

City Gallery

Robert Owen

Sunrise

March 1993

In 1992 Robert Owen undertook a research program in advanced computer graphics which allowed him entry to the pixel world, a place where everything is ultimately reducible to a grid of coloured rectangles. For an artist whose work has steered a path between science, metaphysics and mythology as a way of penetrating the world of experience, the new technology suggested endless possibilities. Yet it also set off a chain of connections reaching back into the history of his own practice; a history in which the grid had initially been a significant formal, conceptual and expressive device, and the deployment of pure colour as a central means of emphasizing the physicality of visual phenomena. The possibility of using virtual imaging was set aside in favour of an investigation of the grid formats of his early work and their generic likeness to the digital order of cybernetics, reinforced through their realization as blocks of colour.

The early grid works on which Owen's recent paintings are based date specifically to the years 1968 and 1969, a time when Owen was working in London as an assistant to the British constructivist and mathematician Anthony Hill. Hill was part of a group of artists operating in the wake of European Constructivism.¹ His activities harnessed both art and mathematics in the search for notational systems capable of describing representational conundrums such as the Moebius strip, non-isomorphic polyhedra and organic molecules. Inspired by Hill's concern for rational problems in the real world, Owen used diagrams related to Hill's **Cubic Identity Graphs** as the basis for two sets of drawings. These were **Rotation** (1968), a group of four drawings extrapolated from the geometry of the cube, and featuring a large central square surrounded by smaller rectangles, and **Terminus** (1969), a group of drawings featuring a sixteen rectangle grid formed by joining together topographical notations known as 'identity trees.'

The project of the early grid drawings intersected not only with Hill's interests but with broader art enterprises of the time. The drawings' formal reflexivity acknowledged contemporary commentaries on the material, procedural and categorical conditions of art. For Owen, however, they also related to his own representational dilemma – the landscape sublime. At that time Nature constituted Owen's deepest experience.² In the **Rotation** drawings diagrammatic system was applied to its definition. The character of each formal arrangement, one seeming to rotate forward, one backward, the third symmetrical and combining both rotations, a fourth static, suggested the essence of the seasons: Spring, Autumn, Summer, Winter. The simple device of a name became a way of restoring the possibility of content without reverting to representationism. Nevertheless the title given to the **Terminus** drawings suggested an endpoint. Certainly of the intersection of the lines but also of Owen's then current work which many had construed as concerned solely with aesthetics. The geometric drawings were thrown over for object production, installation and photography, until they were again taken up in the present group of paintings dating from 1992.

Like the grid formations, the nine colours which appear in these present works equally emanate from Owen's past. They are the colours of the origami paper he bought in 1971 to make small objects to amuse his baby daughter, Lisa. Owen came across the remnants of the pack in 1987. Charged simultaneously with sentimental significance and temporal distance, the coloured papers captured his attention at a time when he was (re)considering his work to date.³ The papers presented a conceptual duality, colour as a 'thing-in-itself' (much as the powdered pigments he already used) and the standardized output of mass production. When their found colours were aligned with the pre-ordained structure of the grid they allowed almost inexhaustible variation within defined parameters (a possibility intrinsic to the life of computers) to the extent that for Owen free choice now seems a limiting principle.

This union of colour and form has generated an ever-expanding group of drawings and paintings, including a large-scale painting executed directly on the gallery wall. Each work is marked by an intrinsic simplicity of being which at once highlights the presence of the pictorial surface and allows rectangles of paint to resonate as areas of pure, coloured light. The effects of aftersight and optical vibration pervade the space of the gallery, transforming its experience. Most immediately Owen's dramatic mobilization of the space of the gallery through planar arrangements of colour suggests the interior 'colour solutions' of Theo van Doesburg, especially van Doesburg's work at the Cafe Aubette, Strasbourg. For van Doesburg, the applied aesthetics of the cafe's colour scheme was a means of placing art at the centre of life, from whence it could satisfy humanity's spiritual and material needs. The abstract colour planes were designed to "oppose to the material room in three dimensions a super-material and pictorial, diagonal space",⁴ thus alluding to existential states and possibilities beyond contemporary realities.

