1999

Painting the lines of connection between time, space and memory

Debra Dawes

University of Wollongong

Recommended Citation

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
PAINTING THE LINES OF CONNECTION BETWEEN
TIME, SPACE AND MEMORY

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF CREATIVE ARTS

FROM

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

BY

DEBRA DAWES

FACULTY OF CREATIVE ARTS

1999
CERTIFICATION

I certify that this work has not been submitted for a degree to any other university or institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

Debra Dawes
December 14, 1999.
ABSTRACT

This document examines a number of works produced from 1990-1999. The works discussed are Houndstooth, Starlite, Gray Spectra, Trace of Passage and Lifting the Sky.

The interconnections between time, space and memory are analysed through exploring the broader concern of the primacy of personal experience within my creative process.

I critically analyse the pictorial structures in the paintings of Piet Mondrian. This analysis sets up the subsequent analysis of pictorial structures that operate within my own work. Within Mondrian’s development I show how each visual shift away from pictorialism embodied not only a complex of ideas, but also a visual language that has become foundational in the structure of my own pictorial order.

Gray Spectra is the primary body of work under investigation within this document. The structural and spatial concerns deployed in Gray Spectra are explored via the metaphor of the hummingbird. The hummingbird is a telling symbol connecting the two main threads that Gray Spectra brings together. The narratives within Gray Spectra embody the themes of time, space and memory. Their lines of connection are drawn in the form of a personal narrative.

The subject of landscape within Lifting the Sky is scrutinised through the experience and the memory of spatial and temporal representations. Within Lifting the Sky, I reflect upon the relationship between the body and space and the ways in which we respond to space and inhabit space.
Each chapter within this document offers a specific focus which, when brought together as a whole, weaves an analysis which aims to provide an understanding of the many processes involved in my creative practice.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 1

Introduction 2

Chapter One
The Link to Mondrian 8
Houndstooth 1991 and Starlite 1993 in Retrospect 26

Chapter Two
Gray Spectra and the Hummingbird 44

Chapter Three
Gray Spectra: Granny Rainbow and the Heart 62
Trace of Passage 75

Chapter Four
Gray Spectra and Summer 1963 94

Chapter Five
Lifting the Sky 110

Conclusion 147

Appendix 152

Bibliography 156

List of Figures 164
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To those who have been closely involved with the process of the writing of this document, I wish to express my gratitude for the support given to me throughout the intricate processes of research, writing, contemplation and editing.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of the following people:

Professor Sue Rowley, my first supervisor, with whom I argued and resisted the virtues of autobiography as a model.

Professor Sharon Bell, who as my second supervisor, suggested the process of ‘reflection’ as a model.

Dr. Kurt Brereton, my third and last supervisor, for his reading and structural advice, for his technical assistance in the production of the document and for his kind persistence in the difficult final stages.

Dr. Diana Wood-Conroy, who read the first draft and gave sound structural advice.

I would like to thank Julia St. George for her overall support throughout this process but particularly for her thorough proof-reading of the document.

Jacky Redgate, who has also been a reader.

Michael Young for his technical assistance.

Julian Dawes van den Berg and Jelle van van den Berg, thankyou for everything.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Ross Gibson, who has facilitated the writing of this document with a wisdom that only he could impart.
INTRODUCTION

The supporting document you are about to read, is a bridge between the now and then. It constructs a link between a decade of work, ranging from 1990 to the most recent work produced in 1999.

Through a process of reflection, my aim is to articulate the interrelatedness between these works. This process of reflection has led to an understanding that while the earlier work is a condition of the later works, the later works have determined the parameters through which the earlier works may be understood.

Chapter one establishes the work of the artist Piet Mondrian (Amersfoort Holland, 1872-1944) as the pivotal link for the subsequent analysis of pictorial structures that operate within my work. I have cited the earlier work of Mondrian so that his development toward an 'abstract' mode of representation may be understood in terms of its connection to a 'naturalistic' mode of representation which I refer to as 'pictorialism'. Within Mondrian’s development I want to show how each visual shift away from pictorialism embodied not only a complex of ideas, but also a visual language that imbued this relatedness. Bridget Riley (an English painter and critic) discusses this feature of Mondrian’s work in the following quote and provides another nuance to understanding his project:

With his elements he built coherent visual realities, using pictorial forces and contrasts as an integral part of his order.

In this respect, if one can put Abstraction as such on hold, Mondrian works in the principle as any painter would who follows in Giotto’s footsteps. Giotto’s great contribution (so much venerated by Matisse) was to build a painting as a place in its own right through the distinction of spaces, the massing of forms, the creation of areas of repose and
friction. His depiction of humanist realities grew quite naturally out of his organising of pictorial realities as the primary task. (Riley, 753)

The fundamental principle of Mondrian’s work is the understanding of the interconnectedness between the terms that he deployed to create the ‘areas of repose and friction’. Riley continues this proposition:

Mondrian’s continual references in his writings to the ‘universal’ and the ‘particular’ centre on their relationship, and he builds a pictorial order to manifest this relationship’. (Riley, 753)

If we consider Mondrian’s ‘pictorial order’ as a manifestation of the interplay between two terms in which neither is dominant nor excluded. A balance between the universal (or the general) and the particular, or to say it another way, a model of equilibrium is achieved. We may begin to understand the connection between this model and how my own work has developed in relation to it. We may then consider, on the scales of balance, the paradigm which approximates my own work is not one of equilibrium, but one which errs toward the particular.

The second part of chapter one acquaints the reader with the parameters of an uneasy sense of balance as seen in my earlier works, Houndstooth (Mori Gallery, Leichhardt, 1991) and Starlite (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993). The astute description ‘uneasy sense of balance’ was first used by Victoria Lynn in the catalogue for the exhibition Abstraction also curated by Lynn at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1990.

The earlier work shares with this series an uneasy sense of balance………..Dawes denies the grid its equilibrium (Lynn, 8).

I use the concept of the particular in relation to experience throughout the
The installation Gray Spectra (Exhibited at Sherman Galleries Goodhope, Sydney in 1996) and focuses on the structural and spatial concerns deployed in the work via the metaphor of the hummingbird. This may be understood in a number of ways. For instance, the hummingbird may be understood as a model of the way in which an artist may bring together parts of the world in order to construct a work. Similarly, it may be seen as a model of the way in which the viewer may piece together and construct meaning. The model of the hummingbird is also suggestive of a larger theoretical model for creating work. All of these models are relevant and appropriate. The interconnecting theme of time, space and memory is discussed in relation to the physical space of the installation.

There are two main threads that the installation Gray Spectra brings together. Both threads are gathered from my life, from my experience and are taken across that invisible threshold and into the world of the public institution of art.

Chapter three discusses one of these threads. It is a narrative of connection which draws together the two objects in Gray Spectra, the heart and the photograph, entitled Granny Rainbow Reframed. The life experience encountered behind these objects is documented in this chapter.

The link between the photograph and the heart has prompted a further investigation of the connection between the life of Granny Rainbow and my own life and work. The outcome of the investigation resulted in a trip to Ireland. The process of negotiating this rather extraordinary experience is rendered in series of work entitled Trace of Passage. Trace of Passage continues to further shape the themes of continuity/discontinuity, time, space and memory that previously
appear in *Gray Spectra*.

Chapter four draws together another connection between two objects in *Gray Spectra*. This time it is the thread between the objects *Summer 1963* and the painting *Gray Spectra*. The narrative behind this connection recalls the visual structures of pictorialism and planar space. These discrete spatial structures are contemplated in relation to the concepts of time, as representations of the past and the present. The painting of Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue and Black* (1921), is referenced to provide an example of the present and in this case the simultaneous moment.

I discuss the thinking that connects these structures to the spatial paradigm in the painting *Gray Spectra*. The paradigm is one that creates an optical tension and unrest on the surface of the painting, a visual model through which we understand the link to a particular time and place. The narrative that follows, describes a childhood experience which has broad social, political and philosophical implications for my work. From this experience, I have extracted the key elements that are interwoven in the painting. The narrative invokes the interplay between the general and the particular; black and white; the past and the present.

While embracing the themes that have have flowed through from previous works, the installation *Lifting the Sky*, (exhibited at Sherman Galleries Goodhope, 1999) is also a discrete meditation. Time, space and memory are once more the focus in chapter five, where they are refigured in the genre of landscape.

The subject of landscape within *Lifting the Sky* is scrutinised through the experience and the memory of spatial and temporal representations. Within this paradigm I reflect upon the relationship between the body and space and the ways in which we respond to space and inhabit space.
Each chapter within this document offers a specific focus which, when brought together as a whole, weaves an analysis which aims to provide an understanding of the many processes involved in my creative practice.
1. Photograph of the Polder, North Holland, 1983.
1.1 The Link to Mondrian

To reflect on a decade of one’s creative practice, is to come to an understanding of the interplay between the separateness and continuity of each body of work and the relationship between each painting. The patterns that emerge in the sequential nature of the work over time, reveal varying degrees of the concerns that are either present and highly visible or present and barely visible. Nevertheless the thread that connects them is always there. When I am thinking through a body of work it is impossible to sever my thinking from previous works and similarly it is impossible to think about a single frame unless I think about where it fits within a sequence.

The specific terms of reference that are addressed within a single frame is also subject to the same interplay between concepts. For instance, it is impossible for me to think about a horizontal line without thinking about a vertical; it is impossible to think about distance without thinking about closeness; it is impossible to think about blue without thinking about orange.

The interplay between terms reveals itself as a particular pattern that is continually expressed in my work albeit in different ways. The development of this process began in art school where I understood from colour studies that the most incredible tension may be experienced from the right mix of colour and tone. At the core of this engagement was the theory of complementary colour. I also understood that in terms of form, less is more. I began to simplify forms from imagined landscapes which developed into geometric shapes.
2 Piet Mondrian, *Polder Landscape* (1904-08), black crayon and gouache on paper, 39.5cm x 59.3cm.
As an underlying strategy for constructing an image, the interplay between terms gathered momentum in 1983, after I had experienced the work of Piet Mondrian at the State Museum Kroller - Muller, Otterlo and the Gemeentemuseum in Den Haag. I don’t remember the specific paintings although I do remember the impact they had on me at the time. I was intrigued by the painterliness of the works which I had only ever seen reproduced on glossy pages in books, and moreover I was compelled by the simplicity and complexity in the paintings. From that moment I embarked upon an enquiry to understand the potency of these images. I have come to appreciate more and more the sophistication of his ideas in relation to the refinement of his forms.

It is appropriate that I begin with Mondrian because his work has been instrumental in the development of my own thinking. The key elements in Mondrian’s painting from which I have drawn lines of connection to my own work are highlighted by the following sequence.

The sequence of images is a selection of drawings and paintings from 1904 to 1917 and notes Mondrian recorded in his sketch book. From this sequence I want to understand, firstly, how Mondrian used line as a means of ‘economising’ a scene, ridding a plane of irrelevant detail and revealing fundamental structures of vertical and horizontal lines. In other words, I want to see how by using lines to lift away obscuring veils of excess detail the paintings become geometric. Secondly, I want to understand how the paintings become ‘planar’, that is, to understand the shift from the structure of pictorialism which consists of three major planes to the system of one existing plane, in a way that makes them simplified constructions not only of what Mondrian sees but overlays of what he wants us to see. These two aspects of Mondrian’s work provide the key to understanding the complex interplay between his repertoire of terms which lead to and continue in the visual, philosphical and spiritual structure called
Neoplasticism. (Neoplasticism is a term derived from Mondrian’s text The *New Plastic in Painting* which comprises over 200 pages and was completed in 1917.)

I am looking at the first group of images, beginning with *Polder-Landscape* (1904-08), *Woods near Oele* (1906) and *Trees on Gein at Moonrise* (1907-13). All these drawings show how Mondrian has organised the landscape pictorially, according to foreground, mid-ground and back-ground. In the first two drawings, *Polder Landscape* and *Woods Near Oele* there is a dominance of horizontality and verticality respectively. The rendering of the furrowed soil and the trees as patterned texture and tonal planes, is consistent with the pictorial shift from foreground to background. The contrast of texture is most intense in the foreground and diminishes as the eye recedes into the background. However, the contrast in the background is much greater than it could be - the eye is held firmly by the line of tonal contrast on the horizon.

Mondrian’s decision not to further diminish the tone in the receding background indicates the existence of an early play with the tension between the foreground and the background. The visual proximity of the horizon line which lessens the illusion of distance between foreground and background, is perhaps Mondrian’s expression of the experience of flatness in the Dutch landscape.

The predisposition to geometry as a visual structure within landscape is clear in *Polder Landscape* and *Woods Near Oele*. The following notes, made by Mondrian, taken from a sketch book dated 1914-1916, enrich our understanding of the thinking embodied in these images.

Since the male principle is the vertical line, a man shall recognise this element in the ascending trees of a forest; he sees his complement in the horizontals of the sea. A woman will recognise herself in the horizontal line of the sea. The woman, with the horizontal line as characteristic element, recognizes herself in the recumbent lines of the sea and sees
4. Piet Mondrian, *Trees on Gein at Moonrise* (1907-13), charcoal on brown paper, 63cm x 75cm.
herself complemented in the vertical lines of the forest. (Holtzman and James, 18)

In *Trees on Gein at Moonrise* there is the beginning of a shift from the overt dominance of either the vertical movement or the horizontal movement within the composition. In its composition, this drawing incorporates both the horizontal and the vertical in a relationship that initiates play between the spaces of the vertical lines of the trees and their reflections and the horizontal lines of the horizon and the waters edge. The attitude toward a more balanced image that we see in *Trees on Gein at Moonrise* prefigures the later philosophical concern of attaining equilibrium through the deployment of oppositions.

In the next group of works, *Composition with Trees* 1912-13 and *The Sea* 1914, in terms of the relationship between landscape and geometry, geometry is overwhelming. There is however another set of terms that are central to his thinking in these works - space and form.

