, in a similar vein as with his reframing of abstraction. The 'avant-garde' is not viewed as simply a resistance, reaction, rejection, or negation of a precedent diachronically or even from a synchronic assessment framed within an oppositional logic.

"The avant-garde is not simply negativity.... The limit will not be an absolute but rather exist as a site of tension at which in spite of the presence of the understanding [through which tradition works] it can no longer be said to dominate. The closure of homology and tradition opens[36]".

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[33] Deleuze and Felix. *What is Philosophy?*191-192.

[34] Andrew, Benjamin, What is Abstraction?,38.

[35] Andrew, Benjamin, What is Abstraction?, 41.

[36] Andrew, Benjamin, Art, Mimesis, and the Avant-Garde,53.

No longer is historicity a static bedrock for the new ('avant-garde') be built on top, and subsequently fossilised – as in modernism -or even a ground to be selectively extracted, reconstituted, and conglomerated – the postmodern project -. Rather it can be conceptualised as a dynamic mixture in which new ingredients are constantly added, mixed, and catalysed. Like the brewing within a witch's cauldron, the past is acknowledged as well as actively engaged to be reinterpreted through experimentation enabling new futures to be constantly reimagined (or even foretold), when peered into.

As to what examples constitutes 'avant-garde' abstraction, Andrew Benjamin provides suggestions to this question - what is central, again, is the concept of repetitive difference in contrast to the repetition of the same. With this understanding is clear that any revolutionary project claiming complete novelty is excluded as there would be no instance of repetition, while examples which merely replicate precedent are simply be a repetition of the same[37]. What must occur is a linking of, **1)** repetitive difference found in the concept of perceptual indeterminacy within a painting (the micro) with **2)** repetition on an art historical plane (the macro) while more so recognizing the importance of experimental creative impetus. This allows the project of abstraction to be advanced in terms of interpretive discourse at the site of artistic production. In other words, for artworks to be at the vanguard of abstraction it must simultaneously refer to the historical underpinnings of a genre, in the instance of abstract painting the concept of self-definition, while producing novel percepts and affects through acts of artistic innovation.

Andrew Benjamin has identified four domains of activity within painting in which he believes advances the genre of abstraction, these are **1)** affirmation of the worked surface, **2)** description of installed paintings **3)** presence of disrupted grids and **4)** placement of paint[38]. It must also be noted that these sites of activity are not mutually exclusive and can be found co-presently in a painting. While it is not in the scope of this essay to expound details of what Andrew Benjamin has recognised (examples which are given in his book), particular attention will be given to activity of placed paint as it is of relevance to the abstraction present in the artworks of Bronte Leighton- Dore.

By establishing a framework for 'avant-garde' abstraction above, a comprehensive case can now be made of Bronte Leighton- Dore's landscape paintings and their significance within the genre of abstraction. Graduating in 2018 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, National Arts School in Sydney, Bronte Leighton- Dore has gained local prominence as an emerging Australian artist. Her paintings depicting the diversity of iconic Australian landscapes from temperate coastal bushland to the semi aridic outback, have received acclaim, being twice the finalist of the Art Gallery of NSW, Wynne Prize in 2019 and 2021.

While much can be said about the originality of Bronte Leighton- Dore's compositions, what is significant is in their ability to capture the ethereal qualities of space, time, and movement. Moreover, this spatial-temporal complexity is yielded through the confines of the two-dimensionality of the canvas' surface and reinforced by the medium of paint. Her landscapes not only evidently reference the genre of abstraction though its engagement with question of self-criticality and self-definition of the medium but also arguably advances the tradition of spatial-temporal depiction found throughout the history of landscape paintings.

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[37] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction*?,41.

[38] Andrew, Benjamin, *What is Abstraction*?,41.