But van Doesburg's intentions are circumscribed within the emancipatory discourses of utopian modernism, narratives which identified formal and technological progress with liberation. Owen's interest in computer technologies (as with his previous explorations of science and technology) relate rather to their mythic rendering of the world. As the titles of his paintings allude, each embraces thematic concerns beyond the exclusively perceptual. The names are sign-posts to extra-visual contents, and represent his interest in the computer's ideological colonization of the language, as much as his concern for the politics of (sun)light in the contemporary world.

It is more than incidental that these works focus on ideas of light at a time when the inherent metaphors of light are undergoing profound change. Their coloured glow permeates space as much the conceptual authority of the computer, with imagery of its electrically charged circuits and networks, infiltrates contemporary ideas of time, space, and illumination (as information). The "sunrise" of

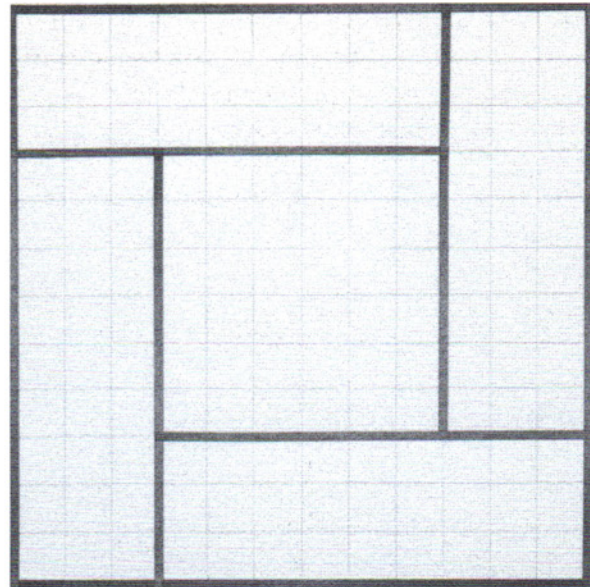
the exhibition's title refers as much to the over-the-horizon status of high-tech industries as any natural event; "gleam" and "Iris" to the specialized language of computing, instantly consigning the reader to temporal locations of past, present or future.

If the glow of these paintings has an unnatural cast, it conjures up the demise of representations of light founded on notions of purity or truth. The idea of "sunbelt" highlights the annexation of a mythology of sun worship to the conceptual economy of real estate, while the letters "UV" effectively signal the demise of the sun's role as life-giver. These changes of meaning constitute Owen's most recent representational challenge. Nevertheless the immanence of pure colour and the quiddity of light, even as tainted metaphoric vehicles, remain an experience, an understanding, to give to others through art.

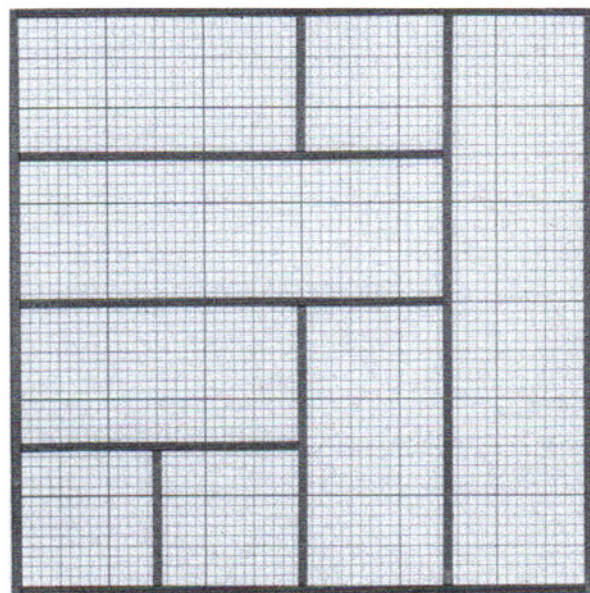
Like words, pictorial structures are also empty formal vessels whose meaning changes over time. If both the colour and form of these paintings relate to Owen's personal history and his will to address contemporary social conditions, at another level he recognizes that as grid and monochrome, they are equally grounded in the history of twentieth century art. What is of individual significance is simultaneously a sort of cultural readymade. The grid and monochrome occupy the nexus of varied debates about the condition of art. The history of abstraction is marked by wide dichotomies of intent, delineating the very gap between form and meaning, the field of interference between collective stylistic determinations and their role in the work of any one artist. The history of twentieth century art, furthermore, is one in which the stature of painting has swung widely between positions of pre-eminence and ideological impoverishment. These histories necessarily resonate through Owen's paintings and he now accepts the risk that his work may be read as circumscribing purely formal concerns, that as the products of an artist who has characteristically used other means, particular inferences may be read into his exclusive use of painting at this point in time.