In terms of this severely reduced range of marks, which in the version painted on canvas consistently avoid making closed forms or planes of any kind, Mondrian asserted that ‘Art has to determine space as well as form and to create the equivalence of these two factors’. (Joosten, 55)

There are two significant shifts from the pictorialism depicted in the earlier works (ie *Polder Landscape*, *Woods Near Oele*, and *Trees on Gein at Moonrise*). In *Composition with Trees* and *The Sea*, the line of the horizon disappears. This absence brings into focus Mondrian’s attitude to spatial depth, which at this stage, does not rely on the pictorial structure. Forms are given spatial definition in relation to other forms through the use of tonal values, thereby defining closeness or distance.
5. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Trees* (1912 - 13), lean oil on canvas, 81cm x 62 cm.
When comparing *The Sea* and *Pier and Ocean (Composition No 10 1915)*, Mondrian's intentions to explore the balance between form and space is further demonstrated by the marginal use of tonal changes in the lines of the latter. Instead the lines vary slightly in width which indicate a very shallow illusion of depth within the picture plane. John Milner describes *Pier and Ocean (Composition no 10)* in his book entitled *Mondrian* (125) in terms that are consistent with my reading of the image. Milner describes the precise placing of each small conjunction of lines through which emerges

the larger crossing of the vertical emphasis...

The pier projects: the sea expands. They are locked in continuous opposition, congregating towards substantial form, dispersing into broad surfaces. The painting has, as a result, a tempo, a pulse, vitality- in a word a rhythm. That rhythm is not solely the ocean's movement, however, for a man-made form projects against it. The pier and the ocean are in interplay and opposition. (125)

Milner's description raises the pier and the ocean as a set of terms which are concrete in the painting. By contrast, as the following quote reveals, Mondrian writes less in the concrete and more in the abstract. His ideas embody a complex of spiritual and philosophical thought.

Opposites are complementary and are necessary in the achievement of equilibrium. Equilibrated duality leads to happiness in life, to unity and repose in art; beauty can thus be created, as an expression of the life force. (Holtzman and James, 16)

Mondrian's interest in theosophy at this time is well documented. The ideas expressed in this quote are linked to theosophy, which Holland Cotter in *Abstraction and the True Believer* regards as:
6. Piet Mondrian, *The Sea* (1914), gouache, ink on paper, 49.5cm x 63 cm.
a blend of Western and non-Western sources which teaches, among other things, that humans are evolving from a concern with the individual toward an embrace of the universal, from a material toward a spiritual mode of being. (75)

Moreover, Martin S. James adds to the influence of theosophy the much written about influence of Hegel.

The aesthetic theories of Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831), in which art appears as a manifestation of Spirit, strongly appealed to idealist art circles in Holland. It was from this sphere of thought that Mondrian assimilated the concepts of neutralising opposition, of abstract and concrete, universal and individual, spirit and nature, determinate and indeterminate- all terms used interconnectedly in “The New Plastic in Painting” (1915-1917). (Holtzman and James, 18)

Equilibrium of opposites as a desired outcome in Mondrian’s painting was to be an integral part of the intellectual framework that he continued to explore from the beginning of Neo-plasticism in 1917 to the end of his life in 1944.

The sequence shows so far that observation of the landscape, the sea and the sky facilitates a slow re-organisation of a spatial system based on pictorialism, to a spatial system based on figure ground relationships. Within this shift from one system to another, we see yet another shift which involves the simplicification of forms in the landscape. The objects that formerly occupied a particular space within the landscape, and were given the presence of volume are now represented as horizontal and vertical lines.

*Composition with Lines (Composition in Black and White)* (1917) takes the principles of *Pier and Ocean* much further and eliminates all descriptive references. The eye
7. Piet Mondrian, *Pier and Ocean (Composition No 10)* (1915), oil on canvas, 85cm x 110cm.
is now moved by the lines around the canvas as well as through the varying relationships of depth articulated by these lines on the surface of the painting. The absence of pictorial space and the fading reference to landscape signals a more independent presence of the ideas that influenced Mondrian’s early rendition of the landscape. *Composition with Lines (Composition in Black and White [1917])* which deploys the small verticals and horizontals to define the shape of the circle within the square, and at the same time asserts an openness and expansion on and across the surface within a defined and limited space, is an example of the way in which Mondrian thinks between his designed terms of reference. Milner ascribes to this painting terms that are consistent with a theosophical perspective.

However active the parts, the whole is still changeless and permanent, as eternity contains events in theosophical theory. Simplicity contains diversity just as silence contains sounds and eternity contains time. (Milner, 130)

*Composition with Colour Planes* (1917) extends the terms that are explored in *Composition with Lines (Composition in Black and White)* by including two elements that had previously been excluded from this trajectory toward Neoplasticism, that is, the closed plane and colour.

The complicity between oppositional relationships and geometric concerns that we see in *Composition with Colour Planes* is reiterated in *The New Plastic in Painting* written by Mondrian in 1917.

Thus by expansion and limitation (the extreme opposites...) an equilibrated relationship of position is created- the perpendicular relationship. (Holtzman and James, 38)
8. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Lines (Composition in Black and White)* (1917), oil on canvas, 108.4 cm x 108.4 cm.
The perpendicular relationship, expansion and limitation, result in the formation of the plane which in turn developed into a modular system that Mondrian would continue working with until July, 1919. The inclusion of colour in relation to the spatial figuring of the plane further enhances the possibility to extend relationships of form and space. Milner is astute in his reading of this painting in relation to Mondrian’s exploration of the relationship between expansion and limitation within a painting.

This is an art of relationship in which no relationship of two planes ever recurs. Around the focal red unfolds an intricate interplay of relationships defined by colour, proportion and position, expanding visually from the static core outwards into a multitude of different relationships. The eye is proffered two spatial readings, one of which is flat while the other suggests depth of field. (Milner, 133)

In Composition with Light Colours and Grey Lines (1919) the system of pictorialism has vanished from view and the movement towards achieving planar space is complete. The painting is constructed according to a modular system which was worked out mathematically.

All of these planes and lines are interrelated proportionally to each other. Milner, again, reads the image according to the interplay between the terms of limitation and possibilities within the painting.

In elaborating on a regular grid, Mondrian literally had to face the fact of a limited range of possible adjustments. As one rectangle grew in size, it diminished the space available to others, which in turn must be adjusted. The parts actually related to each other, and the canvas as whole was a limited system within which balance had to be found. (Milner, 150)
9. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Colours A (Composition in Planes of Pure Colour on White Background)* (1917), oil on canvas, 50cm x 44 cm.
I have traced the conceptual parameters that engaged Mondrian so completely in his early development. The parallels that emerge from this enquiry have been drawn in relation to two interdependent systems. The first is the line that represents the development of the structure of pictorialism to the structure of planar space. The second is the line that represents the geometrization of the landscape to the modular system. These interrelated lines of development are the pivotal link to understanding the structures that operate within my own practice.

When Mondrian articulated the perpendicular relationship into a rectangle it would become a plane of colour in space. Within the realm of possibilities of technology, paint on canvas may be regarded as a limitation, but as a model for thinking it presents limitless possibilities. When he spoke of ‘limitation and expansion in relationship’ in 1917, Mondrian put into place a model which would facilitate continual interplay between terms that would refer not only to painting itself but would extend beyond the frame and into the world. Understanding the tensions between material and concept, limitation and expansion in Mondrian’s work has become foundational in the development of my own thinking.

Throughout this document I will at times draw on Mondrian, as I have done for almost two decades in my practice, but I wish to make it clear that while Mondrian has provided the provocation, it is my own conceptual material that I wish to explore.
10. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Light Colours and Grey Lines* (1919), oil on canvas, 49cm x 49cm.
1.2 Houndstooth (1991) and Starlite (1993) in Retrospect.

This second part of the chapter will draw from the terms established by Mondrian, or more precisely, the relationship between the terms limitation and expansion, and discuss the way in which the dynamic between these terms extend into the realm of my own practice.

The discussion will explore the terms limitation and expansion as a grid for thinking, or if you like, a philosophical template wherein oppositional terms are rendered inseparable and connected rather than hierarchical and exclusive.

I will begin with a series of work entitled *Houndstooth*, exhibited at Mori Gallery in Leichhardt in 1991.

A critique of *Houndstooth* by Charles Green exemplifies the strategy of oppositional relationships at work whereby an interplay between the terms is established.

Dawes’ *Large Verticals* 1991, exhibited a double allegiance: all the pleasures of a detailed inspection of truly sensuous paintwork and the rigour of a serial installation’s minimal imagery. The artist’s large rectangles of black or white were carefully spaced and edged to create optical after-images. Final closure on either aspect- intellectual citation of historical reference or handmade pleasure- was blocked. Neither the overall field of formal relationships nor the minute play of handmade difference was allowed to dominate. ....The artists’ contradictory signals defeated references to the inflected field of landscape and to the utopian spaces of formalist abstraction. (Green, 56)

*Houndstooth* consists of four parts, each part a sequence, and is installed in three quite different spaces within the gallery.
The first sequence is entitled *Squares* (23cm sq.) and consists of four pieces. The second sequence is entitled *Small Verticals* (60 x 50cm) and consists of three pieces. The third sequence is entitled *Large Verticals* (180 x 120cm) and consists of three pieces. The fourth sequence is entitled *Horizontals* (150 x 60cm) and consists of five pieces.

The first space, upon entering the gallery, contains two sequences; one sequence consists of four small square paintings, a line is painted on the border of the frame, suggesting either another expanse or a border. Either way, the line delineates a plane of colour and draws attention to the surface within the frame. Placed opposite in this space a second series; three paintings, a vertical in which the vertical was emphasised by another vertical line, dividing the space within the canvas into black and white. The resonance of black and white is varied each time.

From this space, there is an opening into the large internal space of the gallery where three large vertical paintings are installed, an echo of the three already seen in the first space. On the edges of the horizontal frame is painted another horizontal, broken, so that one is placed at the bottom and another at the top. Again, the broken line may imply expansion or confinement.

The second level of the gallery may be viewed partially from within this internal space. Looking above the large verticals the line of the fourth series is seen in relation to those installed below.

*Houndstooth (Horizontals)* a series of five paintings, are a vertical format and measure five feet by two feet, my scale. The delineation of planes (boundaries) in *Houndstooth (Horizontal)* reads differently to the vertical paintings. The proximity that the viewer experiences in the verticals is more pronounced than
12. Debra Dawes, *Houndstooth (Small Verticals)* 1991, oil on canvas, 60cm x 50cm.
that of the horizontal, the sense of containment is exaggerated by the blackness held within the vertical.

The delineation of borders in *Houndstooth (Horizontals)* is more complex than the other groups. Each work is divided into planes of three. There is a border between two contrasting tones, for the sake of simplicity, a juxtaposition of black and white, and a border between colour. The colour of the same tone, is determined by cool (ie predominantly violet, blue or green in hue) and warm, (ie predominantly red or yellow in hue). In this body of work the predominant palette was based on ultramarine (blue) and umber. The border between the colours blue and umber is the tricky aspect to this work. In the work where the white is dominant, ie the white space occupies approximately two-thirds of the painting, the defining line is more perceptible than the boundary delineating the plane on the black. It is possible not to see this boundary, in fact it may be fair to say that the visibility of this boundary needs time to appear. If there is not enough time in the looking, then the line will not appear. Seeing the whole picture becomes a complex relationship between time and perception.

If the boundary between blue and umber is perceived, it may be said that it is a boundary easily traversed by the eye because the planes are chromatically different but tonally almost the same. The borderline between white and black, however, is not so easily crossed. The areas of white that at times reflect light, may read as something quite palpable, something holding your vision rather than sending it to the adjoining plane. With your attention contained within the white area the reflective white light shows the surface of the painting as immediately materially present. (This is in contrast to the black surface, which absorbs light and seems to recede from the viewer.) With your vision thus detained by the whiteness, you experience moments of distraction. During these moments inspection of the variations in the surface quality of that whiteness is
13. Debra Dawes, *Houndstooth (Horizontals)* 1991, oil on canvas, 150cm x 60cm.
possible. Within these moments it is possible to ask questions. Does the light reflect in the sense that it throws back an image, or does the light cause reflection in the sense of meditation? Does one’s gaze reflect on the resistance of the surface, or reflect upon the transparency revealing a stratum of time, a history if you like embedded within and between these layers of paint?

However, if one steps back to become aware of the entire picture, one notices a rhythmic rising and falling of black and white presences. The entire composition works to prevent the eye being detained in white for too long. One’s vision gets coaxed across the boundary between black and white. Once the eye has crossed the borderline into the surface of the black, soft and velvety, absorbing light rather than reflecting and seeming to shrink back from the white, the blackness in blue and umber is experienced as a vast and infinite space, where one is not confronted with one’s own pre-formed self. This is a startling contrast to the experience one has in front of the palpable, reflective surface of the white. The blackness offers another sense of self, a sense of expansive possibility rather than the detained analysis of ideas and entities already formed.

The slow moving perceptual changes that are a feature of individual works in *Houndstooth* are refigured in the next work, an installation entitled *Starlite* which was first exhibited at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1993. While the work presents a very different experience of time and space to that of *Houndstooth*, *Starlite* also persists in the exploration of the relationship between geometry and landscape.

One large painting measuring 2.4m x 3.9m consists of 104 small panels. *Starlite* is literally a wall of permutations of shifts between the structures that constitute the painting as well as the conceptual parameters of the painting. In the catalogue essay for this work entitled *A Constellation of Options*, Ross Gibson
14. Debra Dawes, *Houndstooth (Large Verticals)* 1991, oil on canvas, 180cm x 120cm.
describes the dazzling and unsettling dynamic operating in the work and ascribes to it a strategy for looking and thinking.