Without charting the entire chronology of the landscape genre, examples of artistic techniques used to depict space and temporal dynamism can be identified to have evolved over time. The painting *Tower Hill* (1855), by Eugene von Guerard a pioneer of Australian landscape, is painted in a realistic manner characteristic of the precise botanical illustrations of scientific study. The contrasting weather conditions depicted on either side of the painting is symbolic of the capriciousness of the local climate, while adding a sense of temporality to the arrangement. Formal compositional techniques such as the central arc of the foreground and the gradation in tones from the edge are deployed to clearly emphasize a vanishing point at the centre of the painting. In this setup a classical syntax of geometrical perspective is used to create the illusion of spatial depth within a singular spatial plane.
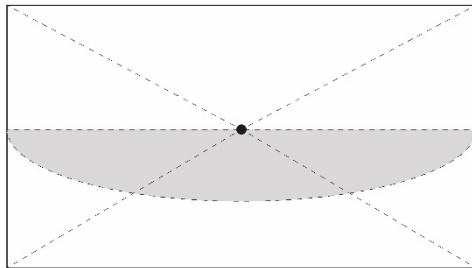

Image 7: *not titled [Hermannsburg watercolour],* Albert Namatjira (1951)

Diagram 7: Illusionary spatiality of Tower Hill (1855)

Another example of spatial depth in landscape painting can be found in the compositions of Albert Namatjira. In his watercolour *not titled [Hermannsburg watercolour],* (1951). Similarly, as in *Tower Hill* the composition of central arc is used to emphasize depth, however instead of a singular vanishing point within a single plane, spatiality is illuded to by using multiple successive planes. Each plane is emphasized by a distinct compositional feature, the mountain ridge occupying the background, the stony outcrop of the midground and the dominance of a gumtree in the foreground. Tonal variance to produce contrast is also deployed to distinguish between the planes. While there is a distinction in the spatial setup of each painting this construction remains static in both instances - that is, there is no movement or capacity for a visual oscillation to occur within each painting. The spatial representation as well as the interpretive capacity of painting marks are relatively fixed e.g. the representation of a tree by the artist is unambiguous interpreted as representative of a tree by the viewer, while the use of formal artistic techniques reinforces this singular interpretative understanding. As such, upon each viewing a repetition of the same representation occurs.
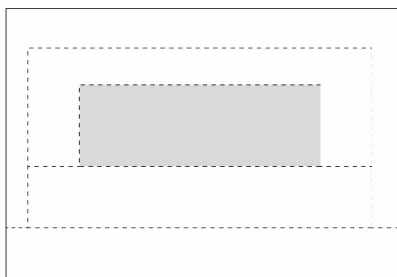

Image 6: *Tower Hill,* Eugene von Guerard (1855)

Diagram 8: Illusionary spatial planes of *not titled [Hermannsburg watercolour], (1951)*

Contrasting the paintings by Eugene von Guerard and Albert Namatjira, the landscapes of Fred Williams introduce a more complex spatial- temporal setup. Acknowledged as an innovator in Australian landscape painting, his reimaging of the Australia's unique topographical vastness draws upon influences in abstract expressionism as well as indigenous artistic traditions. Fred Williams's repertoire is representative of a break from the European formalist tradition previously mentioned. A flatting of spatial representation occurs and a commensurability of 'pictorial space' and the two dimensionality of 'real canvas space' becomes a potential possibility. Although certain works retain a reference of the horizon line, Fred Williams's *You Yangs landscape* (1965) is notable for its complete absence. The consequence of such a gesture is the introduction of interpretative ambiguity, and a spatiality within the painting rendered indeterminant.

Image 8: *You Yangs landscape,* Fred Williams (1965)

