OCCEAN:
Abstraction and Spirituality in the Top End

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A thesis submitted in total fulfillment of a
Master of Visual Arts Degree at
Charles Darwin University

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Master of Visual Arts by research at the Charles Darwin University, is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not currently being submitted in candidature for any other degree.

Jacquelin Anne Fleet

2006
Acknowledgements

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the issue of abstraction and spirituality in the development of my Master of Visual Arts Project. I aim to acknowledge and integrate the various influences on the development of this body of work.

Over the last twelve months I have worked intermittently at Numbulwar School in the Gulf of Carpentaria. These trips have provided inspiration for the development of Occean as has my residency at Darwin High School where my studio overlooks the sea.

I begin by exploring the development of Modernism and abstraction as deriving from nature. The abstraction of Occean maintains close links to the natural environment of the Top End, retaining a classical basis for the work. I acknowledge the influence of Romanticism and notions of the sublime and examine their contemporary value in painting.

These canons provide the basis for Occean, however the impact of place plays a pivotal role upon my work. The cultural and physical landscape of the Top End provides a rich and fertile environment that challenges traditional European concepts of both abstraction and spirituality.
Indigenous artists from the Top End engage with facets of contemporary Western society through painting that is loaded with cultural meaning connected to the ancestral past. I explore some of the deeper layers within the abstraction of Emily Kame Kngwarreye, women of the Balgo Hills, and Northeast Arnhem Land bark paintings.

As a non-Indigenous artist working within this domain I explore a facet of abstraction which finds form from being in this environment. I explore the spiritual and psychic dimension of the ocean implied by the Old French spelling of Occean, through light, rhythm and changes upon a fluid surface and the void experienced by the watery divide of sea and sky here at the edge of country.
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Introduction

This Masters of Visual Arts thesis is composed of two components. The primary component is that of my studio practice which resulted in two exhibitions, *Oceean* at Raft 2 in November 2004, and *Oceean II* at the Charles Darwin University Gallery in December 2005. The studio practice is accompanied by an exegesis exploring the theoretical issues and providing an explanation for my work. The exegesis examines abstraction, postmodernism and the spiritual in the present multicultural Australian art climate.

I put forward the idea that abstraction is a unique genre in present Australian postmodern conditions. Abstraction is often seen as outmoded in the modern sense, however I argue that the worn genre of abstraction combined with the spiritual, takes on new directions and assumes new layers of meaning in an Australian multicultural environment. Postmodernism in the present Australian climate gives artists such as myself the opportunity to re-examine their modernist heritage. As a contemporary artist I am informed by a variety of discourses which provide the material for the possibility of new growth. It is within this larger context of external discourse that I am able to locate the importance of the local environment in my work not just as the geographical space of the Top End, but as a combined and multi-layered cultural landscape. Here, one must recognise that postmodernism in Australia involves another vital element, that of Indigenous contemporary art.

I explore the spiritual connections evoked by light in the landscape as a cross-cultural experience that holds particular relevance in an Australian context.

Methodology

Studio Practice:

My background as a painter has involved an ongoing exploration of the spiritual through Top End land-based themes. The exploration of the theme
Ocean moves my focus from land-based themes to the sea as a vessel for the spiritual imagination. My key concerns as an artist have focused on natural rhythms in nature and the expression of light as a means to convey spiritual ideas. I have explored the effects of light and optical movement and surface/depth relationships repeatedly in differing forms over the years, moving from narrative imagery to abstraction.

The first year of my MVA, (2004), resulted in the first exhibition Ocean at Raft Artspace in 2004. In conjunction with the development of this body of work, I researched concepts exploring oceanic thought from both a Western and Islander perspective, focusing on Australian and Pacific cultures, from colonial settlement until the present, and writing from these neighbouring cultural perspectives.

During 2004 I started working for Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education teaching at the community of Numbulwar in the Gulf of Carpentaria. This teaching and learning experience contributed to the development of my work during the second year of the MVA. My visual and emotional response to my experiences in the Gulf is explored through abstraction in Ocean II, through exploration of the reflective and transcendent nature of light upon an oceanic field. The first exhibition Ocean (Raft Artspace, 2004), focused on developing techniques to express rhythms and light upon a fluid surface. Technically this was obtained by using translucent mediums and pigments in acrylics and oils to trap light within the layers of the painted surface. This exhibition evolved the techniques later refined in Ocean II (Raft II, 2005).

During my second year of study I was artist-in-residence at Darwin High School from August 2006 until December 2006, instructing staff and students in photo-polymer printmaking techniques. I was given a large studio overlooking the harbour including a small press. It was during this residency that the practical work for Ocean II was developed. As part of the research
behind the final exhibition I produced a series of small paintings and solar-plate prints which allowed me to explore the development of my ideas for the final exhibition. In this studio I conceived and developed my large painting *Top End: Sea Country* (2005) based on my experiences in the Gulf of Carpentaria and at Numbulwar, as well as locally observed rhythms at Bullocky Point. In contrast to the large scale and detailed rhythms and light of this painting I created a counterpart *Nocturnal Light* (2005) that was developed through observation of the local Nightcliff foreshore after dark. In this observation I was struck by the minimal description of surface, barely visible, that melted into a velvety dark horizon recalling impressions of the Abstract Expressionist Marc Rothko. These two paintings combined in dialogue to echo and contrast each other for the final exhibition *Ocean II*. Both paintings, based on The Top End environment, became signifiers of spiritual concepts through the appearance of light upon the surface however minimal the latter appeared. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

The Exegesis:
My research for the exegesis is underpinned by postmodernism. The term postmodern also invites a plethora of deconstructions and positionings making a rigid definition impossible, however it is generally agreed that the term came into popular use in the 1970s and 80s, and that some of the hallmarks of postmodernity include the challenge of master narratives decentering Western culture and the Western idea of subject. It is also associated with pluralistic thought, cultural, environmental and gender related issues (D’Avella, 2005: 150 – 157). As such, issues of identity are crucial to postmodernism (Reed, 1994: 274, Mclean, 1998: 125, 126, 134 – 48) and call for a new awareness particularly in an Australian national context of acknowledging Indigenous history and connections to place as an alternative reality to Western postcolonial realities in relationship to landscape, environmentalism, spirituality and culture. In this exegesis I maintain that an understanding of contemporary abstract painting in an Australian context, both Indigenous and
non-Indigenous, is crucial to the exploration of postcolonial ideas and the development of cross-cultural spiritual and environmental dialogue.

It should be noted that in the exegesis I will use the Old French spelling *Occean* to signify the broader mythological dimensions of ocean, rather than just the physical entity. When ocean is referred to as a physical entity it will be spelt in the usual way, and when it is referred to in the context of my work it will be spelt as *Occean*. *Occean* therefore becomes a very complex term, which embodies many things and is discussed further in chapter four.

In particular my focus as an artist is based in the local environment of the Top End. When I speak of the Top End I choose to adopt Cath Bowdler's definition of the Top End as a "geographic construction which does not recognise the border that separates the Kimberley from the [Northern Territory and Far North Queensland] and also... incorporates the 'Centre'" (Bowdler, 2005: 11). This definition incorporates a geographical and cultural area that has been a part of my own experience since moving from Hobart, Tasmania to Darwin in 1987.

I am aware of contemporary Aboriginal artists working in more urbanized contexts however these artists are outside the framework of this exegesis. I examine the underlying concepts and abstract developments of three remote Indigenous groups across the Top End and the importance of light in the conceptual development of their work.