If you stand in front of Debra Dawes' *Starlite* for a few seconds, long enough to give it some play, it starts to play with you. Try to watch yourself watching it...If you focus on the black, the white will persist with a crisp and undeniable claim for attention, after which the black will ooze back to offer solace for your retina even as the white pulses hotly again. If you look for a foreground, then a background shunts up promptly, only to be displaced quickly by a contesting plane. Should you home in on a square, a diamond presently insists itself. Focus on a diamond, and your peripheral vision is stippled with a starburst of protruberant rings. Try to see all these circles at once...now a square presses its claim. Shift your scrutiny out from the singluar dimensions of one component block, and attempt to hold the complete grid-pattern in your purview: the huge rectangle engulfs you in a cinematic shift of subjective scale wherein you feel you become minute. Lost momentarily in the stars' pulsing expanse, you puzzle over your exact placement in the space the painting offers for involvement.....

In this paragraph Ross Gibson describes the way in which the geometric forms within the work are combined to create a complex of visual structures that assume a short-lived primacy of place within the overall system of the painting. The sense of perception and the bodily experience that results from looking at this painting, is described by Gibson as an overwhelming sense of vertigo. The description introduces the notion of the viewer into the physical and perceptual framework constructed by the painting. In the continuing quote, Gibson raises the conceptual parameters of the work.

Generally, however, habit dictates that we promptly regard a painting as clearly one kind and not the other, as either formalist or referential.
15. Debra Dawes, *Starlite* 1993, oil on board, 240cm x 390cm.
This is an habitual trap in binary thinking. It may well be true that a profusion of yes/no decisions are on the basis of all rational thought and verbal communication, but this does not necessarily mean that within the techniques of binary thinking an exclusivist trope of ‘either ....or’ is the only way to proceed. One can lapse into the habit of presuming that the temporary, contingent choice of one option over another serves to relegate the other option to a permanent, ‘type-cast’ status of failure, or impotence, or insignificance. This habit leads to the establishment of a triumphalist system of non-negotiable primacies: principal vanquishes secondary, major rules minor, powerful over-rides impotent, included shuts out excluded, central banishes marginal, white expunges black, referential precludes formalist. One falls easily into a habit of accepting dyads of dominance over passivity, primacy over alterity. And given that a system of dominance works to keep itself in power, one can fall into a conservative habit when one ceases to challenge or doubt an habitual ordering of social experience.

In its quiet way, Starlite works to unsettle anyone habituated to thinking in ‘either/or’ dualities. The painting stimulates the viewer to make choices which must be acknowledged to be provisional, mutable and negotiable. (Gibson catalogue pages not numbered.)

Ross Gibson’s framing of this work, that is, the articulation of the interplay of terms in relation to the form and the politic of looking is so precise in its approximation of the ideas that formed Starlite, that for many years I have had nothing further to add - that is until now. It is only as a result of this very rigorous process of reflection, of thinking through a decade’s work, that I have come to view Starlite with some distance and with an eye on its significance within a larger sequence.
The interplay of oppositional terms discussed as a foundational structure is certainly central to *Starlite*, but I can now see the way in which these terms were connected to broader issues in my life, for instance the interplay between geometry and landscape.

*Starlite* is the name of the design of the cement brick manufactured in the 1960’s, and an actual wall exists as a feature facing west and extending to the southern wall of the Coledale RSL club. At the time I conceived of making this work I was located in a studio which was then the abandoned library. The wall could be seen through windows of my studio. I began making *Starlite* in the first year of living in Coledale. The most distinguishing environmental feature of the south coast is the overwhelming presence of the escarpment.

The significance of the wall, I now believe, is the sublimated impact of the escarpment on my sense of space. The scale of the work that I would undertake for the next few years, including *Gingham* (exhibited at Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne, in 1995) and *Gray Spectra*, would embrace monumentality. The wall was a turning point. It materialised within my practice as an obstacle against which my focus was deflected, so to speak, back onto itself; the subject looking outward became the subject looking inward. The subject matter in the work would, from this time, become more consciously introspective.

The approach I have taken to Mondrian’s painting has provided an underlying structure which approximates an understanding of my own application to painting, at the core of which is the strategy of establishing particular terms, which are then subject to the process of interplay. *Houndstooth* and *Starlite* have exemplified this dynamic, and thereby prepare the ground for the discussion of specific terms of reference that are investigated in *Gray Spectra*. 
The opportunity to contemplate *Starlite* as the wall and as a barrier has facilitated the entry into the next body of work, *Gray Spectra*.

*Gray Spectra* is an installation which is set up as if it were a model that prefigures and facilitates this approach to the writing of itself. The thread I have pulled out of this chapter, continues through the body of this document as the primary line of connection. It is the relationship between the terms 'time' and 'space'. The works that I have introduced so far, address visual structures that facilitate a reading of time and space. In chapter two I will discuss the way in which the physical space of the installation *Gray Spectra* embodies the notion of time and space, and within this construct, focuses on the place of memory within the process of creative thinking.
17. Debra Dawes, *Gingham (Vertical)* 1995, acrylic on canvas, 240cm x 165cm.
18. Debra Dawes, *Gingham (Centrifugal)* 1995, acrylic on canvas, 240cm x 165cm.
19. Debra Dawes, *Gingham (Centripetal)* 1995, acrylic on canvas, 240cm x 165cm.
20. Debra Dawes, *Gingham (Horizontal)* 1995, acrylic on canvas, 240cm x 165cm.
CHAPTER TWO

Gray Spectra and the Hummingbird.

“Frege said that the straight line connecting any two points is already there before we draw it.” (Woolfe, 3)

Chapter two describes the space of the installation and draws the line of connection between the objects placed within the space. I have used the flight of the hummingbird as a model of how to view the work within the space as well as drawing on Salman Rushdie’s structural use of the hummingbird, in *Midnight’s Children*, as a catalyst for bringing together two stories.

The Hummingbird is impatient to get away... but he has been with us, and his presence has brought us two threads which will pursue me through all my days: the thread that leads to the ghetto of the magicians; and the thread that tells the story of Nadir the rhymeless, verbless poet and a priceless silver spittoon. (Rushdie, 45 )

What attracts me to this sentence is the way Rushdie explores the agile and connective abilities of the hummingbird to reveal in a single moment, the connectedness between two moments and two stories in his narrative. The tidiness of this sentence belies the complexity of the narrative’s structure, which, if we were to conjure an image would resemble a well worn piece of twine, something simultaneously gathered together and torn apart in its individual fibres.

Gathered together and torn apart - this duality is the foundation of Rushdie’s narrative. For example, the Hummingbird in Rushdie’s story, is not a bird but a
nickname for a character whose hum is so high pitched that at the time of his assassination, his shrill scream draws thousands of dogs to the scene, where they proceed to tear his murderers to pieces. The character embodies an image of connection and interconnectedness of threads that twist together to make twine, whilst also enduring wear and tear, threads coming loose and threads broken, threads frayed by time and circumstance. He is a character of threads - entwined and shredded - a character whom Rushdie fashioned to tell a tale of continuity and discontinuity.

The thread as an image of connection between things and the hummingbird as a metaphor for the vehicle that brings strands and things together are images I will repeat throughout my text. For me, like Rushdie, the hummingbird and twining and severing of multiple threads guide my thinking as I work through my own themes of continuity and discontinuity.

For now, I would like to focus on the attributes of the hummingbird and in particular the hummingbird's special capabilities of flight.

The hummingbird is a telling symbol. For example, I have learned that the wing structure of the hummingbird enables them to fly in an almost unchanging manner, a sequence of uninterrupted, very rapid, spiral movements. They can also perform a stationary flight, shoot off suddenly with extraordinary speed in any direction, and even fly backwards. It is the action of the hummingbird in flight, drawing its invisible lines here and there, back and forth; its flight lines constructing a pattern of networks and linkages throughout a given space that I would like you to imagine as I discuss the installation Gray Spectra.

Five objects, the spaces that separate them and the lines that connect them, are the elements that together make up Gray Spectra. The seemingly random
22. Debra Dawes, *Gray Spectra* 1996, acrylic on canvas, 202.5cm x 367.5cm.
sequence of the hummingbird as it moves between blossoms containing nectar and its momentary connection to them, is an image worth pondering while I describe the relationships between these elements and construct for you some connections between the objects in *Gray Spectra*. Although the objects are placed within the space in a considered way, it requires a darting about like the flight of the hummingbird, to bring some common threads which can be combined in a variety of ways to produce several skeins of interpretation and emotional response.

One such thread, common to all the objects, is the frame. As a device, the frame operates in a simultaneous way to construct the installation spatially, temporally and conceptually.

Every object has a border or a frame which sets it apart from the world, but *Gray Spectra* draws the viewer's attention to framing not just as a means of separating but also as a means of connecting. The process of connection involves the walls not only as a surface onto which we place things, but also as a surface that holds, within its dimensions the objects that will, in turn, hold our attention. The wall then becomes a frame. Two objects rest within a recess that has been cut into the wall, another is placed on the wall. They are framed and connected by the wall.

Moreover, the wall is a boundary. In much the same way as a frame defines an object or a border defines a plane, the lines of the walls retrace the rectangular architecture of the building thus defining the space of the gallery and the basic structure of the exhibition. We may now consider the spatial composition of three small objects, which are framed and positioned throughout the gallery with vast distances between them. If a line was drawn between the objects it would form a large triangular shape within the space. While the objects appear as details and are viewed intimately in a single moment they are also singular.
23. Debra Dawes, *Gray Spectra* 1996, acrylic on canvas, 202.5cm x 367.5cm.
parts of a larger whole. As parts of a ‘big picture’, the objects set a scene into which the viewer will enter, and from the cues provided, the viewer will draw their own invisible lines of connection and construct from these connections their own sense of connectedness.

The whole space of the gallery, is divided by a central wall. Two equal spaces are created. The wall is a large rectangular structure that acts as a frame for two large objects, one is placed on the front and one is placed on the back. These objects are paintings.

Stepping across the threshold of the gallery, leaving the space of the street and entering the space of the installation, the first of the two paintings to be seen has a border painted in grey and white. The effect is lightness and a feeling of expansion beyond the border. The other painting has a border painted in grey and black. The effect is darkness and a feeling of enclosure. The border contains the image. In each case, the border to some degree determines the outcome of the image.

As the viewer wanders back and forth between the two spaces created by the wall, details are remembered and slight differences appearing on the surface are noted. The resemblance between the two paintings is so close that upon contemplation one painting may be described in terms of appearing like an afterimage of the other. As one is viewed, the memory of the other lingers in the mind’s eye.

The small objects are located peripherally and are set at vast distances from each other; the large paintings are placed in a central position and are back to back.

The vast distances between the small objects, the placement of the paintings and
the relationships between the small objects and the paintings, construct a space for remembering. When we view the paintings a mental picture of details in one painting must be remembered so that the differences between them may be determined. One difference in their similarity brings us back to the frame.

There is one other frame, a frame that like the darker painting contains rather than expands. It is a small wooden structure, oak and cedar, into which a shape is cut, evoking an association with a Medieval icon. Placed within the frame is a photograph of a woman estimated to have been taken in the 1920’s. We are given the following information:

Granny Rainbow Reframed
nee Mary Anne Cready
Born 20th May, 1873, in Knockatour, County Clare Ireland.
b/w photograph sepia toned, oak & cedar recycled frame, 165mm x 125mm x 20mm.

The woman in the photograph stands alone. The framing sets her apart from the other objects in the installation as if to suggest that in her life she may have been similarly ‘framed’ by those who knew her: that in her life and in her death we come to know her through the minds of others.

Gray Spectra presents a particular concept of framing. Framing is a compositional device that can be actively ambivalent in the way it can contain and separate, expand and connect. For example, in the installation Gray Spectra, I have used the walls of the gallery as a frame so that they may be seen as an active part of the spatial construction rather than a passive surface onto which
25. Debra Dawes, *Granny Rainbow Reframed* 1996, B/W photograph sepia toned, oak & cedar recycled frame, 165mm x 125mm x 20mm.
we place things. The walls as frames support the bigger picture in which the five objects are placed. As we draw our own lines of connection between objects, we may recognise the presence of the vast emptiness that the walls carry.

As we move slowly through the installation and experience planes of separation and lines of connection, we may feel the distance travelled and the time taken to move from one object to another. We may come to understand that the reinvention of particular spaces between the objects in this installation, is imbued with a sense of time passing.

There are other moments within the exhibition that allude to the process of time passing. The objects are all from specific historical time-frames, the dates that appear on the room sheet verify this assumption; the paintings - large canvases filled with tiny blocks of colour - are ritualised enactments of marking time. If we continue along this line of thought it will follow then, that time passing involves at some point, a traversal of the boundary between past and present; a conceptual interplay between the terms of connection and separation, continuity and discontinuity.

Just as Rushdie’s novels are often worked through from past to present, relying strongly on the idea that our sense of self is in part formed in response to that which has preceded us, so do I want to explore the idea of the persistence of the past in the present. The agile hummingbird that brought together two threads in Rushdie’s text; and brought you the reader an image of its spatial interweavings, will now perform its magical capacity to fly backwards, towards the past. Upon its return, the hummingbird will bring threads that will connect past and present. It is this same idea of threads of connectedness and continuity that Greg Dening explores in his texts when he writes of the colonial experience.
26. Debra Dawes, *Summer 1963* 1996, B/W photograph 90mm x 90mm.
There is no past that I describe that is not joined to my present, there
is no other that I describe that is not joined to myself. (Dening, 223)

In a similar manner, the reader/viewer of Gray Spectra moves about the gallery,
feeling spaces of separation and connection, feeling the distance travelled and
time passing. While the viewer draws their own lines of connection, they may
begin to sense that the objects are details within a larger spatial and temporal
configuration. As one moves about the space and views the objects they become
points where one may pause to enact the stillness of stationary flight, where the
viewer may pause and reflect. The objects offer themselves as details through
which the idea of connectedness may be expressed.