A more nuanced articulation of the anatomy of a painting must now be presented to explain what is at work. As previously established, painting sets up a relationship between three spaces. In landscape painting the interpretive relationship between what is depicted (the real landscape) and its reimagination in 'pictorial space' must self-evidently be retained. One means this is achieved is through the setup of a viewing frame. In any perceptual lens the viewing frame sets the bounds of perception, and its orientation is an artistic variable which can be manipulated in a painting. The conceptual setup can be likened to a camera fixed to a tripod allowing the shot angle of the image to be altered. The viewing frame also works to control the scale at which an image is to be received. E.g. a close-up or long shot. Pictorial space can be dissected further, ultimately composing of three elements, **1)** the viewing frame, **2)** the pictorial plane, and **3)** the pictorial surface. The orientation of space within a viewing frame can be termed the pictorial plane, while the surface in which this space relates to is the pictorial surface. To overcome the two-dimensional limits of the canvas space, abstract painting can induce a new spatiality by inciting 'interpretative' movement in pictorial space, or more precisely in any of the three elements which compose it. This is opposed to the construction of a fixed illusory spatiality found in traditional painting.
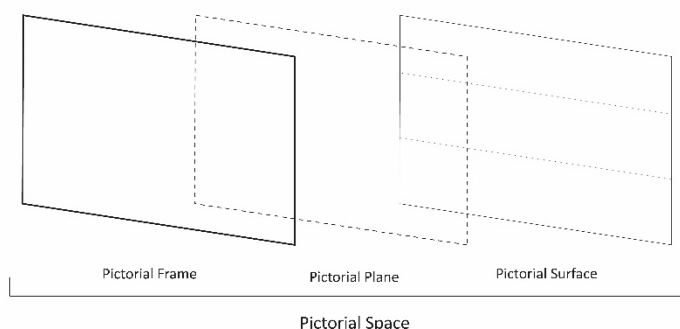
Pictorial Frame   Pictorial Plane   Pictorial Surface

Pictorial Space

Diagram 9: Components of pictorial space

In *You Yangs landscape* (1965) movement in pictorial space is indeed present. The absence of the horizon line unlocks interpretative possibilities in such that the painting could be perceived to depict either a pure perpendicular arial view or   a front-on perspective. Furthermore, the indeterminacy of the marks enables a   scalelessness to endure, in one instance being 'literal paint', shifting in another presentation to possibly reference a vast [imagined] external landscape. Movement of the pictorial plane occurs as it partially demounts itself from the viewing frame. The affect produced by the white and black outline on brown paint allows perceptual depth to manifest and invokes oscillation in the

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inclination angle of the pictorial plane. This occurs as the viewer attempts to reconcile the orientation of this depth in relation to both the flatness of the ground plane and the viewing frame, which remain parallel to it. Uniformity of the pictorial surface is also shattered by this ambiguous determination of depth and a possible perceptual inversion occurs; a landscape of either crevasses, ravines, or a canyon one refencing extruded inselbergs becomes a possibility.
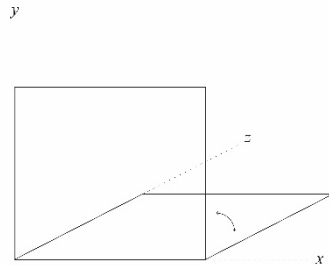

Diagram 10: The indeterminacy of the pictorial frame on the y-x or z-x plane
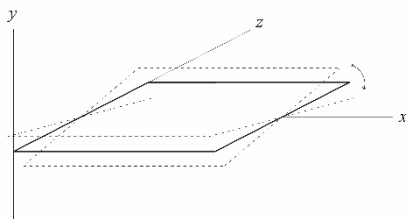

Diagram 11: The oscillation of the pictorial plane on the x- axis

In Bronte Leighton- Dore's compositions, a complex if not more so spatial-temporal framework is established, as evident in her painting *Light Woven Through Clay, Stephen Creek* (2020). Furthermore, similar to Fred Williams, abstraction is advanced though Bronte Leighton- Dore's critical placement of paint. As Andrew Benjamin has identified, the operation of 'placed paint' is a productive site for abstraction's repetition. That is painting's self-critical recognition that it, itself, is a function of the placement paint and how it acts to overcome this through the set-up of its compositional elements. In reference to the first of two movements Andrew Benjamin identifies as making up abstraction's oscillation in pictorial space– that is the continuous capacity of a painting to re-present itself – three mechanisms can be recognised to be at work within Bronte Leighton- Dore's compositions which enable this affect. **1)** The indeterminacy and resulting instability of the pictorial plane. **2)** The deformation of the pictorial surface and **3)** The concurrent manifestation of multiple pictorial planes.