Carolyn Barnes FEBRUARY 1993

- Others in the group were Victor Passmore, Kenneth Martin, John Ernest, Gillian Wise Ciobotaru and Malcolm Hughes.
- Owen has acknowledged on a number of occasions that as a child in rural New South Wales, the experience of the landscape, of nature, had an intensity beyond words. This debt to the power of the landscape was then re-emphasized during the three years he spent living on a Greek island in the time between leaving Australia in 1963, and arriving in England in 1966.
- As artist-in-residence at the Victorian College for the Arts Owen produced an installation entitled **Because of This (for Piotre Olszanski)** (1987), among its parts a painting divided into nine squares, each painted to represent one of the colours of the origami paper, and a series of small collages of the paper itself.
- Theo van Doesburg, "Notes on L'Aubette at Strasbourg", quoted by Nancy J. Troy, "The Abstract Environment of De Stijl" in Mildred Friedman (ed.), **De Stijl: 1917-1931 Visions of Utopia**, Oxford, Phaidon, 1988 page 188.



Rotation 3: Autumn 1968 tape on paper



Terminus 4 1969 tape and graphite on paper

CATALOGUE

Wall Painting

from the **Origami Series** 4000 x 32000 cm

DRAWINGS

Rotation Series 1968

Terminus Series 1969

Origami Series (for Lisa) 1971

Iris Series 1987

pencil, watercolour, collage on paper, mounted 35 x 43 cm

PAINTINGS

Iris Series

Gleam, New Morning, First Light, Sunbelt

1992, acrylic of canvas 122 x 122 cm

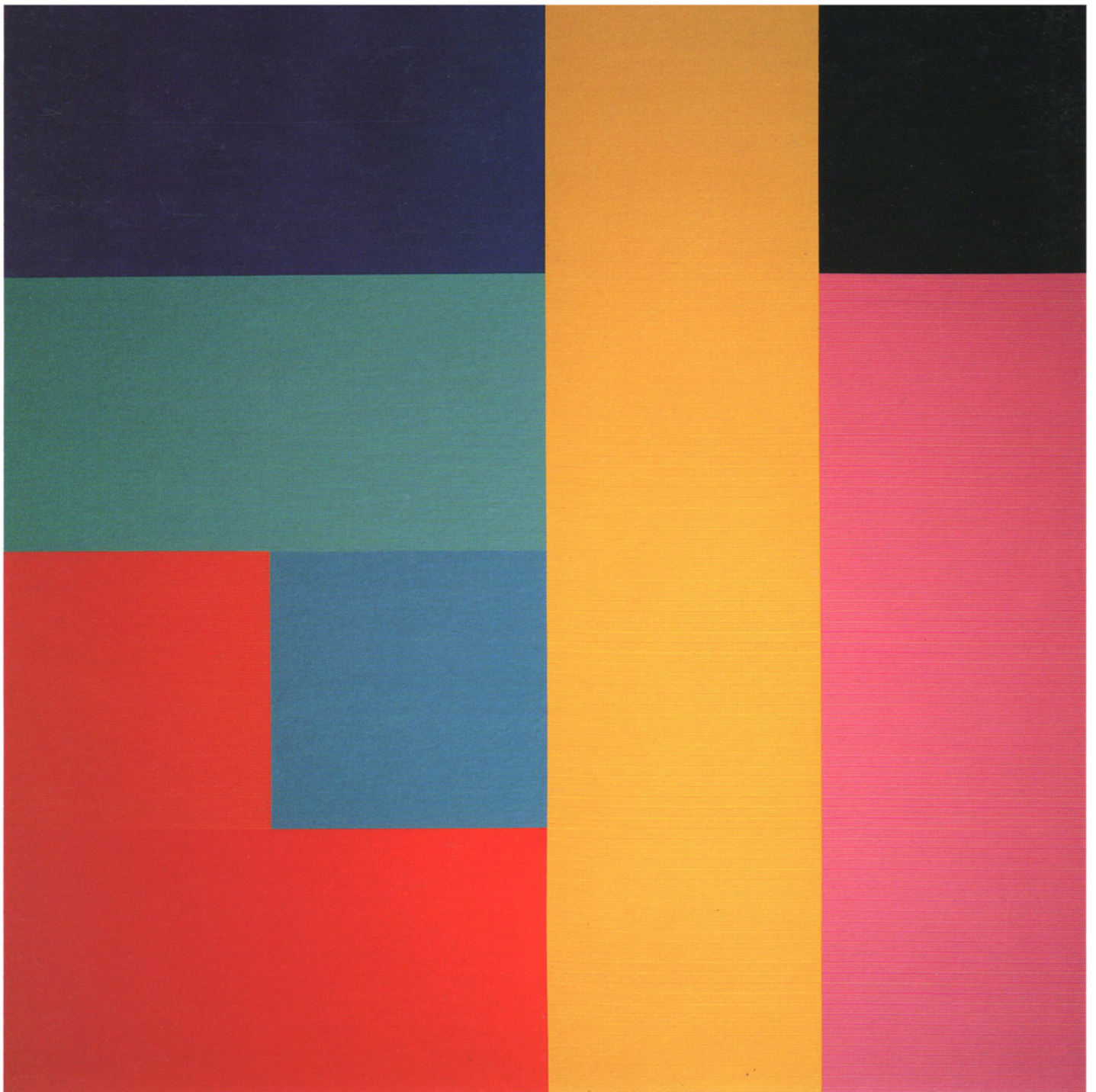
Origami series

Untitled I – IX

1992, acrylic of canvas 122 x 122 cm