While you are hovering and absorbing all the shades of grey in the installation,
a resemblance between the photographs Granny Rainbow Reframed and Summer
1963 may emerge in your mind.

Pondering these two pictures, you are moving back and forth between two
spaces to contemplate a photograph of an older woman and a photograph of a
group of women holding children. It is the figure in the latter photograph that I
want to draw attention to - the only figure whose gaze is directed towards the
camera. It is one of the children who look out at the world. While it is difficult
to detect individual features, there is a striking similarity between the face of the
older woman who also looks into the sun, and the face of the child who looks
into the sun. In both photographs, the shadows fall across the face in much the
same way. Although there is perhaps forty years that separates these two events,
it is roughly the same time of day. As rays of light beam down from the sky and
touch the skin of these two faces, a moment becomes fixed as an image. Two
different people two moments in time and a connection.
Summer 1963
From left to right: Betty Dawes holding Debra Dawes, Gloria Leys holding Douglas Leys, Joan Rooke holding Joanne Dawes.
Photograph 90mm x 90mm.

As we move between Granny Rainbow Reframed and Summer 1963 a new detail becomes apparent. We are drawn towards a black, heart-shaped pendant, placed in a niche in the wall. We are told it is made of bog oak. Bog oak is a petrified wood, which is still to this day found in the peat that is dug up and burnt for warmth in Ireland.

Into the surface of the heart is carved a design. Curved lines from the centre of the piece flow out and join the leaf motif. The leaves are divided into three leaflets, and is an image that many Australians will easily recognise as the shamrock, in our time, the national emblem of Ireland. Oak and shamrocks are two of many symbols which were used to represent Irish nationalism in the 1850’s Celtic revival in Ireland. That this piece is also classified as Victorian mourning jewellery, which marked the death of Albert and left Queen Victoria, her court and her country in mourning for ten years, presents us with perplexing questions about the political character of this piece. Whatever the status the shamrock may have been for the consumer of adornment in the 1890’s most of us in Australia today identify the shamrock with Irishness.

The pendant, when worn around the neck, lies close to the heart and is perceived as a heart.

We know Mary Cready was born in County Clare and we might imagine that this piece somehow figured in her life. If, in the context of the exhibition, we read
27. Debra Dawes, *Victorian Irish Bog Oak Pendant* 1996, 70mm x 55mm x 9mm.
the piece as a heart we might wonder about love and her life; we might speculate if matters of the heart played any part in her decision to leave a home and begin again; or if matters of the heart might colour her perception of a new life in a new land.

Embedded within the centre of the heart is a small compass. An instrument for finding direction. We may wonder about the kind of journey she had and what impressions she may have formed of this land upon her arrival. We may think about her place of destination, what fate awaits her and wonder if the compass in the heart would be a charm to ensure good luck and happiness.

When the pendant is cradled in the hand as if to read the compass, what we perceive at one moment to be a heart we now perceive to be a spade. A heart and a spade. If we asked questions about the heart, then we must now feel that the inverted pendant casts some doubts. Suddenly a third term - gamble - creates a dissonance within the coupling of heart and compass. Risk and uncertainty creep in to shade the picture. We may wonder about the stakes that Mary Cready invested in her future, and again speculate as to whether the investment would yield a return. In what direction would the compass lead her?

Across from the bog-oak pendant in the other niche surrounded by the frame of the wall, is the photograph Summer 1963. Adjacent to the photograph and placed on the central wall is the painting we see first upon entering the space of the gallery. The painting is a visual system of spaces; that are, through the conditions of scale and multiplicity, transformed visually into horizontal and vertical lines. The lines approximate the warp and weft of a weave; another complex through which continuity and discontinuity, connection and separation, containment and expansion are explored.
The system of lines and spaces on the surface of the canvas are configured so that they form a familiar pattern. The connection that I now make for you involves this pattern. As we move again between the objects, careful scrutiny is required to detect details within the photograph. *Summer 1963* depicts a scene; a group of three young women, each holding a child; a festive occasion held at the town railway station. Two of the children, both females are dressed in the same way. Their simple frocks are made from the fabric called gingham. The fabric they wear resembles the pattern that emerges from the configuration of lines and spaces in the painting which is placed adjacent to the photograph.

Thus with all its elaborate cross-connections and fraying, *Gray Spectra* presents a proposal for consideration, and while the connections ultimately reside within the work the arguments within my text here are being shaped with the assistance of the hummingbird. The hummingbird has helped me to create an image; an image of invisible lines of flight; lines that form a fixed pattern of connections between the objects and furthermore a sense of connectedness between the objects and the viewer/reader.

The hummingbird has offered a way to argue the connection not only between objects in a given space but also offers the thread between things that allows us to think about the relationships between the objects as one of connection between the past and the present.

The two threads that the hummingbird brings to the reader in Rushdie’s novel, *Midnight’s Children*, “the thread that leads to the ghetto of the magicians and the thread that tells the story of Nadir the rhymeless, verbless poet and a priceless silver spittoon”, are both stories that in some way shape the life of Saleem, the central character and narrator of *Midnight’s Children*. The first story of the magician’s ghetto involves the birth of his son and the second story, a long
trajectory of events strung together is eventually interwoven with the first story.

Similarly, the presence of the hummingbird in *Gray Spectra* brings together two threads and two stories: the thread that leads to Granny Rainbow and Ireland and the thread that tells a story of my early years in Moree. These two threads will comprise the following chapter and chapter four.
3.1 Gray Spectra: Granny Rainbow and the Heart.

The narrative, Gray Spectra, is one of interconnectedness, but interconnectedness like the twine with its twists and knots, its frayed edges and threads that have come loose, its continuities and discontinuities that are the outcome of lived experience in time and space.

This chapter explores one strand of the the narrative in Gray Spectra that constructs the relationship between the photograph Granny Rainbow Reframed and The Irish Bog Oak Pendant. It is this connection that is the heart of Gray Spectra.

The story traces the process of rejoining a broken thread within the family fabric, a process that would involve an emotional mending of the discontinuity that began to fray three generations ago.

As I embarked upon the production of the new project which would become Gray Spectra, I became acutely aware of the impelling force of memory, and decided to allow the unrelenting rawness of this experience to guide to a larger extent, the outcome of the work. The following quote by Stephen Kern, provides a suitable context for understanding some of the more intuitive decisions I made during the course of the work.

By around the turn of the century, artists and intellectuals turned from the glorification of the historical past and from the method of historicism and began to consider the personal past, thereby generating an unprecedented concentration of interest in the way personal past works
on the present. These thinkers did not discover this past, but they broadened and deepened understanding of the ways it persists in germ cells and muscle tissue, dreams and neuroses, retentions and involuntary memories, guilt and ghosts. (Kern, 64)

During the months it took for Gray Spectra to come together, I recorded some of the experiences that imparted a sense of the way memory works as a kind of knowing that is not necessarily a conscious knowing. I mediated these experiences through a successive interplay of terms which embodied memory within a broader structure of time and space, for instance terms such as past and present, continuity and discontinuity, distance and closeness and the now and then. I have incorporated some of the entries of the journal into this text to provide an account of the way in which I understand the past is embodied in our physical and psychical being, and how the insistence of the past in the present shaped this process.

The following series of my journal entries begins with the experience that possibly triggered this line of investigation.

Saturday, 1st April and Sunday, 2nd April 1995.

While attending a conference and exhibition of Matisse in Brisbane, I also saw a show curated by Candice Bruce called Out of the Void: Mad and Bad Women: Art from the Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery. In the introduction of the catalogue, Bruce states that “As my curators, Bronwyn Mahoney and Kristy Grant ... and I sifted through the material by women artists, the final concept took shape. There were several consistent themes linking much of the work - but an irreverence for the notion of what was an acceptable norm of femininity was the strongest.”
As a consequence of being in Brisbane, memories and emotions that were connected to my father’s family, were stirred considerably. It was in this environment that the presence of my great-grandmother, Granny Rainbow, entered my world. The family mythology that painted a picture of Granny Rainbow was consistent with the themes explored in *Mad and Bad Women*.

Tuesday, 4th April 1995.
A day after arriving home to Coledale, in a very excitable state, I contacted my father and arranged to travel with him to Goondiwindi for Easter. It was to be a family affair. It also gave me the opportunity to be introduced to Granny Rainbow’s only surviving child, John Rainbow.

Friday, 14th April.
At 4am we began driving to Goondiwindi. We arrived on Good Friday at 12.30. Fish was then cooked and eaten for lunch. Yellow Belly was of course the delicacy. My father complained because the fish had been skinned and therefore was not as flavoursome.

Saturday, 15th April.
Visited John Rainbow. His account of Mary Rainbow’s life was one of extreme hardship; of a failed marriage due to her husband’s alcoholism, of extreme poverty resulting in the death of a child due to starvation, and in the end, the breaking of her own spirit and the inevitable family dysfunctionality that would continue to resonate through the next and following generations.

Sunday, 16th April.
On the way home from this most eventful weekend, my father and I spent time visiting in Moree. While driving from one relative to another we bumped into Joan and Allan Rooke. These two were a young couple who lived two doors
down from us in Moree. I had a special relationship with Joan, she was my confidante when I was growing up. She had straight jet-black hair and wore bright red lipstick on her full lips. I hadn’t seen or heard from Joan since the day we left the house in 1970. I found it hard to reconcile the grey permed hair that she now wore. It was not so much the grey but the perm that every country woman seems to adopt as a style after she turns thirty-odd.

We were seated in her living room when she said she had found something she had wanted to give me. After a short time of searching she returned with four photographs from the early sixties. One was a photograph in which both my sister and I were wearing gingham dresses. This was three weeks prior to the opening of gingham in Melbourne, and I was stunned that this photograph should show up now. I had not remembered this dress nor this occasion, and I began to ponder the way in which memory resounds on the conscious mind and the intellect.

The visit to Goondiwindi provided the impetus to proceed with an investigation of the life of Granny Rainbow. I began to gather as many official documents as I could.


I spent today searching the records in the genealogical society in Sydney. I couldn’t contain my excitement at having found her name on the shipping list. It hadn’t taken too much time, and I had been previously warned against disappointment by the all too experienced volunteers and devotees of the search. I studied the details and a vast array of moving images flooded my mind. With the record of the tiny fragment of her life, I began constructing the moment of her arrival on these shores. How different the night sky must have looked. Arriving in Brisbane in May, she may have been wearing the same clothes that she may have worn for a summer in Ireland.
And then my attention was drawn to the date of her arrival, it was the 25th May, 1892.

Saturday 30th September, 1995.

First layer of paint on first painting- centrifugal/blue

From the moment I began painting, many of the documents I had begun searching for would either arrive in the mail, access would be refused, or they had been destroyed. I continued to paint - like a diarist- five lines a day.

Wednesday, 3rd January, 1996.

In a spin. Whilst cleaning out my file, I found four photographs which had been given to me by my mother about eighteen months earlier. They must have come from father’s sister, Miriam. Looking through them, I noticed one in particular which I hadn’t paid attention to before. This time it was different. I was completely overwhelmed. It was Granny Rainbow. I compared it to the image I had of her daughter, my grandmother, Molly, as a young woman. The likeness was striking. I couldn’t believe I had overlooked it. Perhaps it was somehow meant to be that I would undertake the research in order to discover more about the life of this woman so that the photograph would precipitate not just an identification through familial likeness, but recognition that involves knowledge and empathy.

Sunday, 25th February.

After thinking through possibilities for presenting the photographs, I decided to frame Mary Rainbow.

I looked for frames in Antique shops locally and found that the silver frame which was fashionable for the period, was not appropriate for the way in which I perceived Granny Rainbow. I had allowed space in my mind to perhaps
frame her differently to the image of austerity and frugality I had constructed, however the richness and warmth in the brown tones of the photograph excluded this option. To reframe her in a Sterling Silver hallmarked English frame was in every way a mismatch.

I found a brass frame circa 1920’s. The frame was tarnished and a little bowed on one side. The design was simple if not a little clumsy consisting of a thin edge. The edge of the frame reminded me of the kind of design my grandmother, Rachel, would make on the edge of her jam tarts, the mark of a finger imprinted into soft dough. The backing, an off white fabric in which the vertical structure assumed a visual dominance within the weave was once a tabula rasa, like the blank page. Now rust spots randomly permeate the fabric as if in testament to the passing of time.

It seemed alright but as I searched for the photograph which I had placed in an envelope inbetween the pages of my diary only two minutes previously, I was stricken by the thought of having lost this photograph, but also disquieted by the possibility that Granny Rainbow didn’t like this frame. Fortunately, Granny had only escaped the envelope, but the point was taken. Even though I bought the frame, I decided to look further in Sydney.

28th February, 1996.

The search began in the Sydney Antique Centre, a large building which accommodates sixty stalls, and again, the same arguments against the elegant, classically designed Sterling silver frames had to be articulated. By the end of the day I had settled on a wooden frame approximately 170mm x 120mm. It is constructed from oak and cedar, which is a good bit darker than the oak. The oak is quite solid measuring about 10mm thick. An oval shape, just large enough to comfortably position the figure of Granny Rainbow, is cut out of the timber. The frame asserts a simplicity and strength. Although a new construction, the hand
made roughness and second hand timber evokes the pioneering values of making do with what you’ve got, and more precisely, to the frugality practised by my great-grandmother.

During my search for the frame, I browsed through several stalls. My attention was caught by an object. It was a large black heart on a silver chain. Embedded in the heart was a small compass. Carved into the surface of the heart was a design depicting the shamrock and fastened to the chain, a label, on which was written “Victorian Irish Bog Oak”. The combination of these elements embodied a meaning which stirred my emotions and my imagination. The notion of love and remembrance engendered in this piece epitomised the kind of sentiment I felt in my pursuit of reframing Granny Rainbow.