My own work responds to important and influential Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists such as Emily Kngwarreye, Galuma Maymaru, Marc Rothko, W.C. Pigenuit, and Peter Adsett, to name a few. My work is conceived within a combined cultural landscape that includes colonial, modernist, postmodern and local concepts. Many writers acknowledge that notions of modernity still underpin abstraction in the 21st Century, revisiting earlier concepts of the avant garde, primitivism, abstract expressionism, minimalism,
etc. Postmodernism in an Australian context revises centre/periphery relationships and cultural constructs in a postcolonial environment inviting new possibilities for discussion and understandings of abstraction.

Chapter Outline
In chapter one I begin with a literature review examining the key concept of abstraction. The problems and dilemmas posed by the concept of abstraction are further explored through a critical analysis of several exhibitions of Australian contemporary art, which included both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. Dialogues in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and their diverse cultural histories are framed together under notions such as abstraction and spirituality provide challenges to these concepts re-framing abstraction and spirituality in an Australian environment into a postmodern, postcolonial context. As part of this analysis the origins of abstraction in Western modern art are examined as are the origins of acrylic painting at Papunya Tula.

Chapter two will look at the relationship between abstraction and spirituality and the transcendent qualities attached to the development of modernist art and the abstract surface. I acknowledge the problems of defining the spiritual and examine the idea of the sublime in nature through artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, Piet Mondrian through his work *Pier and Ocean* (1915), Wassily Kandinsky’s notion of the ‘Spiritual in Art’, and the Abstract Expressionist Marc Rothko. In particular I will be noting the importance of light in the ability to impart associations of a spiritual nature. This can be observed in the work of artists such as Caspar David Friedrich through his use of twilight and diffused haze in his landscapes. Light, I believe, has the ability to affect such associations cross-culturally, and as part of this exploration I acknowledge similar ideas from a different cultural context such as Northeast Arnhem Land.
Chapter three will discuss contemporary Indigenous painting in the Western Central Desert, Balgo and northeast Arnhem Land regions which are layered with meaning rather than reduced, whilst having the appearance of an abstract surface. These images, although appearing reductive, refer back to the land. I discuss the Utopia artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye and the reception to her work which remains linked in a contemporary dialogue that operates like a mirror which, Janus-faced, reflects back an understanding of the history and culture of the Western art world. This two-way dialogue creates a cusp of interaction adapting and relocating Indigenous culture into a postcolonial context. I discuss the importance of sand-painting in the art from Balgo Hills and the visual interpretation of light and sound in specific works. I also explore recent developments in Northeast Arnhem Land bark paintings which extend the concept of bir’yun, relating to shimmering light in the landscape.

Chapter four, Occean, explores the meaning and relevance of abstraction and the spiritual within my work and the importance not only of an inherited artistic tradition, but also of the vital influence of place and locality upon my aesthetic. It is important to acknowledge the effects of isolation and distance from the rest of the contemporary world and also the culturally active and loaded space of the Northern Territory, which has enriched my understanding of place and feeds the general orientation of my thoughts.

The body of paintings in Occean explores water as a theme to express spiritual feelings through rhythm, transparency and light. Occean is based on an abstract notion of a mythical sea as a dividing and connecting field; a place of mystery and intrigue, an expression of the boundless and, as a moving reflective surface which has the ability to inspire notions of transcendence through the radiance of light.

In conclusion I put forward the possibility of new combinations and directions available to the contemporary painter in the exploration of abstraction and the
spiritual, through cross-cultural exchanges, interactions and understandings. The language of abstraction keeps modifying to suit the conditions of the present, and in that way not only is culture an alive and adapting force in this country but also abstraction and the language of painting itself holds currency in a cross-cultural context.
1. Abstraction

In this chapter I examine the key theme of my Master of Visual Arts Degree, abstraction.

I argue that abstraction is a very complex and ambiguous concept, derived from Eurocentric artistic traditions which continue to dominate the Australian art world and overlook recognition for a parallel language of abstraction within contemporary Indigenous art.

Let me begin with the definition of abstraction provided by The Concise Oxford Dictionary. Here abstraction is defined in very general terms as:

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary* describes abstraction as: “taking away, withdrawal... [the] process of stripping an idea of its concrete accompaniments; an idea so stripped, something visionary; piece of abstract art ...” (Sykes, 1976: 5). It is clear that within this definition the term abstraction is ambiguous referring to both the reduction of form associated with Cubism and the spirituality of Expressionism and other modernist movements. The first problem we encounter here is that abstraction is defined in purely Western terms with no acknowledgement of the abstraction which occurs in non-Western and Indigenous cultures. Therefore, Western, European and American artists may identify with this definition of abstraction, however in an Australian context, these ideas create confusion and misunderstanding, particularly when applied to Indigenous art. It is precisely this Eurocentrism which becomes problematic when displaced into an Australian context as the inherited concepts and impetus for modernism and abstraction have no connection to visual languages and traditions that arise in non-Western and particularly Indigenous cultures. Even within European art history the terms ‘abstract’, ‘non-representational’ and ‘non-objective’ are problematic implying on the one hand, a response to the exterior world and on the other, an aesthetic concern with the visual field of the picture plane. These debates are not central to my arguments however and I do not address them in detail. For the purposes of this exegesis I argue that abstraction is better seen as a complex set of responses to the world expressed through the artist’s personal style and may contain many levels of meaning.
The complexities of abstraction arise from a combination of factors. In the Western world the history of abstraction has developed around both London, Paris and New York as the centre of the avant garde. I maintain that the first abstractions primarily were related to landscape through painters such as W.C. Turner and also the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. In terms of a European historical timeframe this coincides with the beginning of industrialism, mass production and also the invention of photography. I acknowledge the terms modern and modernity as problematic in terms of definition (Stangos, 1994: 7, Haese, 1988: 2) however, for the purposes of this exegesis the developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century signify the beginning of a modern art movement concerned with the avant-garde, primitivism, the questioning of academic traditions and the development of a visual language through the development of abstraction from Impressionism, Cubism through to Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism.

Locating the problems inherent in the terminologies of abstraction, Modernism and Postmodernism and placing them within a postcolonial Australian discourse allows us to view the crisis in the Australian consciousness that allows abstraction to be viewed as an imported aesthetic and therefore not relevant in an Australian context (Smith, 1971: 295, 308, 309, 330, 333, Hughes, 1970: 251, 252, 260, Haese, 1988: 7, Barnes, 1993: xvii-xix, McLean, 1998: 77, 91, 111, 112). Modernism in an Australian context has two main trajectories stemming from the 1940s, on the one hand a conscious reaction against abstraction through a blend of the figurative, subconscious and social concerns by the Melbourne Antipodeans and on the other an exploration of the formal qualities of the picture plane as supported by a faction of Sydney-based artists (Haese, 1988: 8, 18, Smith, 1971: 289 – 330, Hughes, 1970: 169, 252). A sense of nationalism and internationalism differentiate the two schools of abstraction in Australia. As a young settler colony on the periphery of the art world the Heidelberg school (1885-96) established the canon on Australian art and it became a symbol of national identity (McLean, 1998: 52 – 81). The
Antipodeans of the 1940’s reacted against this conservative pastoral tradition in an attempt to create new expressions of the Australian experience (Haese, 1988: 3), inspired more by Surrealism and the subconscious and the power and dynamism of Expressionism (Haese, 1988: 3) than a purely aesthetic exploration. Not only is there a dichotomy between the two early forms of abstraction in Australia, but a paradox exists in the Australian consciousness which denies the possibility of an abstraction that is borne from an Australian identity not derived from modernist concepts. The perceived problem is that abstraction in modern art springs from a European construct which is historically contentious issue. Postmodernism displaces these cultural constructs and centre/ periphery arguments inviting new dialogues and expression. As such, it must be considered that abstraction in an Australian context is thousands of years old, given an Indigenous context, its signs, symbols and visual language emanating from an Ancestral past.