Image 9: *Light Woven Through Clay, Stephen Creek,* Bronte Leighton- Dore (2020)

While in *You Yangs landscape* (1965) perceptual oscillation of the pictorial plane occurs only around the fixed x-y axis, in relation to the ground plane, in Bronte Leighton- Dore's painting the pictorial plane demounts entirely from the viewing frame. As no gestural mark establishes a definitive spatial reference to an external reality (e.g. horizon line, ground plane), perceptual movement within the painting occurs as the viewer attempts at reconciling this ambiguity. The composition of the gestural marks offers many possible alternative interpretations challenging the construct of a two-dimensional pictorial plane. The tonal intensity and central dominance of foreground gestures appear to suggest an elevated horizon and thus a tiling of the pictorial plane downwards.

This interpretation, however, is subsequently contested by the compositions on the left and right of the canvas, where a more up-right viewing frame predominates. The threshold between ground a sky is rendered unstable, fluctuating within and in-between viewings. Movement of the pictorial plane is analogous to pane of glass when opposing forces are applied to its edges. The resulting movement leads to regions of differential stress, culminating to the shattering of the pane. The resulting shattered formation is only one potential resolution in a single temporal instance and due to the continuous movement, a repetitive re-fragmentation occurs. The complexity arising from the fragmentation of the pictorial plane is further multiplied by the deformation of the corresponding pictorial surface(s).
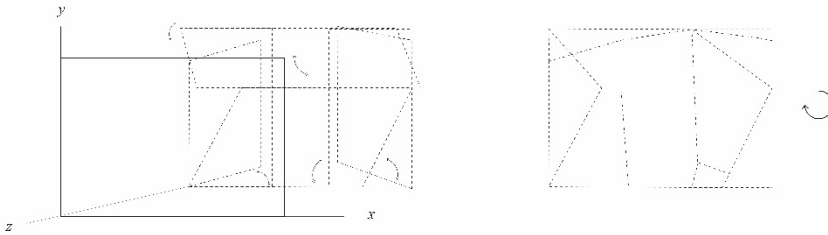

Diagram 12: The dismounting, shattering and re-fragmentation of the pictorial plane.

In its literal state the presentation of 'pictorial surface' is flat and parallel with the plane of the canvas. However, due to how the medium of paint is applied, such as variation in stoke width, curvature, application density, tonal intensity, the resulting compositional relationship allows deformations to present itself. Several vanishing points seem to appear within the pictorial space, distorting the pictorial surface. This presentation can be metaphorically conceptualised through Einstein's gravitational model in which spacetime can be imagined as a flexible surface. The intensity of gravitational force is visually illustrated by the distortion of spacetime caused by the placement of mass on this surface. The perceptual oscillation between the literal flatness of the 'pictorial surface' and its re-fragmentation further operates to continuously alter the presentation of these distortions.
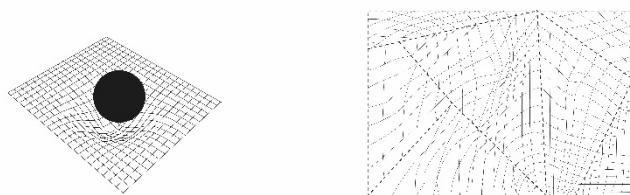

**Diagram 13:** Distortion of space-time is analogous to the distortion of the pictorial surface.

The considered use of colour and the blank canvas is another a feature of Bronte Leighton- Dore's compositions and work in conjunction to induce the third mechanism of movement. The blank canvas features prominently in her compositions and its importance in allowing 'movement' within a painting is also recognised by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

"However, blocs need pockets of air and emptiness, because even the void is sensation. All sensation is composed with the void in composing itself with itself, and everything holds together on earth and in the air, and preserves the void, is

preserved in the void by preserving itself. A canvas may be completely full to the point that even the air no longer gets through, but it is only a work of art if, as the Chinese painter says, it nonetheless saves enough empty space for horses to prance in (even if this is only through the variety of planes)."[39]

The blank canvas in one instance, operates to firmly ground the paint marks to the real canvas space and strengthening its compositional unity. In such a viewing the literalness of each paint mark is reinforced, and a flattening occurs making 'pictorial space' equivalent to canvas space'. The consummation of both planes synchronises the seemly discordant composition into a unity. It is the very use of the blank canvas, however, which subsequently undermines this unity, as the empty space allows for each mark to be individually articulated. As the marks do not create a pictorial surface that seeks an illusion to spatial depth, through tonal gradation, when viewed as a compositional whole, the flatness established in a prior instance is shattered by each individual mark and their interrelations. The result is a perceptual oscillation between a perceptual whole and fragmentation into its constituent gestures. The composition of each brushstroke combined with use of colour transpires not only to a fragmentation of perceptual unity among compositional elements but also of the pictorial plane itself.