29th February, 1996
I have finished the paintings.

Remember that the space of the installation Gray Spectra was divided into two. The first space of the gallery felt light and open and the second space of the gallery felt rather like an inner chamber. It is a darker space to inhabit and imparts a darker more enclosed feel. The painting installed in this space is darker all over and is edged by darkness. The photograph placed peripherally to it, Granny Rainbow Reframed, is perhaps a cue to evoke the theories espoused by Ewald Hering (Ueber das Gedaechnis als eine allgemeine Funktion der organisierten Materie [Vienna, 1870]) and Samuel Butler (Life and Habit [1878]), of memories of parent cells and of former generations that are contained in every living cell in one’s body.
Nearing the completion of this work I began searching through texts for ideas for a title which would refer to the uniqueness of making Gray Spectra. The title, I thought, should reflect the rather uncanny fog that enveloped my thinking throughout the process of this work. During this experience, I was alerted to states of being that were by nature, more uncertain than certain and would exist for longer durations than previously known. The self-knowledge that one acquires of one’s process assumes that clarity of direction and aimlessness are both a necessary part of the decision making process. It was obvious however, that during this particular work periods of aimlessness were delayed further and further as the fog seemed to thicken.

The fog clouded my perception of things that were spatially and temporally located, consequently I was unable to determine my position between relationships of concrete and abstract, of closeness and distance, of absence and presence with regard to my subject, Granny Rainbow.

I came across a piece of writing by Ruskin under spectrum in the Oxford English Dictionary. The allusion to the world where one wanders wildly through gray spectra was I thought a little more dramatic but nevertheless a suitable parallel to the world of grey formlessness I had recently inhabited.

Fuseli may wander wildly among gray spectra, but Reynolds and Gainsborough must stay in broad daylight with pure humanity. (The Oxford English Dictionary, 170)

The interplay between the meanings of the words in this text, the process I have described and the relationships between my subject and the objects in the exhibition was implicit in the title. And this grayness, of course, was the perfect chromatic frame within which to ponder all the hues offered by a rainbow.
Let's look at the name Granny Rainbow and the meaning of her name. Rainbow is defined as

A bow or arch exhibiting the prismatic colours in their order, formed in the sky opposite to the sun by the reflection, double refraction, and dispersion of the sun's rays in falling drops of rain. (The Oxford English Dictionary, 134)

How often have we seen this beautiful phenomenon, a giant bow that has a beginning and an end spanning a vast space in the sky and the landscape, a connection between two points in time and space. The rainbow appears as a vision that is there and not there, it appears like an apparition or a spectre to those who are there, in the moment. The paintings Gray Spectra also allude to the spectral quality of illusion. Shades of grey conjure visual uncertainty across a surface of certainty, an all too familiar pattern.

Gray Spectra was the beginning of the mending of the frayed connection between the two faces, that of Granny Rainbow and the child in Summer 1963. I felt compelled to continue in the manner in which I had begun this work; to journey to the points of connection and along the way, spin the yarn that draws them together. And so, I set out to re-establish the continuity of knowledge that became severed through migration and complicated family circumstances by embarking upon a trip to Ireland.
3.2 Trace of Passage

*Trace of Passage* refers to the title of the series of work that extends the particular thread drawn through from Gray Spectra. It extends the narrative of the connection between my great grandmother and myself. This chapter describes the journey to Ireland and the work that follows the experience.

I read Fintan O'Toole's critique of contemporary Ireland entitled *A Lie of the Land* which discusses the long practiced comings and goings of the people of Ireland. While lying on my bed in a Dublin hotel room I felt strangely comforted to be part of the concept that a border can be stretched to include its people that live in places as far as New York or Goondiwindi.

So here I am in Dublin wearing the Irish bog-oak pendant. It hangs around my neck and assumes the shape of the heart. It is part of the process of connection, and it will lead me further to County Clare on the west coast of Ireland where I will encounter the original homeland of Granny Rainbow nee Mary Cready.

That so many people stake their future on a trip to Ireland was evident as I found myself in the living room of a stranger's cottage in County Clare.

As we approached the cottage we were aware of the face peering out at us through a window. The same face met me at the door and without any questions I was ushered into a room where as if in waiting, a man sat listening to my confused mumblings about who I was and what my connection was to this place.
My attention was drawn to the way in which these people who seemed to be part of a place so unchanged by the technological changes of the last century, also seemed so unbothered by my intrusion. It was revealed sooner rather than later, that many people from Australia had already preceded me, and that this kind of interview was somewhat commonplace.

The idea of returning to my great-grandmother’s birth place and finding anything at all was always fanciful. The pile of stones I imagined finding may or may not have been the remains of the house where she was born and raised. For reasons which elude me the physical evidence of her existence was important to experience.

Salman Rushdie discusses revisiting Bombay, and while his experience is different in the sense that Bombay was known to him, he speaks about the evocative nature of fragments of memory as remains, acquiring greater status:

> fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities. There is an obvious parallel here with archeology. The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects. (Rushdie, 1991: 12)

As I travelled toward County Clare and continued to imagine the pile of stones that I may find, they took on the same significance as a shard of pottery because I was sure they would in some way fuel my imagination further in the reconstruction of my subject’s life.

For many people who return, the threads of connection with people and place are still intact, others return to search for those they know had stayed behind.
32. Photograph of the house where Mary Cready was born and lived. Knockatour, Ireland.
had no idea for whom or for what I was seeking. I hadn’t dared anticipate finding family as a possible scenario. Consequently, I was completely unprepared for the interview that took place with the unknown man in the room, Hugh Talty, a distant uncle, who told me many things.

I was impressed by so many threads pursuing the lives of those who have come and gone, the intersections of names and places, snippets of information I had known and not known, spaces and connections.

The connections of past and present that Gray Spectra draws together are again present in the room. The connection between two people in two photographs - two faces bathed in sunlight each one fixed to her own moment in time - is evoked. I am standing in the room where my great-grandmother and her family spent time together; feeling the same space, the same light, again connecting two people and two moments in time.

The theme of continuity and discontinuity and the implied interplay between concreteness and abstraction has been explored so far in this chapter in the writing of Rushdie and in the installation Gray Spectra. I carried all of these ideas with me to Ireland where the continuities and discontinuities I encountered there would flow into my next ‘meditation’ on these themes, the work Trace of Passage, which I produced not long after returning to Australia. This work emerged for me almost as a summation of the ideas of continuity and discontinuity that I had been working through in Gray Spectra. (As a way of concluding this chapter on this particular theme, I will now discuss this series.)

The title Trace of Passage comes from a text by Paul Carter, The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History, in which he proffers the map as an accurate chart, an outline of names......but the essence of these texts was
33. Photograph of Hugh Talty in foreground and son Patrick.
that they did not sum up a journey, but preserved the trace of passage.
(Carter, 32)

Some of the images in the series are composed from parts of documents, now archival evidence, of a voyage. The cuttings are details from a page in a shipping list and a newspaper. The shipping list is a document which verifies, along with other details of a passenger’s life, the place and date of arrival. The vessel carrying the passengers is named the “Jelunga”. There is nothing remarkable about this vessel or its voyage. To my knowledge there is nothing that would distinguish it from the thousands of like voyages and like cargo that went before and indeed came after.

The details in the shipping list are arranged in a familiar structure. Lines are drawn across the page and down the page. Information is ordered into a grid. General headings appear in vertical columns while horizontal lines carry details of the particular. The intersection of the general and the particular is the site of meaning. The shedding of light: ‘She was 18 years old, yes she could read and write, she was from County Clare, she was a domestic servant, she was Roman Catholic...’

We cannot deduce from the information in the shipping list but I know that Mary Cready would have celebrated her 19th birthday, 5 days before docking.

The newspaper clipping which comes from The Brisbane Courier, Wednesday, May 25, 1892 under the heading ‘Shipping Movements’, provides the information of the arrival of one, Mary Cready. It reads:

Jelunga, R.M.S., from London for Brisbane, left White Cliffs at 6.10 a.m. yesterday, and was due at the Bar last night. She will come up the river on this morning’s tide.
34. Photograph of Margaret Talty.
The shipping list, and the newspaper in this case, are official documents and provide information of a factual kind. They each embody a structure that facilitates ease in discerning the facts.

The works in *Trace of Passage* which are constructed from these documents are altered to further consolidate the interplay between continuity and discontinuity. Lines of illegibility appear as we try to read the text. Over time, with numerous copying, the letters have become distorted. Also, a surface previously layed down and visible beneath the document erodes the clarity of the text. One senses the continual impression of the past, as well as the insistence of mutability. For example, the process of layering over time and the physical effects of change as well as the way in which we perceive these changes are present in the works.

The under surface portrays a fine weave of cloth which has been cut from the centre of a handkerchief. The underlayer is another kind of grid, perhaps a metaphor for a pattern of being in the world which is other to the official record - the surface layer.

The remaining works in the series are constructed from photographs of lace handkerchiefs. They were photographed by me as I travelled around Ireland, so in a sense they are also records of a voyage. The handkerchiefs were crafted by women more than a century ago. Originally the lacemaking industry in Ireland was established by convents and charitable ladies in response to the famine. Youghal, Limerick and Carrickmacross were the primary centres. Each centre manufactured its particular kind of lace which was made using needle and thread on netting. The lace was named after the place.

As there was no lace-making industry in County Clare, I settled on Limerick lace
because of its proximity to County Clare. The threads that make the lace in *Trace of Passage* are barely identifiable as threads. Like the other documents in the series, they have been scanned and manipulated by computer technology. The lacework within the series has been enlarged beyond recognition; it exists as a blur. In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie uses the metaphor of a cinema screen to transport his ideas of time and space and perception. The narrator Saleem describes the scene:

> Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems - but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible. Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up,... until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grain; tiny details assume grotesque proportions; the illusion dissolves - or rather, it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality. (Rushdie, 165-166)

In Rushdie’s book of essays entitled *Imaginary Homelands*, he discusses the use of the relationship of time and space in the metaphor of the screen.

> The movement towards the cinema screen is a metaphor for the narrative’s movement through time towards the present, and the book itself, as it nears contemporary events, quite deliberately loses deep perspective, becomes more ‘partial’. (Rushdie, 1991: 13)

Rushdie’s point is that with closeness to things or events, only blobs and slabs or disconnected details are perceived. With such a degree of distortion and so few pieces it is impossible to create the big picture. Proximity, either spatially and or temporally increases the potentiality of a more subjective response and a more subjective picture. Although it may not be the whole picture it is still,
however, a picture. The laceworks in *Trace of Passage* are cut and blurred and are to varying degrees barely recognisable, even as threads. Some of the threads that are discerned as threads form the lacework, some of those threads are frayed and broken. Holes become the focus of the picture.

*Trace of Passage* is a picture of fragments and of wear and tear which explores a line of connection between the past and the present. The work is a response to the experience of travelling to Ireland and re-presents the ideas expressed in the narrative of Granny Rainbow and the Heart. The rendering of the images in *Trace of Passage* recalls the interplay between continuity and discontinuity, of connection and disconnection, of concreteness and abstraction.

The concepts of proximity and distance that have also been discussed in relation to *Trace of Passage*, will be examined further in the following chapter, *Gray Spectra* and *Summer 1963*. 
35. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
36. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Shipping List*  1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
37. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
38. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Shipping Movements* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
39. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Shipping List* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
41. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
42. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Shipping Movements* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
43. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
CHAPTER FOUR

Gray Spectra and Summer 1963.

The narrative, *Gray Spectra*, is one of interconnectedness which relies on a thread with twists and knots, its frayed and broken strands, its continuities and discontinuities that are the outcome of lived experience in time and space. This chapter explores another strand of the narrative in *Gray Spectra* that constructs the connection between the painting *Gray Spectra* and the photograph *Summer 1963*.

The story takes up the thread from chapter one which begins with the sequence of images by Mondrian. We have seen via the sequence, how Mondrian’s painting began with the pictorial structure of rendering objects in space in terms of foreground, mid-ground and background to figure ground relationships. The sequence documented the shift from the pictorial space evident in his earlier work to the planar space of Neoplasticism.

In the first part of this chapter, I want to draw out how Mondrian’s Neoplastic painting may be understood in terms of the time and space relationship. The following section will then focus on the way in which such a paradigm may extend to an understanding of the pictorial structures I have used in *Gray Spectra*.

I would like to introduce the notion of time and space that was pervasive around the time of Mondrian’s development towards Neoplasticism. My source is *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* by Stephen Kern. Kern provides an overview of the technological changes that influenced the culture of these times. I particularly want to draw on the ways that the *present* and the *past* as cultural
constructions were understood in relation to these changes.

Kern discusses the concept of the present through the phenomena of the sinking of the Titanic.

On the night of April 14, 1912, the largest moving structure ever built, the Titanic, steamed at a recklessly high speed into an icefield in the North Atlantic. The first officer recalled that the sea was especially calm and so that night there were no “ice blinks” — flashes of light given off when waves splash against icebergs and illuminate their crystallized surfaces. Visibility was further reduced by fog. At 11:40 p.m. a lookout suddenly spotted an iceberg dead ahead. The ship turned sharply and, as it scraped by, was opened up like a tin can with a gash below the water line three hundred feet long. The captain determined that they were going to sink fast and at 12:15 A.M. ordered his wireless operator to send the distress call. Within a few minutes the airwaves were rippling with signals as over a dozen ships became aware of the disaster. This was a simultaneous drama on the high seas, driven by steam power and choreographed by the magic of wireless telegraphy. (Kern, 66)

Kern sites the sinking of the Titanic as an historical moment in which lines of communication across the world were actively transmitting information as the disaster unfolded. The speed with which the communication would travel and the distance covered was a turning point in conceptualising the structure of time and distance. Instantaneous electronic communication made simultaneity a reality. This effect of simultaneity was most keenly understood by the relationship between the present, speed and distance.