The rise of an Indigenous painting movement in the Top End, using abstraction and symbolism to describe Indigenous relationships and ancestral connections to country requires non-Indigenous artists, particularly those working in the Top End, to be aware of the social and political context for these works and to re-negotiate our own relationship to not only this place and its traditional owners, but also to our own inherited postcolonial and postmodern belief systems in order to create a new form of abstraction informed by cross-cultural past histories.

I argue that in the Australian context there is a pressing need to reconceptualise abstraction as a unique postmodern hybrid genre with an autonomy of its own. Abstraction in Australia must be seen in terms of both Western and Indigenous histories. The problem is Aboriginal art was originally seen in ethnographic terms through the discoveries of anthropologists. When it was appreciated by the art world it was understood as ‘primitive art’ i.e. admired as a source of strength and vitality for Western artists, but relegated to the past and the artists
were anonymous. A contemporary Aboriginal artistic expression emerges in the 1970s in the Central Desert alongside self-determination and the Land Rights movement.

In the 1970s Commonwealth recognition was given to Indigenous Australians under the 1967 Referendum (Fink & Perkins, 1997: 61) and the first commercial galleries devoted to Aboriginal art opened in Melbourne and Sydney during the 1970s. Before that “Aboriginal artists showed as schools” and their work was “seldom marketed as the work of individual artists” (Ingram, 1997: 126). In the 1970s “contemporary” art then effectively meant “current work by white artists” (Ingram, 1997: 126). Basically Aboriginal art was classified under the category of ‘traditional Aboriginal art.’ Perceptions of Indigenous art changed dramatically from the 1970s onward, with the emergence of Western Desert acrylic dot painting at Papunya as a new art form calling into question earlier terminologies such as ‘native’, ‘primitive’, ‘artifact’, and ‘craft’. In the current era Indigenous artists are promoting Australia internationally in major contemporary art events.

Abstraction in the Western and Central Desert

An ‘abstract’ style in Indigenous acrylic painting emerged at Papunya in 1971. These paintings differed from other forms of Indigenous art still thought of as traditional through their modern materiality of ancient concepts. They have been perceived to hold visual similarities to modern Western abstract painting (Anderson, Dussart, 1988: 90, Morphy, 1998: 291) and are now considered “part of a modern Australian art” (Anderson, Dussart, 1988: 90) despite their historical references.

The government settlement of Papunya brought together Pintupi, Walpiri, Aranda, Anmatyerre and Loritja language groups. During his brief stay at Papunya art teacher Geoffrey Bardon’s encouraged the children to translate designs drawn in the sand as part of the story telling process into murals on the
school wall. A number of Pintupi men were invited to paint their traditional designs as a mural at the school. The subject of this work was the Honey Ant Dreaming which is the dreaming for the site after which Papunya is named (Anderson, Dussart, 1988: 97). The men went on to explore their traditional designs formerly used in a ceremonial context, into works on canvas and board using acrylic paints (Morphy, Smith-Boles, 1999: 160, Anderson, Dussart, 1988: 97). These ‘abstract’ works were promoted at a time when they were not understood, as they seemed to stand outside the accepted framework of Indigenous culture as craft and artifact. At the time there was little understanding that the discreet range of geometric symbols which form the visual language of Central Desert culture contained a myriad of meanings directly connected to the ancestral past (Allan, 2001: pp 1-5).

As we see abstraction in an Australian context is a confused and complex term. Many writers on Australian abstraction revisit Modernism, as it is inextricably linked to Western European art historical concepts and in particular developments of the twentieth century. Because of this retro-active linking, in a contemporary postmodern world abstraction is not only seen as un-Australian, but as frequently seen as outmoded (Barnes, 1993: xvii).

The value of abstraction in Australian art is questioned by various writers. For example, Carolyn Barnes in her essay ‘Abstraction and the Australian Cultural Context’ written for the Australian Perspecta 1993, discusses in particular some of the debate surrounding these issues. Barnes locates abstraction in Australia as retroactively affected by Modernist values and tells us these issues need to be discussed. Barnes opens up the problem of abstraction in Australia by telling us it is often discussed in terms of regional specificity and as somehow alien to the Australian experience” (Barnes, 1993: xvii). Barnes tells us that the “relationship of Australian culture to geographic location” frequently works to “deny the validity of abstract art practices in the Australian context despite a history extending back to the early decades of this century”
Barnes position on abstraction becomes automatically linked to Modernism and the problems that presents in an Australian context, in which the landscape is often the impetus for abstraction. Barnes does not acknowledge an Indigenous history of abstraction.

Barnes tells us “the whole issue of cultural authenticity versus dependence seems intimately connected to the need to fix Australian cultural identity as a discrete and coherent entity, an agenda abstraction constantly problematises when it is related to cultural forces (modernity) conceived as seemingly ‘Un-Australian’” (Barnes, 1993: xvii). The issue Barnes highlights is that abstraction is an imported aesthetic, and part of a European model that she questions in relation to an Australian context. The ‘cultural authenticity’ Barnes refers to is a ‘home grown’ culture, not the kind of ‘cultural authenticity’ that is used to validate Indigenous art today.

Barnes discussion does illuminate some of the issues that affect artists of Western European descent in an Australian context yet fails to take into account Indigenous artists working from a cultural heritage, or the complexities of living in a cross-cultural environment. Barnes acknowledges the beginnings of abstraction in the Australian contest as extending back to the early decades of this century, but what she fails to recognize is that Indigenous abstraction has a history which extends back 40,000 years. In this chapter I will explore ideas and developments in abstraction from a Western perspective in this present climate and acknowledge also the origins and power of Indigenous ‘abstract’ painting in the contemporary art market.

Through Papunya Tula we see the emergence of a new visual language formerly only seen in ceremonial contexts now in a public forum with a new iconography. It is noted that the development of a particular style at Papunya Tula is surrounded by discussions on the politics of secrecy. Early paintings comprised of outlined geometric figures related to sand sculptures with dotting
restricted to certain areas (Morphy, 1998: 292). Myers indicates that the discussions he had with Pintubi artists were not dominated by these themes, in fact he notes an intense interest on the part of the Pintubi artists to make clear the multi-layered deep meanings and referents embedded in their works (Myers, 1999: 223). Myers informs us that the central precursor of acrylic painting at Papunya was based in ritual through the reenactment of Dreaming stories (Myers, 1999: 223) in which the rights were shared and expanded. During the following decade the figurative element was reduced becoming more abstract through the proliferation of dots, cocentric circles and u-shapes (Morphy, 1998: 294).

As Indigenous art has now expanded rapidly into the contemporary domain we see Indigenous cultures evolving their cultural forms and exploring the painted surface through abstraction. Not only is this apparent in the Western Desert acrylics but is also noted in recent developments of a traditional art form such as the bark paintings of the Northeast Arnhem Land region.

Since these early beginnings, many Indigenous painters have adapted their painting styles in response to the rapid expansion into a commercial domain. The huge price tags attained by Indigenous artists through the commercial bandwagon have initiated some negative responses suggesting that artists were ‘selling their culture’. However this criticism disregards the main reasons for the explosion of contemporary Indigenous art which has obvious financial benefits to both artists and communities, but primarily concerned with maintaining the preservation of culture and acts as a teaching tool to both younger generations and the wider community.