Visually, the representative pastel hues allude to the qualities of each depicted landscape e.g. the green and blue hues of coastal forests to the contrasting ochre and deep blue of a desertscape. The use of contrasting hues operates together with the blank canvas, by further contrasting each gestural mark from each other. The visual presentation of overlapping paint stokes directly introduces temporality into the painting. It becomes possible for the application sequence of the marks to be deciphered. Although the composition allows some level of interpretation regarding the application sequence of each brushstroke when viewed in an isolated region, when examined in its entirety this initial comprehension is challenged by the complexity and number of stokes. From a perceptual level, the oscillation between the resolution of the compositional sequence and its subsequent indetermination, produces an affect which can be described as a spatial- temporal delamination. As the viewer attempts to articulate the sequential composition of the painting, the gestural marks become perceptually individualised, and breakdown of the singular 'pictorial plane' begins to occur. Multiple parallel pictorial planes subsequently manifest with each plane corresponding to a single individual gestural mark and the temporal instance of its creation. The delamination of the pictorial plane liberates each brushstroke from the limits of the canvas, hence opening-up a depth and notion of an original spatiality within the pictorial space. Like the motion of shuffling cards, the act to decipher the sequential composition of the painting and its ultimate indetermination allows for perpetual perceptual movement and a constant reinvention of this spatiality.

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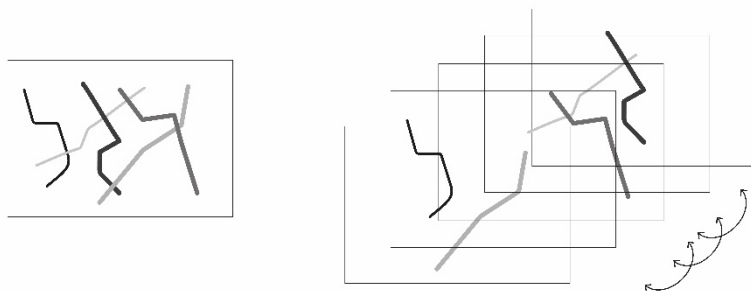
[39] Deleuze and Felix. *What is Philosophy?*165-166

Diagram 14: The mechanism of spatial temporal delamination of the pictorial plane.

The ontological instability of painting marks in relation to objects in real space is the second form of movement occurring within the economy of abstraction. In Bronte Leighton- Dore's paintings the fluid expressionism of her brushstrokes allows for a site of multiple interpretations. Gestural marks shift in separate temporal instances, from suggesting the sky to a forest canopy and alter from depicting the ground plane to signifying undergrowth vegetation. The success in Bronte Leighton- Dore's compositions lies not in their depiction of a tangible reality, however, but in their capture of an ethereal 'sense of place'. It is in the simultaneous ability for her paint marks to reference both the physical as well as sensuous qualities such as the light and movement that distinguishes her compositions.

Image 11: *A lightness of touch, a being with and feeling into space,* Bronte Leighton- Dore (2021)