Thinking on the present was divided over two basic issues: whether the present is a sequence of single local events or a simultaneity of multiple distant events, and whether the present is an infinitesimal slice of time
between past and future or of more extended duration. (Kern, 68)

Technological changes and thinking around the concept of the present manifested in the culture of Western Europe. Artists took up the changing concept in their work. The particular group of visual artists cited by Kern as exemplifying the phenomena of simultaneity was the work of the Futurists, particularly, Giacomo Balla who in two works dated 1912:

pictured a temporally extended moment. Rhythms of a Bow shows a player's hands in successive positions, violin strings swollen with vibrations, and the air around them quivering as if the sound waves had made it visible. In Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash Balla depicted successive stages of a dog trotting alongside a pair of feet. The undulation of the leash is represented in four fixed positons as if stopped with a modern stroboscopic light, and the intervals between are continuous lines of light reflected off the swinging links of chain.

(Kern, 84)

The overwhelming sense of the present that Kern suggests is an historical moment, would surely not have escaped Mondrian's attention. I have come to understand the paradigm of Mondrian's Neoplasticism through the cultural phenomena permeating these times, and though linked in a continuous way to visual systems like pictorialism and perspective that pervaded in other cultures at other times, the absence of pictoralism is also discrete in its connection to the new concept of the present.

My knowledge of painting began with Mondrian and this system. The palimpsest from which illusion and recognition have been removed, yields to planes of coloured paint bound on a unified surface. It inscribes a new reality on the blankness that is created by absence. In the absence of pictoralism and the
44. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue and Black* 1921, oil on canvas, 59.5cm x 59.5cm.
negation of distance, time and space collapse into the simultaneous moment. The planar space of Neoplasticism I now understand as a visual paradigm representing the collapse of time and space that exists between the past and the present.

In contrast to this, I have also come to understand that in pictorialism, time and distance is represented by the slow movement of looking and discovering the passage through various moments of delay and flow as the eye scans the surface of the image, slowly finding release in the background of the picture. The depiction of distance in terms of here and there, is a representation of time and space that extends the boundaries of the moment.

Having prepared the ground and understood the temporal and spatial implication of both visual paradigms, that of pictorialism and planar space, I will now discuss the specifics of the visual system operating in *Gray Spectra*, which draws a connection between the two. Let’s first consider the painting in which each discrete block of colour creates the illusion of a continuous line and contributes to the spectral quality of the surface.

An analysis of the visual paradigm in the painting *Gray Spectra* reveals that the individually painted blocks consist of three tones of grey - light grey, mid-grey and dark grey, and are specifically configured and repeated over the entire surface of the canvas. The relationship that exists between the light and dark greys establishes the tension in the painting. Within the structural system of pictorialism there are three main stages through which the eye travels, first the foreground through to the mid-ground then to the background. The relationships of tonal value work in tandem with this system starting with high contrast of tone in the foreground through to the least contrast of tone in the background.
45. Debra Dawes, *Gray Spectra* 1996, acrylic on canvas, 202.5cm x 367.5 cm.
Gray Spectra deploys the three stages of this system as a model but rather than the ease of traversal from foreground to background there is instead a displacement of this order. The two extreme tonal values light and dark contest the position of foreground, thereby establishing a strategy of constant negotiation. Meanwhile, the mid-grey of the mid-ground the space inbetween maintains the connection between them. The surface pulses with unrest. How then are we to consider this paradigm in relation to time and space?

I have speculated already about the distance between here and there in pictorialism, the implied relationship of time and space, and the embodiment of the present and the past within the structure. I would like to venture further with this line of thought and propose that the visual paradigm we see in Gray Spectra is a time and space paradigm that proclaims the existence of a very specific relationship between these terms. It is one that insists on the negotiation of the past in the present.

Within this structure there exists an abstract space where the symbolic space of memory resides. It is not bound either temporally or spatially but negotiates the spaces between past and present.

The concept of memory espoused by Bergson in Matter and Memory (1896), is that:

- every movement leaves traces that continue to affect all subsequent physical or mental processes. The past collects in the fibres of the body as it does in the mind and determines the way we walk and dance as well as the way we think. (Kern, 41)

This understanding of the way that memory persists in everything we do must
then surely extend to painting.

To further this suggestion, it is useful to go back to the space of the installation into the first space of entry to consider the relationship between the painting *Gray Spectra* and the photograph *Summer 1963*. It is the photograph that most readily offers the cues to the concerns of time and space, and the connection to the abstract space of memory.

Look into the photograph, past the figures in the foreground and the swell of people in the mid-ground, past the dominant horizontal of the train, to cast your eye on the sign that is barely visible in the background - the sign that reads MOREE.

As I have said, I had no memory of this occasion until it was prompted by this photograph, I also had no recollection of this dress made from gingham fabric - I still don’t know what colour it was. What I do remember from this prompt, however, are my movements as a child - I remember the roads of the town.

The first of these is not such a long road, about the equivalent of five blocks. Well I should say it is a walk of about five blocks. The actual road extends further but since it was beyond my experience it is not charted. The road, as I will speak of it, is a road that will connect my house to the school. There is one intersection and one right - hand turn. I will travel this road every school-day for ten years. There will be a few changes over that time. A few houses will be built. Sometimes, the old wooden bridge that crossed the river would flood. Eventually it would be replaced with a cement overpass. This too would flood.

My memory of the summer is most clear. Walking home was marked by every sensation of heat; the smell and the sensation of breathing hot air, the magic pool
46. Debra Dawes, *Summer 1963* 1996, B/W photograph, 90mm x 90mm.
of water lying on the road that regardless of how far or how quickly you advance, is always the same distance ahead. The heat during the day was so intense that by three in the afternoon, the straight blue road was bitumen on the boil. As I looked out into the landscape the line of scrub on the horizon would manifest as a shifting blur in the heat. The road that led me to school was a boundary. We lived on the western edge of the town beyond which extended a vast empty brownness. On the right and looking east is the town, a grid imposed on the landscape. My memory of the roads of Moree are formed around my movements as a child. The road I walked to school is a line deeply etched in my mind as is the landscape on either side of it.

These lines of my early childhood would later be scored again onto a surface far removed from this road and this landscape. The intersections of vertical and horizontal lines appearing in my paintings would connect and resemble the grid of the town. This blueprint would facilitate resonances from the past. Like the road that I walked to school. It had one intersection - a main artery that ran from the west to the east.

There is, perhaps not surprisingly, a geometry emerging in this description; as one line intersects another - "an equilibrated relationship of position is created - the perpendicular relationship" the words of Mondrian resonate here in the formation of structural relationships of space.

The spatialisation of this memory however, does not construct an "equilibrated relationship" that would be in keeping with the tenets of Mondrian, the space if anything, is in opposition to the notion of unity and universality, because the space is particular. How a space is occupied inscribes the seeming blankness of lines and spaces, the gridwork of roads and the day to day life of those who travel and inhabit them,
47. Photograph of Edward Street, Moree, 1985.
impregnate a perception of absence with presence, of non-existence with existence, and of the general with the particular.

I want to explore the spaces of *Gray Spectra* in relation to the place - MOREE, and to travel a specific road from east to west, between the aboriginal mission and the pool, remembering that my road is the intersection that lies between the two points.

The location of the two points on the map is significant in the sense of time and space, the connection between them and their connection to the particular. The pool and the aboriginal mission are in my mind inextricably bound.

It is the summer of 1965 and the town is buzzing with sounds of outrage - the like of which I had not heard before. Publicly and privately, people are talking about the ‘stirrer Charlie Perkins coming to town with a bus load of those do-gooder city kids who don’t know what they’re on about - disturbing what is and what has been the way we do things here.’ It is Sunday afternoon, my mother and I drive to the pool to see what events might unfold. I remember all the talk of trouble and confrontation and was consequently bewildered by the fact that little seemed to be happening, apart from a few local people standing around and talking. We had probably arrived too early or too late.

The following account of this historic moment is taken from a documentary made in 1993 by Rachel Perkins who wrote and directed *Freedom Ride*. The documentary provides personal accounts from people who were involved in the movement to change laws which excluded Aboriginal people from their right to equality in this country.

In 1965 Charlie Perkins, the first Aboriginal person to attend university,
led other students in a campaign across the country to expose segregation and the shame of Australia’s treatment of their Aboriginal people.

Jim Spigelman QC appears in the documentary as one of the participants of the *Freedom Ride* recalls that:

The objectives of the Freedom Ride was to provide a catalyst to escalate the level of public awareness of the position of Aborigines.

Charles Perkins adds to this his own objective which was to:

confront examples of intolerance.... to expose not only to whites but to blacks.

Bob Brown who was a Moree resident, businessman and alderman discusses his experience of that time:

Moree wasn’t a town where people questioned the status quo.... you couldn’t discuss politics or religion or sex or race - they were disruptive subjects - when you went to friends houses you didn’t bring those topics up because they were taboo - it was disruptive..... and if you made comments or statements about it - a popular thing then was that ‘oh you’re a communist’. Moree was a town where the white’s were fairly happy with the way things were - they didn’t want it changed - they wanted to keep the place stratified. They had separate lives from the Aborigines - and they had separate lives in their own social groups - they knew their places - that was a very common expression ‘I know my place’. They were happy with their places which was on the top and they wanted to keep it that way....
Bob Brown explains that as an alderman on the council, his awareness of the treatment of Aboriginal people came to light when at a particular council meeting a letter from a teacher requesting permission for Aboriginal children to attend the pool as spectators was denied.

That was the first time that I thought about segregation - the first time I realised they actually had rules barring Aboriginal people from the baths, council chambers, parks, public toilets....I just couldn’t believe that there were actually rules like that. We always thought we lived in a free country; we thought we were free men; it suddenly hit me that I was free but that a lot of other people weren’t free.

Bob Brown became an active agent for change within the council but soon found himself outside the system as a result. In the interview in *Freedom Ride*, he describes a particular incident that occurred during the protests at the Moree baths. The incident sums up the degree of duplicity that existed within the public system at the time.

They had a student carrying this very attractive young girl, trying to get her into the pool - and they had one of the aldermen trying to stop her getting in - I’ve never forgotten- the alderman trying to stop the young girl getting in was the young girl’s uncle - he was a white man and she was an Aborigine - it showed me the whole stupidity of the thing - Charlie may have seen it as a battle between black and white - but it was never so clear cut as that to me - a huge number of people in Moree are related - they may not be registered down at the registry office but there’s always been relations between the Aborigines and the white people in Moree and they are interrelated.
The dualism between public and personal, black and white as Bob Brown explains, was never clear. The separations that were devised by governing bodies to exclude Aboriginal people from entering public venues and indeed inhabiting the psychical spaces of the public apparatus was always illusory because of the nature of the personal. The unofficial truths were always visible and known in spite of the best attempts to ignore them. Black and white as an external was always a superficial irrelevance because what constituted Aboriginality and non-Aboriginality was much deeper and elusive than that.

The example of the white uncle and the Aboriginal niece, shows that within the paradigm of oppositions or dualisms, there is always an interplay between them. The seepage of cultures through artificial boundaries was always evident, particularly in the language of people. Expressions, meanings and enunciation were common to both. This has become even more evident to me as the distance of miles and years becomes greater. The details of the specific issues and situation just don’t fit the system of the general definitions. In this case, it is again the particular and the personal in relation to the general and the universal that reveals an interplay rather than separation. *Gray Spectra* has evolved from this experience and from an understanding of interconnections and relatedness.

The visual structure that exists in *Gray Spectra* is composed from an understanding of the continuity that exists in the many threads of connection that become interlaced through the experience of time and space. It organises the place of the historical, the social and the general, as well as understands the necessity to articulate the discrete moments and differences of the particular, of the personal, and of the detail. Moreover, *Gray Spectra* is an embodiment of the impulses behind the processes of continuity and discretion, and as such displays the restlessness that is symptomatic of the constant negotiation between them.
The installation *Gray Spectra* is itself a model for understanding the complex of threads that come together in a specific body of work. It has thus far, facilitated the structure of the narrative of continuity, which will be extended into the following chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

Lifting the Sky.

In the first chapter, I introduced the notion of landscape by way of the early drawings by Mondrian. From this example, I suggested a pretext that would grow into a central issue in my work, that of landscape, the experience of and memory of landscape in relations to my own painting. I explored the influence of landscape on my own work, beginning with the examples from the early nineties, *Houndstooth* and *Starlite*. The fourth chapter re-introduces the interplay between geometry and landscape but shifts focus to, firstly, refigure the links between the spatial structures of pictorialism and planar space as paradigms of temporality and spatiality, and secondly, to underscore the personal narrative implicit in these structures.

This chapter will continue to further explore the interplay between geometry and landscape, memory and landscape, time and space and memory in relation to the installation of paintings entitled *Lifting the Sky*.

To begin, I will return to the first drawing *Polder Landscape* in the sequence on Mondrian, primarily to give focus to the interplay between geometry and landscape.

The drawing renders the furrowed soil as texture and tone that suggests the configuration of distance and time and space, but built into this system as well, is a resistance to it. The sequence clearly shows the way in which Mondrian constructed tension from the interplay between oppositional terms. In *Polder Landscape*, Mondrian’s decision not to further diminish the tone in the receding background indicates the existence of an early play with the tension between the
48. Piet Mondrian, *Polder Landscape* (1904-08), black crayon and gouache on paper, 39.5cm x 59.3cm.
foreground and the background. There is the illusion of distance but also the tension which holds the eye firmly on the horizon rather than allowing the visual passage through. The visual proximity of the horizon line which lessens the illusion of distance between the foreground and the background is, perhaps as I have already suggested, an expression of the experience of flatness in the Dutch landscape.

The experience of landscape and the expression of landscape is the central issue in Lifting the Sky. Both these aspects are at work in the credits of a film, written and directed by American film-maker Gus van Sant, called My Own Private Idaho (1991). The following description shows the way in which geometry in the landscape is explored compositionally to create the illusion of weights, tensions and conflicting forces.