The contemporary critical response.
I turn now to the critical writings of contemporary art historians and curators to examine the reception to a contemporary Indigenous artistic expression and its location within the Australian art world.
Rex Butler in his recent book *Radical Revisionism* (2005) gathers together a collection of essays on the influences of appropriation on Australian art criticism in the 1990s and 2000s examining them through a postmodern lens (Snelling, 2005: 5). As already shown, Bernard Smith is considered a major figure in Australian art history, responsible for the first key texts defining the particular style and character of Australian art. Butler conducts an interview with Bernard Smith primarily focused on a discussion of Smith’s book *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768-1850* (1960) (Butler, 2005: 73 - 79). At the end of this discussion Butler diverts the topic toward Indigenous issues. They discuss the possibility of a new history of Australian art from an Aboriginal perspective (Butler, 2005: 78). Smith acknowledges that Aboriginal art practice arises from ritual, and considers the study must contain the right mix of history and anthropology (Butler, 2005: 78). Butler proposes that the kind of abstraction that Smith previously rejected in ‘The Antipodean Manifesto’ as un-Australian is now the most unique Australian art form exampled by Emily Kame Kngwarreye (Butler, 2005: 79). Smith disagrees testifying the continued power of the formalesque in world-wide culture (Butler, 2005: 79) and further goes on to suggest that Aboriginal art could possibly have developed stylistically toward this aesthetic through Bardon, a trained modernist, as he worked with the children and elders of the Pintubi tribe (Butler, 2005: 79). The discussion closes at this point illuminating Smith’s position which maintains a colonial attitude to the developments from Papunya Tula. His position reinforces the idea of a Western dominance whilst it ignores the autonomy and strength of Indigenous culture. It is notions such as these that need revising in a postcolonial and postmodern environment.

In several contemporary exhibitions curators have brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists focused on the theme of abstraction. In the group exhibition *Abstraction* curated by Victoria Lynn in 1990 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Lynn contextualises her selection of key artists through the
idea of “Eccentric Abstraction,” a term originally coined by the American writer Lucy Lippard to refer to developments in American sculpture (Lynn, 1990: 4). Lynn uses this term to evoke a sense of the mutating realm of abstraction and minimalism that draws from a wide variety of sources and takes on a number of different stylistic tendencies in Australian art. Lynn includes these variations under the umbrella of abstraction that in the 1990s, encompassed an amalgamation of a wide range of concerns, methods, and impetuses. A protean recipe for an Australian postmodern abstraction, but not one which necessarily embraces an Indigenous perspective.

Lynn gives a concise overview of the critical changes in modernist abstraction this century encompassing a range of ideas from the utopian ideals of the Russian Constructivists and Kasimir Malevich’s interest in the fourth dimension to the spiritual concerns of Wassily Kandinsky and the American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock’s exploration of the artist’s psychological unconscious (Lynn, 1990: 4). In doing so she provides an overview of the key phases in Western thinking throughout the twentieth century through which it is possible to gain a glimpse of the internalizing processes of the artists of this era.

The twelve non-Indigenous artists included in *Abstraction* are seen to provide variants on the conventions of Modernism and abstraction and are concerned with a postmodern dialogue. For example the artists Debra Dawes and Liz Coates continue the extension of primary modernist structures based on the grid, which Lynn sees as leaning toward more feminist interpretations. Marion Borgelt and Aida Tomescu explore a painterly gesture which Abstract Expressionism saw as “an outward extension of the artist’s psyche, an authentic mark” (Lynn, 1990: 11), whilst Borgelt’s palette is altered to relate to northern hemisphere light. Both artists refer back to a naturalism that is inherent in the land, and is translated and mutated into the realm of abstraction. Other artists are grouped through their use of materials, the substance of which
provides their work with inherent qualities and associations, not only to the environment from which they were sourced, but also from the art historical canons. However, none of these artists are concerned with Indigenous art and there is no evidence of cross-cultural dialogue at work.

Lynn’s use of the term “Eccentric Abstraction” might be appropriate to apply to the non-Indigenous artists in the exhibition but there is a danger that the Indigenous artists are subsumed under a Western paradigm. Lynn has chosen all fifteen artists on the basis that they “deviate from the central directions of abstraction in remarkably different ways” (Lynn, 1990: 11). However, out of the fifteen artists included in the show Lynn chooses only three key Indigenous artists i.e. she could be accused of tokenism.

The inclusion of the three Indigenous artists in Lynn’s selection Rover Thomas, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, and Peter Skipper complicates this trajectory and adds new directions that deviate from essentially Western constructs of abstract practice and thought. Lynn expands, “Contemporary Aboriginal art contributes a fresh set of meanings to abstraction. It denies the self-reflexivity and purity of form common to much abstraction from the mid-century as well as providing alternate conceptions of spirit” (Lynn, 1990: 5). Art in an Indigenous context therefore has many more roles to play than that of a purely aesthetic object. Although Indigenous art now has a commodity status, it also communicates ideas within a Western domain regarding Indigenous relationships to country and its ancestral creator beings. In her catalogue essay Lyn examines these Indigenous works through a critical analysis of the artist’s use of symbols. She argues that they “exhibit a freedom with abstraction engendering a vitality rather than a repetition” (Lynn, 1990: 4).

Aboriginal culture is founded on cultural values which are part of a continuous tradition, in direct continuity with the past. However this does not mean Aboriginal culture is static and locked back in the past. Aboriginal culture is constantly evolving and adapting to present political and social conditions and
market demands thus as shown by the Yolgnu indicates response to the outside world (Isaacs, 2003: 3, Morphy, 1999: 83). I would argue that the Indigenous artists in Abstraction have found a means of expression that bridges the gap between their own cultural history and Western abstraction whilst holding no reference point to Modernism’s history.

Likewise the exhibition Indecorous Abstraction (2002) curated by Margot Osbourne, brought together women artists from varying cultural backgrounds who worked in an abstract style. The artists included Marion Borgelt, Aida Tomescu, Cathy Blanchflower, Kari Bienert, Angela Brennan, Wendy Kelly, Ildiko Kovaks, Rosella Namok, Dorothy Napangardi, Mitjili Napurrula, Gloria Petyarre, Angelina Pwerle, Savanhdary Vongpoothorn and myself. The exhibition operated on a culturally collective notion of the visceral power of optical and rhythmic art that crosses cultural boundaries. Osbourne intended that by bringing together this culturally diverse collection of paintings, the exhibition would through its organic nature transcend the term decorative often associated with women’s art. Within this curatorial frame the danger is however that Indigenous artists are subsumed within a Western art/craft paradigm.

Osbourne’s conceptual framework for the exhibition was questioned by the critic Michael Newall who argued that Borgelt and Tomescu’s paintings were landscapes concluding that many works in the show “are not in fact abstract” (Newall, 2002: 86). Newall’s comments return us to the dilemma of the term ‘abstract’ and how it is perceived in contemporary Western discourse as necessarily concerned with Modernism and the grid.

The problem of a redefinition of the term ‘abstraction’ is heightened by Newall’s comments. In an Australian context abstraction is complicated by artists whose work comes from completely different cultural contexts. From a culturally strong Indigenous context such as the Western Desert, Kimberley
and Northeast Arnhem Land, Arnhem Land, whilst moving in new directions maintains a strong political ownership through the clan designs it represents. An exploration of these groups and their varied and yet connected impetus for an expansion on traditional motifs and forms of symbolism is expanded further in chapter three.

Osbourne demonstrates that the Central Desert painters included in the exhibition Angelina Pwerle, Gloria Petyarre and Dorothy Napangardi extend the idea of organic ‘abstraction’ associated with the women’s painting of this region. However Newell warns that the danger of “placing these paintings alongside genuinely abstract works is that it encourages the viewer to focus on what the works have in common – certain superficial formal qualities – while eliding the points of difference – the different cultural, social, ritual and aesthetic contexts from which these works draw their distinctive meanings” (Newall, 2002: 86).