FRONT COVER IMAGE: **Origami Series Untitled I**

BACK COVER IMAGE: **Origami Series Untitled IX**



Robert Owen was born in Sydney in 1937.

He is currently Associate Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

Exhibitions include **From Nature To Art / From Art To Nature**, 38th Venice Biennale, Italy, 1978; **European Dialogue, Biennale of Sydney**, 1989; **Australian Perspecta**, Sydney, 1981, 1985; **Re-Constructed Vision**, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1981; **D'un Autre Continent; L'Australie le rêve le réel**, ARC/ Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France, and **Presence and Absence**, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1983; **Biennale des Friedens**, Kunsthau Hamburg, Germany, 1985; **Ormond College Welcomes New Art**, University of Melbourne, 1987; **Trace of a Silent Bell**, Palais du Rhin, Strasbourg, France, 1988,

and City Gallery, Melbourne, 1989; the **International Exhibition of Steel Sculpture**, Chiba, Japan, 1989; **Inland, Corresponding Places**, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 1990; **Three Installations**, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1991; **Sunrise**, Pyo Gallery, Seoul, Korea, 1992.

Robert Owen is represented in Public Collections throughout Australia as well as the British Museum, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi; Staatliche Museum, Berlin; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Puskin Museum of Fine Art, Moscow; Olympic Sculpture Park, Seoul; National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.