The first image, a text highlighted from a dictionary, defines the meaning of narcolepsy as a condition characterised by brief attacks of deep sleep. In the second image is the text Idaho in white on a blue background.

While the text is being shown a slide guitar and voices echo like an ambient yodel, a veil rising and falling, an auric layering over the landscape composed of straw coloured brush with mountains in the background. This world before us, the thing we need to understand, is a composition of layers and segments.

In the next scene, a bitumen road cuts a diagonal which draws the viewer’s attention from the foreground to the soft line of the horizon in the background. The road itself is divided by painted strips, a line of vertical posts scores the diagonal. Into this composition, so
bristling with lines, a figure enters the picture. Now that my attention is so strongly attracted to the presence of the young man, I am feeling a tension building as a result of the interplay between the sense of connection and disconnection through the carefully crafted interlace of the road, the landscape and the figure.

He looks ahead, across the road into the landscape. His face is heavily contrasted against the road which disappears into the distance.

Using a painter's eye and language, I have described a sequence of particular moments that I have selected and frozen, from three minutes of a film. There is no dialogue, yet from the composition of lines and space within the image and the relationships between them, that is, from the geometry within the images, I am able to speculate about the various tensions and threats that the situation presents.

In the same way that van Sant gives us a world that can be perceived through layering of planes and pulses of connectedness and separation, in this way I experience a world perceived through Mondrian, through the resonance of painted layers and precisely painted lines.

The sequence introduces the concept of geometry. The many lines constructing this scene are dual in the way that their function may be interpreted. The lines that dissect the landscape, the lines that draw boundaries between the figure and space are lines that depict a scene of cut and connection.

Moreover, the line that I draw between geometry and the landscape, whether in relation to a painting or a film, is the line of connection between points that exists before we draw it. One point of this connection is exemplified in van
Sant’s framing of the landscape in *My Own Private Idaho.*

This seemingly arbitrary connection that I am drawing between the work of Mondrian and the scenes from the film can be explained by Henri Bergson in his discussion on the interpenetrability of memory and perception. He states that consciousness and perception work in relation to memory or put another way, that memory is a condition of the way we perceive and respond to all manner of things in the world.

> For though the function of these bodies is to receive stimulations in order to elaborate them into unforeseen reactions, still the choice of the reaction cannot be the work of chance. This choice is likely to be inspired by past experience, and the reaction does not take place without an appeal to the memories which analogous situations may have left behind them. (Bergson, 69)

This piece of film from *My Own Private Idaho,* has incited a strong emotional response in me because of its association and therefore its connection to my own experience of the road in the landscape, that is, the road of my childhood. Through my selection of frames from the film, I want to explore the themes of time and space and memory in *Lifting the Sky* as a representation of landscape.

Having been so moved by van Sant’s evocation of a narcoleptic landscape so alienating and interwoven with insight and loss of orientation, I understand that what I was seeing in *My Own Private Idaho,* was a way to understand key principles operating in *Lifting the Sky*.

I spent my formative years living on the northwestern plains where the flatness of the landscape and the vast distances have formed an understanding and a sense of time and space that is particular and individual. The way I experience
time and space and the emotional response I have to time and space is already conditioned. Whether the space be vast or confined, deep or shallow, I understand that my response is connected to these first experiences.

*Lifting the Sky* draws upon my early impressions and experiences of the walk on the same road every school day for ten years. The road is on the western edge of the town, beyond which lies a vast brown landscape.

As a representation of landscape, *Lifting the Sky* explores the relationship of the viewer to time and space in a way that recalls these early impressions of orientation. Let’s for a moment consider the sequence constructed from the fourteen paintings installed within the space of the gallery.

To begin to decipher the sequence is to understand that the linear sequence is constructed from two parts. One part of the sequence moves the viewer around the room in a clockwise direction, and the other part of the sequence moves the viewer around the room in an anticlockwise direction. The first sequence begins with the darkest blue painting and moves around the room from dark to light whereupon the lightest blue painting is met by the darkest magenta painting. The direction is thus reversed. The second sequence begins with the darkest magenta painting and moves around the room to the lightest magenta painting whereupon the first sequence begins again with the meeting of the darkest blue painting.

If this pattern of movement is followed, the viewer may sense a two way movement, a coming and a going that is bound to the experience of the road and the way in which we inhabit a space.

At the core of this installation is an understanding of the way that landscape
moves us. As we find our way around in it, it stirs us and shapes us physically and psychically. We understand it, as the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) explains, through our bodies.

Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object. We transport it without instruments...since it is ours and because, through it, we have access to space. (Merleau-Ponty 1963 :5)

The coming and going establishes a repetition and a relation to time and space. So much time is spent on this road, how does one break the monotonous routine. I am reminded of the actions I would perform during the many hours spent on this road and its borderland while travelling to and from school. Everyday, a stepping out and measuring of the distance and the time it would take to arrive at a newly designated section. Each section is then carefully scrutinised for new trap-doors of baked mud that an industrious spider had constructed. Each part of the road is examined for those bubbles of air locked into the bitumen.

Rituals that emerge from the monotony of repeated actions and of the interconnection of time and space also resound in the film sequence from *My Own Private Idaho*. The figure who is stranded in the landscape begins to perform an action:

He fumbles in his pockets, finds what he is feeling for and walks to the side of the road, where to the left of the picture his back-pack is placed vertically against a fence post. He positions his feet precisely on the edge of the bitumen road. He steps out, back of front foot touching front of back foot, making his own line on this long road.
Nine slow steps are timed on the stop watch. He stops the watch and turns. Seconds pass, his bag slumps to the ground. He looks out into the vast landscape. He looks down at the watch. We see a detail. We see the watch cradled in his hand. The time is noted - 4.28. The second hand is stopped at around twenty-five seconds. The watch is an instrument of measure. He looks out to the hills in the distance. Is he calculating? Is he measuring distance and time? The sequence has now become a meditation not only on space and geometry but on space and time.

The expressions of orientation and disorientation in My Own Private Idaho are consistent with the kind of experience that one might encounter in the installation Lifting the Sky. For instance, one may experience a degree of difficulty in orientating oneself within the construction of the sequence.

There is an implicit sense of time and space within the structure of the sequence, however, Lifting the Sky also incorporates the concept of time and space within the relationships between the individual paintings. The notion of time passing is articulated in the relationship between each painting within the sequence. There is a sense of the way the tonal value of individual paintings represent a particular light as in the time of day.

The viewer is met with a doubling of spatial concerns. In the first instance, as I have discussed, she/he must orientate herself/himself within the space and within the construction of the sequence. In the second instance, she/he must negotiate the body in relation to the allusions and illusions cast upon the surface of the paintings within that space. I am referring to the nuances of the paintings that make them different from each other.
Within the sequence, there are fourteen paintings which are all the same dimensions, 100cm x 60cm. The paintings are vertical in format, and the composition which is repeated throughout, consists of two equal planes that appear at the top and the bottom of the horizontal centre.

This composition is a reference to my experience of the northwestern plains, and in particular to the visual effect of the heat and distance on the line of the horizon. The mirage that is produced provides the starting point for the composition which is repeated throughout the sequence of Lifting the Sky.

The two planes are formed by a shift in the tone and colour of the verticals at the moment when one line begins and one line ends. This moment of painting, a motion connecting the shoulder to hand to brush to canvas, is fixed. As the line is drawn, the brush in hand records a pattern of breathing in the ebb and flow of the paint. It records being in the world in the moment of taking a breath. The mark that is made with the brush and paint, also captures the traces of past experience. This suggestion recalls Bergson’s proposition that the past is the precondition of the way we move and the way we think.

The persistent action from which the many vertical lines are created also forms the illusive horizontal line that emerges from this repeated structure. The horizon then is derived from the action that produces the vertical line. Embodied within this action of painting lies a complex of interconnections, for example, the interplay of oppositional terms, which in this instance, is the horizontal line and the vertical line. The vertical line and the horizontal line are at play and are inextricably bound. The vertical is the mark containing the blueprint of all that precedes it. From these series of marks the composition is constructed. From this construction we are drawn into a scene where past and
55. Moree, the western perimeter, 1963.
present are negotiated on the level of experience.

To understand the negotiation of experience is to understand the issue that is the core of *Lifting the Sky*, an issue well described in contemporary philosophy, most notably in the work of Merleau-Ponty as it is described by Elizabeth Grosz:

Merleau-Ponty locates experience midway between mind and body. Not only does he link experience to the privileged locus of consciousness; he also demonstrates that experience is always necessarily embodied, corporeally constituted, located in and as the subject's incarnation. Experience can only be understood between mind and body - or across them- in their lived conjunction. (Grosz, 95)

This quote is important to understand in relation to *Lifting the Sky* because it articulates the crucial issue that is at the centre of the work. It is to understand *Lifting the Sky* as an embodiment of experience of past and present; as the *lived conjunction* between mind and body. It is the ongoing negotiation between mind and body in relation to the world before us.

Time and space are thematic constructions that offer a way to explore orientation within space. In *Lifting the Sky*, time and space are rendered to create a distance between the horizon line and the viewer. Where you are in the space relies on the knowledge of illusion. How to create a sense of where you are in a landscape that is without pictorial reference again requires the knowledge and understanding of the connections between this presence and absence.

The interplay between pictorialism and absence of pictorialism, distance and closeness is explored in *Lifting the Sky*. Both sets of terms are given form through the geometric structure. The horizon line is the most obvious reference to pictorialism, but perhaps less obvious is the shifting between the tonal range
that comprises pictorial structure. Each painted vertical strip of colour has a
tonal value that relates to the adjacent strip. The effect of this relationship creates
the illusion of weight of the particular plane.

Reflecting upon my understanding of the structure of pictorialism and the
concept of time and distance embodied within it, I have come to understand that
the concepts of here and now and the there and then emerge in the paintings in yet
another structure. A paradigm of where you stand in time and space and place
materialised in the relationship of the vertical lines and the horizontal line. The
vertical lines consist of three different widths. Each width in relation to the
horizontal establishes an illusion of distance. The thin strip achieves an illusion
of greater distance while the thicker width achieves an illusion of proximity to
the horizon line. In this way the viewer perceives herself/himself in some
specific relation in time and space. Each frame in the sequence alternates
between these three distances.

Past and present, as an interconnecting set of relations, is rendered through the
process of painting and the development of the series. I have mentioned the
landscape of the northwestern plains on which the composition was based. I
should also mention that a peculiar thing happened during the process of
making the work. As the work progressed, I became aware that a shift in colour
and texture was emerging. The first paintings in the sequence were warmer and
more textured than the later paintings which were cooler and more fluid in the
application of paint. Initially, I ascribed the shift to the knowledge and
confidence one acquires during the development of a body of work when a
feeling of control begins to shape the outcome.

I then became aware that this shift in attitude was aligned to a traversal of the
gap between two different time frames. The shift in the sequence represented a
convergence of time frames from the past to the present. I began to understand
the structured warmer paintings as representations of the past and the more
fluid cooler paintings as representations of the present. Around the time that I
began to think more consciously about landscape, my own life had a dramatic
change of perspective. Rather than the overwhelming dominance of the
escarpment on my sense of space, I was now placed before a vast body of ocean
with its everchanging skies to view. The paintings disclosed a seamless change.
I recognised that the shift in time had seeped into my expression of sense of
space and my sense of place. The past had merged with the present. This
moment of revelation within the process casts light on Bergson’s theory that “the
body is an ever advancing boundary between the future and the past.” (Bergson,
88)

Returning for a moment to the figure in My Own Private Idaho who is cast on a
road in an expansive and isolated landscape, I want to explore further this sense
of understanding that we have of where we are in landscape and how we
understand it.

The figure in the landscape delivers a soliloquy which goes something like this...

Always know where I am by the way the road looks

Like I just know that I’ve been here before
I just know that I’ve been stuck here like this one fucking
time before you know that

There’s not another road....anywhere that looks like this road
I mean exactly like like this road
Its one kind of place
One of a kind
Like someone’s face

Like a fucked-up face.

These words, which imply a personal knowledge of the road, embody details that make it particular and different from any other road. This knowledge of the particular somehow alters the sense of unknown that we, as viewers, have of this vast space. We are told that it is one kind of place and particular in the same way that someone’s face is particular. From the vast possibilities within the landscape, the figure begins to select details with which he will compose the face. In this way, this one stretch of road will become distinct from others, in this way he will orient himself in his surroundings.

The process of orientation in *My Own Private Idaho* and similarly in *Lifting the Sky* requires an openness to experience. It requires an understanding of the nuance and the particular in relation to the universal and the general.

Bridget Riley’s proposition that Mondrian’s pictorial order arises from an understanding of the relationship between the particular and the universal is the premise around which I have constructed *Lifting the Sky*. The installation presents a sequence of paintings as a “coherent visual reality” in which “pictorial forces and contrasts are an integral part” of this order (Riley, 753). Each painting, a discrete system, depicts a particular moment, which in turn relates to the whole. Each painting reflects a light and a mood that is specific. The individually constructed paintings are each in their own way, a meditation on time and space. The compositional weights and tensions are varied and specific to each painting.

Over years of practice as a painter, I have become more and more aware of the
relationship between my pictorial order and my experience. I have come to understand that experience is the starting point of analysis. I have come to understand

the constructed, synthetic nature of experience, its simultaneously active and passive functioning, its role in both inscription and subversion of sociopolitical values... (Grosz, 95)

Within the installation *Lifting the Sky* the viewer is placed in a relationship within the space of the sequence and within the illusionistic space of the painting. It works on you and works with you. *Lifting the Sky* is a model through which we understand representations of spatiality and temporality, and it is through this condition that we understand our relations to objects and our relationship to the world.