What we need now is to find our way toward a new idea of abstraction that is located somewhere between the work of Borgelt and Tomescu whose work connects directly to the land and the Indigenous connections to country. I believe that the word abstraction now has many facets and that it is time to acknowledge that there can be more than one application of the word. Lippard quotes the British geographer Denis Cosgrove as defining landscape as “the external world mediated through human subjective experience” (Lippard, 1997: 7). This explanation could also define many streams of abstract painting and yet Lippard brings us closer still to separating the threads when she tells us that “a lived in landscape becomes a place, which implies intimacy” (Lippard, 1997: 7, 8). Many Indigenous connections to country and place not only exist through historical continuity, but also through a visual language that is unique to that specific area. In my own work I also explore connections to country/landscape and return to explore the beginnings of abstraction in a European
tradition as exemplified in the works of Turner and the Impressionists, the origins of which lie in the landscape.

Return to Beginnings
The beginnings of European abstraction held nature and human expression to be at the source, before the various movements of the twentieth century became more self-reflexive and non-mimetic. These new concerns saw artists move away from the representation of the natural world to express their response to a new modernist era brought into being by the rapid growth of industrialization. With Modernism the methodologies of the academy were seen to be antiquated and in need of revision. The picture plane became a site of experimentation in which the artists freed themselves from the established conventions of a past era. Artists focused on inventing a new visual language for a new era.

In my view one of the first ‘abstract’ painters of note was the English artist, William Turner (1775–1851), whose renditions of sea and sky went beyond the sense of the ordinary to express the “grandeur of the natural world” (Wilton, 1996: 16). Turner was a member of the Royal Academy in London and was trained in the topographical and picturesque. His later works became a study of atmospheric effects and the materiality of his medium. Light, in Turner’s paintings, increasingly became the source through which the material realm became dematerialised. These works, although relatively true renditions of the atmospheric, became less illustrative and more powerfully suggestive towards the latter part of his career. Water and seascapes were an important subject matter for Turner assuming a multiplicity of meanings touching on the sublime. Writer John Golding tells us that “as the drama of Turner’s art became increasingly internalised, the constant shimmer and pulse of water and of the shifting and scudding skies above it are at times compounded into a single flux of pictorial movement” (Golding, 1996: 179). *Seascape: Folkstone* (1845) (Plate 3), is a classic example of this new form of abstraction which no
longer clings to mimetic forms in nature, but rather has become suggestive of
them. Turner’s work sits directly on the cusp of the modern era. It bridged the
Old World signalling the coming of the new.

A group of French artists, who, in 1874, broke away from the academic
tradition of painting and became known as the Impressionists are often cited as
the beginning of Modernism. The Impressionist painters concerned themselves
with properties of light upon forms and the atmospheric change of local colour
at different times of the day to develop *plein* air painting, thus removing the
artist from the studio into the field itself. In their momentous break from
academic and scientific conventions that had been applied throughout
European art since the Renaissance, they differed from Turner (who remained
part of the academy). Defying existing conventions in favour of
experimentation they were the avant-garde of their time and, in this respect,
they are often construed as the leaders of Modernism. Whilst the art of the
Impressionists became increasingly abstract, their art remained inextricably
linked to nature and the movement of light upon forms within it.

Cubism marks a pivotal moment in the development of new concepts relating
to form and space transferred to a two-dimensional surface. Ideas promoted by
the established model of The Academy started slipping into antiquity. The
deconstruction of the image occurred as rapidly as the advent of
industrialisation and invention. Cubist artists reduced form to a series of
interlocking planes creating new ideas about objects and spatial representation
(Golding, 1994: 57). Artists established a new form of visual language
exploring the conceptual limits of the picture plane. Picasso and Braque, both
inspired by the work of Cezanne (Golding, 1994: 54), in particular made
revolutionary contributions to ways of resenting the object as form and space.
Picasso was also influenced by the conceptual nature of African sculpture in
which he conceived that ideas about the subject are more important than a
natural depiction of it (Golding, 1994: 52). His subsequent flattening of form,
although inspired by African sculpture and primitivism, was not informed by a deep connection with that culture or place. The sculpture however acted as a catalyst, reflecting and challenging existing Western cultural conventions.

Braque's contribution to this challenge was to place into question existing structural notions of pictorial space developed in the Renaissance, giving space as much importance as the subject. He invited the viewer to explore this notion of space (Golding, 1994: 57).

Russian artist Kasimir Malevich was the first artist to divorce the object as subject, pronouncing that art ‘“can exist, in and for itself, without things”’ (Gablik, 1995: 244). Malevich used the square as “the basic Suprematist element, never to be found in nature” (Gablik, 1995: 244). This cool formalism and reference to the square was to re-emerge under the premises of Minimalism which became a vehicle for sculptural form, often modular and repetitive, and devoid of the crafted hand of the maker, imitating the industrial, de-humanized surface as a reaction to the excesses of Abstract Expressionism.

Abstraction in the fifties and sixties became the hallmark of the American Abstract Expressionist painters who took abstraction to new levels. Abstract Expressionists such as Marc Rothko and Jackson Pollock created large scale corporate paintings which reached sale prices unprecedented in an artist’s lifetime. The market economy that rocketed in a short span of time played an integral role in the way abstract art was accepted and assimilated by the general public, solidifying its kudos in the modern world. This era was also dominated by male artists, many of whom with their tragic and impassioned lives, gave new currency to the idea of the ‘artist as hero’, a notion challenged in contemporary times.
Eventually the cool formalism of this abstraction, which in its rigor separated art and life, led to the re-assessment of rigid formalist principles. Nick Stangos, editor of *Concepts of Modern Art*, expands:

thus, modernism is now revealed to be not entirely the liberating force it had been thought to be. Instead it is seen as being responsible for, among other things, the denial of representational meaning, the fixation on authenticity and originality, specifically of the aesthetic experience, the denial of intention, and expression in the purely visual, the distinction between verbal and visual arts by the ‘partitioning of the aesthetic field into discrete areas of specific competence’, the belief in the autonomy of the work of art (Stangos, 1994: 8).

Stangos makes the point that the historical avant-gardes aimed for the de-institutionalization of art to bring it back to the people, however by the 1960s the avant garde had been absorbed and neutralized into a “commercially dominated cultural context” which transformed it “into commodity value” (Stangos: 1994: 9).

Postmodernism attempts to address this dilemma. Jurgen Habermas, in his essay ‘Modernism – an Unfinished Project’, suggests that “the term modern now applies to anything that serves to give objective expression to the current spirit of the age, which spontaneously renews itself” (Habermas, 1988:25). He suggests that the new is constantly being outmoded by the next new fashion, and as fashions come and go, the truly modern retains its links with the classical. Habermas rejects the idea of the avant-garde and suggests we return to the classical for works of enduring quality. I argue that in Australian Indigenous art we have classical works of an enduring quality.

The Indigenous art of the Top End requires an acknowledgement of custodial ownership and is politically active in a postcolonial environment in which Indigenous issues and land rights are currently being challenged and contended. Non-Indigenous artists in the Top End in particular gain a greater awareness of the strength of culture and the importance of Indigenous issues. If notions of belonging constantly challenged in postcolonial discourse hold currency in
urban centres, then they are magnified in the humidity crib of a Top End environment. Non-Indigenous cultural baggage includes an acknowledgment of the systems of Modernism, Western art forms and postcolonial histories. Here, the interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture is a daily event. Here we are asked to acknowledge the lie of Terra Nullius and to form new histories in the full light of our tragic colonial beginnings. This is not a negative response, but a positive way forward to a more informed and responsible future. The language of abstraction invites a forum through which postcolonial constructs are discussed and our relationship to place is enriched through deeper understandings.