When comparing her paintings *Blue to eye's touch, Merlin's Lookout* (2019) and *A lightness of touch, a being with and feeling into space* (2021) both Wynne Prize entries for years 2019 and 2021 respectively, an emerging refinement of her oeuvre is apparent. In her earlier composition, while suggestive, an apprehensive rigidity of stokes is still evident in the depiction the vegetation and the background. This results in a less interpretative ambiguity and spatial flatness. This is contrasted to her subsequent entry where a greater fluidity is extruded by her brushstrokes. The elements within this imagined landscape provide the chance for greater interpretative flexibility. The reception of the tree and its constituent elements is rendered uncertain due to the contrasting hues and fragmentation of individual brushstrokes. The application of paint is also reminiscent of tree bark patterns characteristic of certain eucalyptus trees. Spatial depth is not only alluded by the movements as described above in pictorial space, but more formally in the tonal variance, suggestive of light and shadow. A spatial temporal complexity is constructed by the accentuation of certain strokes, indicating a contradictory multidirectional light source, its exact location ultimately indeterminable. The painterly affect is the allusion to movement – of the sun, clouds, vegetation, atmosphere – and hence the infusion of temporality directly within the composition itself.

Image 10: *Blue to eye's touch, Merlin's Lookout,* Bronte Leighton- Dore (2019)

While a certain maturity in Bronte Leighton- Dore's oeuvre has been reached, it is evident that abstraction and its potential for spatial- temporal complexity is undermined in certain compositions. It must be noted that the criticism expressed here should not be taken as a detraction but rather should serve as a counterpoint to emphasis the successful instances of her technique. In the painting *To the Water's Edge, Bermagui State Forest* (2023) the suggestive potential for an interpretative spatiality to emerge within pictorial space is restricted by the clear demarcation of horizon line. In this respect, a clear foreground, middle-ground, and background is determinable, leading to a relatively fixed and somewhat formal spatial setup. A definitive spatial reference is established, first by the horizon line and secondly reinforced by the painted surfaces of the sea and sky. The consequence of these gestures is that a determinable relationship between the painted brushstrokes is established, grounded firmly within the given pictorial space. This contrasts with the affect given by a blank background, typical of her other paintings, where an ambiguity remains over the situation of paint marks- either in pictorial or canvas space. As such a spatial- temporal delamination of the individual brushstrokes, depicting the forest-scape, does not occur as in her other compositions. An imagined spatiality within pictorial space does not eventuate and the literal flatness of the canvas prevails. To use critical jargon, self-criticality of the medium is not achieved as the flatness of canvas space is not overcome through paint. In this scenario, due to the relatively fixed representations of the composition, movement within the economy of abstraction is weak. An interpretive
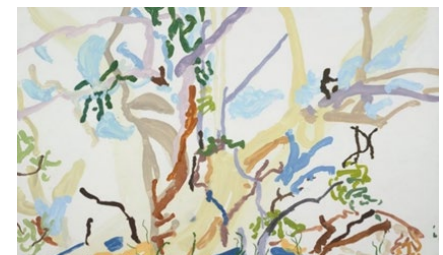
Image 12: Tree bark patterns of a eucalyptus tree

Image 13: *To the Water's Edge, Bermagui State Forest,* Bronte Leighton- Dore (2023)

engagement with the viewer is eventually exhausted and a perpetual re-presentation of affects does not arise.

What Andrew Benjamin has demonstrated through his discourse and what has been confirmed by the landscape paintings of Bronte Leighton Dore is that the notion of abstraction within the discipline of painting is not exhausted. Innovative, avant-garde works of art which challenge and recast the historicity of their respective genres as well as producing novel affects continue to be produced. Art's finality is ultimately a misconstrued notion. Clement Greenburg was indeed right to be critical of the intrusion of external agendas into art's domain robbing it of its agency. What Andrew Benjamin has achieved through his 'economy of abstraction' is to firmly reaffirm the creative impetus of art. More precisely the authority of art's is ultimately situated with the artist and its power distributed among the viewing public. The masses are no longer docile receivers of an imposed agenda and the artist no longer a mere vassal for its communication. The role of the artist is not as purveyors of an idealised vision, or to simply reflect the world as it is. It is far more potent. If the fear is the reduction of artist and consequently their art into tools for propaganda, the antidote is the simulation and awakening of humanity's imaginative capacity. The masses should become active participants in the reception of art and be presented with opportunities to create their own alternative potentialities. It is in this instance that the torpor of the banal and mundane can be challenged and a resistance against the oppressive forces of life can be mounted. To incite such imaginative potential is the enduring power of abstraction.

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