*Lifting the Sky* is thus an embodiment of the way in which experience manifests; it is imbued with the way I think and the way I feel. *Lifting the Sky* is the act of painting, which for me, is a way to be in the world. To borrow Grosz’s words one last time, painting is the

condition and the context through which I am able to have a relation to objects......Insofar as I live the body it is a phenomenon experienced by me and thus provides the very horizon and perspectival point which places me in the world and makes relations between me, other objects, and subjects possible. (Grosz, 87)

*Lifting the Sky* is the locus of negotiation between the past and the present, the here and now, between the inside and the outside, between the subject and the object; between the universal and the particular. It is my applied means of threading experience together, like Rushdie’s hummingbird.
58. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
59. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
60. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
61. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
62. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
63. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
64. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
65. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
66. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
67. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
68. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
69. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
70. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
71. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
CONCLUSION

This document presents a series of networks and linkages between things. I have drawn the lines of connection between points that are significant within each body of work and at the same time I have with these lines, constructed a network of linkages that supports an over-riding principle.

The process of negotiation that Grosz identifies in Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the primacy of experience, underscores the theoretical premise of all my work. It is to understand that the act of painting is an act of acquiring knowledge. This document articulates, and negotiates all the processes and the connections that have been drawn and shows the interrelatedness between them. Neither one of these processes, is more important in this action of attaining knowledge, than the other. Intuition and intellect are of equal importance, the past and the present are always in negotiation, experience and theory are linked and ongoing.

The act of painting, as I have shown, is a locus where this process is inscribed. Within the document I used metaphors that are devices of construction: like lines, which when drawn, or threads, which when drawn together, create a conceptual link between several works produced over a period of time. The structure traverses the gap between past and present, experience and memory, art and life. The aim of the text is to reveal the connections and interconnections between these modes.

The first chapter disclosed the system or the conceptual paradigm, as devised by Mondrian, of working with the interplay of oppositions. This paradigm has become the conceptual template of my own work and is deployed throughout the document to explore my painting.
When Mondrian spoke of ‘limitation and expansion in relationship’ in 1917, he put into place a model which would facilitate continual interplay between terms that would refer not only to painting itself but would extend beyond the frame and into the world. Understanding such tensions between material and concept, world and frame, limitation and expansion in Mondrian’s work has become the foundational structure of my own thinking. This tension sets up the basic structure through which I investigate the interplay between the principles of limitation and expansion, universality and the particular, the general and the personal. Within this document *Gray Spectra* is the principal example through which the interplay of these principles is highlighted.

In chapter two I explored the spatial structure of the installation *Gray Spectra* in relation to the themes time, space and memory. I have used the model of the hummingbird to draw together the lines of connections between the objects within the space of the gallery, and the space of the text. The installation is itself a model for understanding the linkages between things and the interconnectedness between things.

Within this space of *Gray Spectra*, the connections between life and art have an unambiguous presence. The decision to include the photographs into the installation was done with the understanding that this would involve some risk. It is clear from some responses to this work (by those who are considered by a few, to have a level of expertise regarding contemporary issues in art) that this proved to be a reasonable assessment of the situation.

‘Critiques’ written by Giles Auty and David McNeill are placed in the appendix. In a very brief summation, the ‘critiques’ reveal more about the men who have written them and the cultural environment from which they have come, than the work itself. The work is unpalatable to these men because it makes clear reference to the experience of women. It is better to make reference to a memory of tablecloths in an Italian trattoria than to make reference to a memory of a cloth
worn as a child. The objects within *Gray Spectra* are deemed unsanitary because they disrupt the poetics of the paintings—meaning they disrupt this man’s construction of what he thinks painting should be.

The knowledge of these prevailing attitudes in the artworld motivated the decision to include the photographs and the pendant, and thus determined the outcome of the installation *Gray Spectra*. I include these responses to *Gray Spectra* here because I feel that these attitudes strengthened my resolve to integrate the concept of personal experience as an argument within the document.

This process of integration is well symbolised by the hummingbird, which I have invoked to thread together the two narratives in *Gray Spectra*. The first of these narratives as discussed in chapter three, is *Granny Rainbow and the Heart*. The second narrative, as discussed in chapter four, is *Gray Spectra* and *Summer 1963*. While the stories are different, the main point of both narratives is the same, that is, they both allude to the pervasive nature of personal memory within the creative process.

The intuitive impulses that became a dominant feature of *Granny Rainbow and the Heart*, relate to memory, to the way personal past works on the present. The theme of time, space and memory, was explored in relation to time and space, particularly through the childhood memory of the walk to school, which is central to the second narrative in *Gray Spectra* and the following work, *Lifting the Sky*.

Chapter five then extended the examination of memory by concentrating on matter, the body, that physical entity which forms relationships with the space it inhabits. Personal embodied experience has thus emerged as a primary issue in my work, *Gray Spectra, Trace of Passage* and *Lifting the Sky*.

The process of reflecting on a decade of practice has made me aware of the persistence of the personal past in my present and of the expansive forms of a
memory. The concept of personal experience, is for now, the means through which the particular and the universal, limitation and expansion are expressed in my painting, as I orientate my way through a world of objects and a world of ideas. My paintings render a field composed of figure and ground, of space and horizon. They are the substance through which I find perspective.
72. Photograph North Holland, 1983.
The following quotes are the references to critiques that are made in the concluding chapter of this document.

The first is written by Giles Auty, is entitled 'Obsessive Compulsive', and appears in *The Weekend Review*, April 13-14 1996.

Last week I wrote of an instance of a young woman who had been encouraged by her tutor at a major art school to look only inwards rather than outwards, to the possible detriment of her adult development. She was still obsessed at the age of 27 with the death 15 years earlier of her twin sister's pet rabbit.

This week I met an even more curious case of infantilist obsession. In the clean minimalist space of Sherman Goodhope, arguably the most successful art gallery in Sydney, one meets only two large, minimalist works that look at first sight to be made from gingham, famed tablecloth material in Europe of the cheap Italian trattoria, but in Australia of school summer frocks for small girls.

Which source provided the inspiration for Debra Dawes? Disappointingly, it turned out to be the latter and a tiny alcove contains a minuscule snapshot of a diminutive Dawes so attired, yet the strength of her obsession is this: each vast panel of pseudo- gingham is hand painted. Picking oakum, sewing mailbags and other traditional modes of correctional hardlabour pale by comparison.

Whether this remarkable feat of energy and patience is merited by the subject matter is perhaps not for me to say. Who dares query the innermost yearnings of the female mind, especially when this appears to be supported via
documentation through selective quotations from Wordsworth and others on the value of childhood memories?

Naturally one does not wish to appear merely a beastly, unimaginative man, nor yet excessively pragmatic and prosaic, but I still cannot help questioning the priorities encouraged in today's art schools from time to time.

The continuing relevance of the wise words I quoted last week from a Jesuit may also seem clearer. What he said in essence was that the value of individual experience lies in its illustration of universal principles. I fear how this is clear in Dawes's case is far from clear.

The second critique, entitled 'Debra Dawes Sherman Galleries, Goodhope, Sydney March 21 - April 20, 1996', is written by David McNeill and is published in *Art and Text*, May 1996.

Just as abstract painting has become a catch-all sign of high modernism, so too has abstract painting about abstract painting become a sign of high postmodernism.

Self-reflexive abstraction has a heritage dating back at least to Lichtenstein's brushstroke works of the mid-sixties, or to take a local example, to Robert Rooney's "colour-field" tablecloths and knitting patterns of the same period. However its moment of triumph is undoubtedly the 1980's; the decade of meta-discourse, simulation, and power-dressing. Neo-Geo was a particularly robust and witty Gen-X option which allowed parody, critique, and occasional smart-assness to cohabit with an unreconstructed fondness for the "pure" pleasures of pushing paint around. Levine, Halley, Bleckner and others perfected a kind of double articulation embracing reference to both recent (that is, late-modern) art
history on the one hand, and monoaesthetic aspects of lived experience on the other.

Australia has had its own exponents of meta-abstraction, and Debra Dawes has been one of the more consistently interesting. Her large paintings are typically labor-intensive without appearing labored. Dawes is a subtle colorist who at her best can finesse warmth and refinement from fundamental geometric premises.

Her most recent show at Sherman Goodhope is dominated by two 2-by-3.6 meter trompe l’oeil paintings of gingham patterning, one hanging on each side of the gallery’s central dividing wall. The exhibition is completed by three small displays set into the wall at a considerable distance from each other. Like gas molecules introduced into a vacuum chamber, the individual pieces appear to have moved as far away from each other as possible, resulting in a Spartan installation to say the least. The small pieces comprise two photographs - one of Dawes as a child in a gingham dress and another of an Irish ancestor- and a family heirloom.

Irish workers in Manchester cotton mills, anonymous seamstresses doing interminable piecework, tablecloths in small family-run restaurants, pleated skirts, and country music are but a few of the associations that gingham can evoke.

Dawes’s installation recasts that recurring trope of modernism, the grid, in light of the hidden history of women’s labor. Such ambitions are not new. Miriam Schapiro’s monumental pattern paintings with their allusions to applique and quilting, Rosemary Trockel’s deadpan machine knits, and more recently, Rachel Lachowicz’s acerbic lipstick remake of Carl Andre’s floor pieces, all share a desire to ironize and feminize patriarchal modernism.
Dawes’s exhibition is maybe not as convincing as those of her illustrious precursors, and not simply because the show looks so thin in the large gallery space. Despite its sparsity, the exhibition actually reveals more than it needs to, spelling out what is perhaps best left implicit. The interpretive fixity and nostalgic sentimentality evoked by the inclusion of the artist’s mementos seem to rob the viewer of the poetic insights and pleasures and ambiguity. The large gingham canvases make their point far more elegantly on their own.


LIST OF FIGURES

1. Photograph of the Polder, North Holland, 1983.

2. Piet Mondrian, *Polder Landscape* (1904-08), black crayon and gouache on paper, 39.5cm x 59.3cm.

   Provenance: Legat Slijper, Haags Gementemuseum.

4. Piet Mondrian, *Trees on Gein at Moonrise* (1907-13), charcoal on brown paper, 63cm x 75cm.
   Provenance: Legat Slijper, Haags Gementemuseum.

5. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Trees* (1912-13), lean oil on canvas, 81cm x 62cm.
   Provenance: Legat Slijper, Haags Gementemuseum.

6. Piet Mondrian, *The Sea* (1914), gouache, ink on paper, 49.5cm x 63cm.

7. Piet Mondrian, *Pier and Ocean (Composition No 10)* (1915), oil on canvas, 85cm x 110cm.
Provenance: State Museum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo.

8. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Lines (Composition in Black and White)* (1917), oil on canvas, 108.4cm x 108.4cm.
Provenance: State Museum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo.

9. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Colours A (Composition in Planes of Pure Colour on White Background)* (1917), oil on canvas, 50cm x 44cm.
Provenance: State Museum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo.

10. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Light Colours and Grey Lines* (1919), oil on canvas, 49cm x 49cm.
Provenance: Kunstmuseum, Basle.

12. Debra Dawes, *Houndstooth (Small Verticals)* 1991, oil on canvas, 60cm x 50cm.

13. Debra Dawes, *Houndstooth (Horizontals)* 1991, oil on canvas, 150cm x 60cm.

14. Debra Dawes, *Houndstooth (Large Verticals)* 1991, oil on canvas, 180cm x 120cm.

15. Debra Dawes, *Starlite* 1993, oil on board, 240cm x 390 cm.


17. Debra Dawes, *Gingham (Vertical)* 1995, acrylic on canvas, 240cm x 165cm.

18. Debra Dawes, *Gingham (Centrifugal)* 1995, acrylic on canvas, 240cm x 165cm.

19. Debra Dawes, *Gingham (Centripetal)* 1995, acrylic on canvas, 240cm x 165cm.

20. Debra Dawes, *Gingham (Horizontal)* 1995, acrylic on canvas, 240cm x 165cm.

22. Debra Dawes, *Gray Spectra* 1996, acrylic on canvas, 202.5cm x 367.5cm.

23. Debra Dawes, *Gray Spectra* 1996, acrylic on canvas, 202.5cm x 367.5cm.


25. Debra Dawes, *Granny Rainbow Reframed* 1996, B/W photograph sepia toned, oak & cedar recycled frame, 165mm x 125mm x 20mm.

26. Debra Dawes, *Summer 1963* 1996, B/W photograph 90mm x 90mm.

27. Debra Dawes, *Victorian Irish Bog Oak Pendant* 1996, 70mm x 55mm x 9mm.


31. Photograph of Victorian Irish Bog Oak Pendant, circa 1860’s.

32. Photograph of the house where Mary Cready was born and lived. Knockatour, Ireland.

33. Photograph of Hugh Talty in foreground and son Patrick.
34. Photograph of Margaret Talty.

35. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.

36. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Shipping List* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.

37. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.

38. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Shipping Movements* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.

39. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.

40. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Shipping List* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.

41. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.

42. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Shipping Movements* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.

43. Debra Dawes, *Trace of Passage: Limerick Lace* 1997, computer generated iris print, 37cm x 37cm.
44. Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Yellow, Blue and Black* 1921, oil on canvas, 59.5cm x 59.5cm.

45. Debra Dawes, *Gray Spectra* 1996, acrylic on canvas, 202.5cm x 367.5 cm.

46. Debra Dawes, *Summer 1963* 1996, B/W photograph, 90mm x 90mm.

47. Photograph of Edward Street, Moree, 1985.

48. Piet Mondrian, *Polder Landscape* (1904-08), black crayon and gouache on paper, 39.5cm x 59.3cm.


55. Moree, the western perimeter, 1963.


58. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

59. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

60. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

61. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

62. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

63. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

64. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

65. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.
66. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

67. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

68. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

69. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

70. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

71. Debra Dawes, *Lifting the Sky* 1999, oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm.

72. Photograph North Holland, 1983.