If I return to Habermas' suggestion that "the term modern now applies to anything that serves to give objective expression to the current spirit of the age, which spontaneously renews itself" (Habermas, 1988:25), then the hallmarks of a certain cultural modernity within Indigenous painting are evident. These works are imbued with the classicism and "authenticity of a past actuality," being the cultural knowledge based in Law. Visually however they are constantly developing, reinforcing Lynn's claim that "abstraction engenders perpetual expansion" (Lynn, 1990: 11).
2. Spirituality

This chapter examines aspects of the sublime in nature originating from a European Romantic tradition. I will also examine artistic concepts of the spiritual and the transcendent, linking them to new Theosophical ideas in the early twentieth century that influenced many modern artists. Prime examples of the influence of this new philosophy are seen in the ideas of artists such as Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Piet Mondrian (1872 – 1944) as they journey into abstraction with the spiritual becoming more removed from the mimesis of nature. Thus Modernism can be seen as a search for a sense of the spiritual in contemporary life. I also examine the concept of spirituality in Australia in a postmodern postcolonial environment, which in Australia is a strange mix of orthodox religions and a materialistic, ocker secular culture, contrasted by the complex spiritual domain of Indigenous Australia and the landscape.

This raises the question, How do we define the spiritual and what is its relevance in contemporary Australian society? The Concise Oxford Dictionary describes the “spiritual quality; ... what belongs or is due to the Church or to an ecclesiastic as such...” (Sykes, 1976: 1106). The spiritual is also described as: “of spirit as opp. to matter; of the soul esp. as acted on by God ... of or proceeding from God, holy, divine, inspired ... concerned with sacred or religious things...” (Sykes, 1976: 1106). This definition accords with the framework of traditional European structures however it is not appropriate to an Indigenous spirituality.

Ideas of the spiritual essence of humanity and the sublime in nature arose through painters such as the German, Caspar David Friedrich (1774 – 1840) as part of what is now seen as the ‘Northern Romantic tradition’ (Rosenblum, 1978). Friedrich’s landscapes and seascapes often contained a “lone figure in nature, with eyes – and, by inference, soul – fixed on the void, the unnamable
absolute” (Smee, 2005: 18). *A Wanderer above the Clouds* (1815) (Plate 4) is a classic example of this genre. For Friedrich the horizon had deeper connotations than just a pretty view, because the Romantic tradition originated out of German idealist philosophy. Simon Morley in his article ‘The Friedrich Factor’ tells us “there emerged a spirituality of art based on the mystical, contemplative psychology of self-effacement transposed now into a secular phenomenology in which all consuming attention to the work of art aimed to lull the viewer into self-forgetfulness” (Morley, 1998: 28). Morley explains that the goal of this art was to generate an experience of liminality – “of being placed at the boundary of consciousness, far from the security of the ordinary and utilitarian world” (Morley, 1998: 28) culminating in a sublime experience between the work and the viewer. In my paintings the horizon denotes this space between worlds, and consciously points toward ideas of the sublime.

In nineteenth century Australia artists followed European ideas of the sublime. Examples of this genre can be seen in the works of the immigrant artist Eugene von Guerard (1811 – 1901) and the self-taught, Tasmanian born, landscape artist W.C. Pigenet (1836 – 1914). These artists portrayed the romantic grandeur of the natural Australian environment seeking untamed and largely unexplored vistas depicting a timeless and natural grandeur within the land. Pigenet’s rugged Tasmanian landscapes were lit by luminous skies evoking the grandeur of a pristine wilderness. Ian McLean writes that in Australia, the failure of the picturesque can be “traced to the triumph of the romantic imagination, and to a new relationship to the world in which the other inhabited the very centre of one’s being and culture” (McLean, 1998: 46). The important difference between a picturesque and a sublime landscape, for McLean, is that “the picturesque is inhabited and cultivated; it represents a historical landscape” (McLean, 1998: 55). These landscapes by Pigenet and von Guerard verge on a melancholic wilderness inhabited with timeless forms. Here the sense of the tragic sublime is softened by the ambience of
illumination. I expand further on Piguenit’s vision of landscape in more detail in chapter four.

With the coming of modernity, earlier belief structures i.e., the rules of The Academy and the constraints of Christianity, no longer fitted the role of the artist in forging a new vision for a more worldly view. The Theosophical society founded in the 1870’s by Madame Blavatsky and H.S. Olcott (Galbreath, 1986: 388) conflated world religions, both Eastern and Western, creating new dialogues and new avenues for the visualization and extension of abstraction by the avant-garde (Alego, 1987: 2). Both Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian were followers of these new ideas, and extended them into their practice. Mondrian moved toward a gradual form of abstraction that he at first found in nature. He reduced form to an essential set of horizontal and vertical marks as shown in his work Pier and Ocean (Plate 5) held within an egg-shaped field. Writer Robert Welsh notes the implications of the oval border, which he relates to Theosophical notions of the cosmic egg born of the sea, originally derived from Hindu tradition (Welsh, 1977: 11). Mondrian’s ‘plus-minus’ compositions imply great spiritual truths in the form of the cross that embodies ideas such as the union of opposites: masculine and feminine, spiritual and material. Of Pier and Ocean Mondrian said in 1945 “Impressed by the vastness of nature, I was trying to express its expansion and unity” (Welsh, 1977: 10). Mondrian also believed that “…reality is form and space… Art has to determine space as well as form and to create the equivalence of these two factors” (Welsh, 1977: 11). Thus the space in Mondrian’s painting Pier and Ocean appears as a white background against a sea of black marks. It is this white background that could be interpreted as light in the landscape. For example when looking upon a fluid surface, its rhythms are accentuated by the light reflected on its surface. It is clear that through Theosophy, Mondrian explored ideas that moved beyond the purely physical dimension of life towards the spiritual.
Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* (1912) "links a new style of painting, abstraction, with the coming of a new utopia" (Long, 1986: 202). Kandinsky saw his "epoch [as a] tragic collision between matter and spirit" (Long, 1986: 202). Kandinsky saw in the materialism of the new era, the forces of evil. In abstraction he found a sense of form freed from attachment to the material world hence invoking a sense of the spiritual. Throughout Kandinsky's various phases he continued to experiment with spatial illusions. Kandinsky's later publication *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), "discussed the problem of dematerializing the picture plane, urging the artist to transform it into a sensation of indefinable space, so that the spectator might experience the extension of 'the dimension of time'" (Long, 1986: 214).

The dematerializing of the picture plane continued to be of importance to artists later in the twentieth century and became central to the work of the American Abstract Expressionist Marc Rothko among others. Rothko's "hovering lozenges of colour ... suggest boundlessness" and have been linked to the Romantic sublime by Rosenblum. Rosenblum argues that "in the abstract paintings of Rothko the figure of the monk," that was often present in Friedrich's paintings, "has been effectively replaced by the viewer" (Rosenblum cited by Smee, 2005: 18). He suggests it is we, "rather than any illustrated figure, who stare out at the void" (Smee, 2005: 18) (Plate 6). Rothko's paintings were large in scale in order for them to be "intimate and human" (Rothko cited by Harrison, 1974: 196). Rothko considered small-scaled works to place the viewer outside experience whereas a larger picture takes the viewer into it (Rothko cited by Harrison, 1974: 196). However, it is a sense of light trapped within the layers of a Rothko painting that give it depth of field and add to its sense of boundlessness and the sublime. In chapter four I examine the impact of Rothko as a seminal figure in my work.
An Australian Spirituality

Rosemary Crumlin in her book *Images of Religion in Australian Art* (1988) tells us that by the 1940s in Europe “the divorce between art and the Church had long been declared...” (Crumlin, 1988:14). However in “Australia, there was no such divorce because their had never been a marriage... Colonial Australia was born out of skepticism and pessimism...” (Crumlin, 1988:14). This is not to deny the presence of traditional religious structures in Australia, but Crumlin gives them little power to inspire our artists by saying they “were more concerned with the nurturing of faith than the cultivation of beauty” (Crumlin, 1988:14). Crumlin’s comments suggest that European artists had left something behind when they abandoned the Church in favour of new, less rigid and more universal doctrines, however here in Australia there was nothing to leave behind.

Various writers when approaching the spiritual in modern art acknowledge the problematic and nebulous aspects of its definition. Art historian Virginia Spate writing in the catalogue for the *Spirit and Place* (1996) exhibition, questions the meaning of the spiritual and wonders how it might be manifested in painting and experienced by the viewer (Spate, 1996: 76). She asks the question, in “the absence of a shared belief system, can the spectator experience what the artist conceives as spiritual experience?” (Spate, 1996: 76).

Spirituality has been explored by artists throughout the ages. Traditionally the artist worked for the church and had a set of religious structures and signs that were understood and read by the wider public. As artists moved into the twentieth century and broke away from traditional religions, they needed to find new means of expressing spiritual ideas, which progressed into abstraction. Here in Australia not only has the relevance of abstraction been questioned, but also we have yet to understand what an Australian spirituality is. Today the Indigenous relationship to the land is seen to embody spirituality
but this was not always the case. Writer Max Charlesworth tells us that “the idea that Aboriginal religious systems could seriously be compared to Christianity, or Judaism, or Islam, or Buddhism would have seemed laughable until the 1950s” (Charlesworth, 1998: xiv). Here we can see that non-Indigenous responses to Indigenous spirituality have changed dramatically indicating that our own belief systems are changing and becoming more sensitive to an Aboriginal world-view.

In the 1940s and 1950s some painters turned to religious subject matter in response to the war (Crumlin 1988: 14). Artists such as Arthur Boyd often dealt with narrative biblical themes orchestrating them within an Australian landscape. His themes of Nebuchadnezzar lost in the Australian desert crazed by wealth and greed evoke ideas of a spiritual wilderness in a materialistic culture (Boase, 1972). The Blake Prize for Religious Art was founded in 1950 in the hope of bringing artists back to both religious inspiration and the church. Rosmary Crumlin’s book *Images of Religion in Australian Art* was produced in conjunction with an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Victoria (1988-89). Crumlin includes Melbourne artists Roger Kemp (1908-1987), Leonard French (1928-), and the immigrant Stanislaus Rapotec (1913-1997) as artists who engaged in spiritual themes through an exploration of the abstract surface. French explored the Genesis through his series *The Seven Days* (1964-65) combining a number of abstract motifs in an interplay between the basic polarities of dark and light. The structure of these works move from a traditional Western landscape structure in *The First Day* to a form evoking the Buddhist mandala in the final work in the series *The Seventh Day* (Crumlin, 1988: pp. 162-174). This demonstrates the multicultural and eclectic nature of an Australian spirituality that acknowledges a variety of sources.

Juxtaposed to this tradition of non-Indigenous artists drawing on their European cultural heritage, Crumlin includes a section on Indigenous artists, arguing that “for Aboriginal people there is no separation between life and
religion; everything for them is a unity, a rhythm of the sacred, filled with meaning” (Crumlin, 1988: 11). Likewise writer David Malouf in the Boyer Lectures for 1998 points out that “For Aboriginal people land is the foundation of spiritual being. For Europeans it represents security and status, or it is a source of wealth” (Malouf, 1998: 16). Malouf contrasts the materialism of Western culture with the spiritual-sacred of Indigenous culture, drawing attention to the dramatic rift between the colonial acquisition of land as property and the spiritual associations of the land for Indigenous people.

The exhibitions Spirit and Place and Beyond Belief – Modern Art and the Religious Imagination (1998) combined both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to create new dimensions for the exploration of the spiritual in an Australian postcolonial, multicultural society. Co-curator of Spirit and Place Ross Mellick specifically critiqued the materialist dimension of modern life and argued for art’s connective role that he saw as transcending cultural barriers.

Curator of the 1996 Contemporary Territory exhibition, Daena Murray, examines the spiritual connection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and the landscape of the Top End. Murray writes, “the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal people have always viewed the landscape as an arena of action. Its natural and seasonal rhythms continue to be invested with a multi-layered significance which is spiritually and materially dynamic” (Mendham, 1996). She also notes that contemporary artists working in the Territory “are readily confronted by the drama that is within themselves and their environment. By choice or force their art is fired by a consciousness of elemental and personal change” (Mendham, 1996). Murray goes on to make the point that many non-Indigenous Territory artists also hold a dynamic view of the landscape which she sees as being “as much a product of the spectacular climatic changes…as it is a desire to wring spiritual meaning out of nature in the alleged absence of it in contemporary Western culture” (Mendham, 1996).
In *Contemporary Territory* Murray includes the artist Peter Adsett (1959 -) a Pakeha from New Zealand whose work abstracts the Top End landscape and at the same time refers to a spirituality that combines his Celtic heritage with Indigenous “understandings of the land, conveyed to him by Pitjantjatjara elder and friend, Nganyinytja” (Murray, 1996). Here we see a new emerging era of collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. Adsett’s work draws on a modernist heritage and plays with the optical dynamics of the picture plane through the polarity of light and dark. For Mary Alice Lee the “fascination and difficulty of Adsett’s paintings is concentrated in the notion of “dark and light” as he presents it, and in their separation” (Lee, 1998:9). We see that Adsett’s blacks are made from layers of colour, and his whites hover over a ‘black’ ground. Murray suggests that *Pastoral Station no. 1* (Plate 7) “suggests the brooding of the spirit on the waters before the cleaving of sky from earth, a visual resolution which echoes his concern for a spiritual meeting place between disparate peoples” (Mendham, 1996). In this comment we can see Adsett’s references back to a Biblical spirituality and also to the pressing need for recognition of Indigenous ideologies. The title of the work carries multiple references to Biblical themes, his property at Humpty Doo and the dark history of colonisation. The dark space becomes a void pregnant with the spirit of hope as Murray acknowledges the universal spiritual power of the landscape and its potential to reach beyond cultural boundaries.

Adsett furthered the idea of art as a meeting place in his collaboration with the painter Rusty Peters, a senior Gidja man from the East Kimberley, in the exhibition *Two Laws... One Big Spirit* (2000) at 24Hr Art, Darwin. Peters and Adsett developed a friendship resulting in a collaborative exhibition consisting of fourteen paintings, seven each. Each artist produced a painting after discussion and in response to the other’s previous work. Suzanne Spunner tells us “the issue is abstraction but its grounded abstraction. Peters’ work is always about intimately known places, particular events drawn from his life, his knowledge and the stories he was told by his grandfather, yet it is always
abstract and symbolic…flat and two dimensional…Adsett’s work is about spiritual states, states of being, it never illustrates locale but calls up particular places” (Spunner, 2000: 29, 30). This kind of artistic exploration is a point of exchange, a reciprocal arrangement in which lessons are learnt and shared through process and dialogue. Peters illuminates the importance of this two-way dialogue when he says, “I make my country and tell him what it mean, that painting. I look at his painting and ask him ‘What country that?’ But he got different way. ‘What that painting mean?’ I say where that place?’…That how we work together. We want to find out black and white together” (Peters cited by Spunner, 2000: 28) (Plate 8).

In the light of changing concepts about the meaning and value of abstraction in Australian art, the contrast of the spiritual through Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories, and restored notions of the Romantic sublime through a re-examination of nineteenth century painters, it is possible to see that these ideas are not relegated to a past history but are active and potent symbols for future exploration.
3. The Cusp

This chapter acknowledges the complexities of the deeper levels of meaning within abstract works from the Central Desert, Balgo and Northeast Arnhem Land. I will discuss the particular iconography of Central Desert painting and its multiplicity of meanings and connections to the land. I also examine the problematic and complex issues of the Western reception to the work of the Central Desert artist, Emily Kame Kngwarreye. As part of the exploration of the visual and spiritual connections to the landscape, recent developments in art from the Balgo region of Western Australia and the *bir’yun* of Yolgnu bark paintings from Northeast Arnhem land are examined.

The question begs to be asked. What is the power of Indigenous art? The rapid rise in the recognition for Aboriginal art nationally and internationally gives testimony to the importance of Indigenous painting in contemporary culture. Indigenous painters communicate through a language of ‘abstraction’ which, contrary to Western abstract imagery, is layered with meaning and references back to the land. This form of communication is aimed at educating both a white audience and also becomes a teaching aid for younger members of the community.

Perhaps part of the power of Indigenous paintings comes from the depth of spiritual knowledge it embodies. It is not dependent on Western knowledge systems for its development. Evolution is constant as artists respond to each other within their communities allowing for the development of distinct styles and forms of expression. Parallels between stylistic developments in various regions and the European history of Modernism have been made. However, our perception that all artistic innovation must follow established Western canons is challenged by the phenomena of contemporary Indigenous art, layered with meaning, and imbued by birthright with associations to country and the spiritual.
For Indigenous peoples the land holds a hidden and layered history that has its genesis in the Dreaming. This presents to the non-Indigenous viewer an expression of the spiritual that knows no parallel. A European population knows no such sense of belonging with the formations of the country. Our ambivalent response is also affected by our position as colonizers who have acquired land traditionally owned by Indigenous people. Is part of the allure of Indigenous art based in a hunger for a spiritual relationship with the Australian landscape? Indigenous art contains cultural connections to place that the non-Indigenous population can only glimpse. Indigenous academic, Professor Marcia Langton proposes that, “Aboriginal art expresses the possibility of human intimacy with landscapes” and that its power resides in the fact that “it makes available a rich tradition of ethics and relationships with place and other species” which, as a “settler Australian audience” we appreciate in our efforts “to belong to this place and not another” (Langton, 2000:16). Langton acknowledges that art aids in our attempts to attain greater understanding of Indigenous knowledge, cultural connections and mythologies relating to place.

The painters and groups discussed in this chapter have received much attention in recent discussions that try to give context to their work outside the framework of a Western paradigm. Emanating from the Top End these dialogues are all the more important to deconstruct as this is the centre of contemporary Indigenous art production and the site from which my own work evolves. Firstly it is important to note that although Indigenous ‘abstraction’ may have visually similar characteristics to European artistic traditions, it is constructed from an Indigenous knowledge base and way of thinking. In community life, ceremonies are very much alive. Cultural Law, clan structures and relationships exist alongside ‘whitefella’ ways. In the contemporary era the old ways are still part of the layered and hidden knowledge systems within Indigenous culture, and provide and instill tribal Laws and ancestral knowledge.
Central Desert Art

As mentioned in chapter one, the emergence of a contemporary Indigenous artistic expression began in the Central Desert at Papunya in the 1970s. To many commentators it seemed that ‘dot painting’ at Papunya emerged as a signatory style of Indigenous ‘abstraction’ (Bonyhady, 2000: pp. 1-4). But it is more accurate to see that Walpiri art is based on a restricted set of signs that are deliberately ambiguous. The complex meanings they convey are determined by context. Studies by the anthropologist Nancy Munn demonstrate that the basic iconography originating from sand drawings, body painting and sacred objects could have almost a hundred meanings (Morphy, 1980: 21), and they are used to map country through the ancestral events leading to its creation (Morphy, 1980: 24). The small number of geometric forms represent a range of human activity and utilitarian objects (Morphy, 1980: 21). If we return to the Western idea of abstraction which according to dictionary definitions is largely reductive, we can see that the complexity of Indigenous painting does not fall into the category of an ‘idea so stripped’.

Writer Anne Marie Brody contrasts the male dominated art of Papunya Tula to the women’s batik work from Utopia. The former she describes as having an “orientation towards very formal design structures” while the latter displays a “celebratory air… and an expansiveness” (Brody, 1998: 15). Art from this region gained prominence in contemporary art circles in 1988 when the women moved to canvas painting. The late Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s (1910-1996) first works were batiks that she produced from 1977 to 1988 (Ryan: 1998: 39). Brody notes the connection between these early batiks of Kngwarreye’s and her move to painting after which her art became more visible (Brody, 1998: 17). The connections between body painting, country and the earlier batiks can be seen in the painting Emu Woman (1988-89) (Plate 9) which embodies the concept of awelye, (women’s ceremony and body painting), and on a deeper level to connections between people, places and things (Hodges, 1998: 33).
Kngwarreye’s work is based on her country of origin, Alhalkere, although for the latter period of her life she resided in Utopia, which borders onto Alhalkere country in the Central Desert. Her short artistic career saw her produce over three thousand paintings in eight years (Benjamin, 1998: 49). These works visually take on an all-over appearance often likened to modernist conventions, however they are constructed from multiple combinations of signs relating to the land and ceremony.

In his essay ‘A New Modernist Hero’, Roger Benjamin examines possible reasons why the phenomenon of Kngwarreye met with such sudden and unprecedented acceptance and reverence in the contemporary art world (Benjamin, 1998: 47-54). He suggests a number of deliberately Eurocentric trajectories. Benjamin notes that Emily’s abstractions do not refer to the usual symbols and objects used by other artists of the Central Desert, taking on an all-over appearance that he likens to Abstract Expressionism. Benjamin also refers to her “capacity for formal development” (Benjamin, 1998: 49) and her “rapid succession of styles” (Benjamin, 1998: 49) relating them to Picasso and his intensive and varied output. Emily’s great productivity and the privilege of age, he suggests, “strike specific chords within the mythology of the artist as it has developed in Western tradition” (Benjamin, 1998: 49). Also her extreme age negates her femininity allowing her to “activate Western discourses that have primarily been the preserve of men” (Benjamin 1998: 51), layering this with the fact that she is both woman and black: a marginal position becomes a point of advantage. Finally Benjamin refers to an inherent spirituality of the Indigenous ‘other’. In the case of Kngwarreye, Benjamin likens the spiritual associations invested in the art of Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich and the Abstract Expressionists to the lack of explanation behind the attraction of Kngwarreye’s works. Benjamin continually turns the reader back towards a Western paradigm framing Kngwarreye’s popularity through our own constructs whilst at the same time acknowledging “that the time is ripe for her work to escape the dominant Eurocentric reading” (Benjamin, 1998: 53).
Marcia Langton, in response to Roger Benjamin, reminds us that:

Kngwarray's work depicts her homeland. The meaning of land most critical to understanding the sacred visions in the classical Aboriginal genre is the inherent meaning of native title – landscapes humanised over tens of thousands of years and subject to a system of laws and religious conventions which bind particular people to particular places. People and places are transformed from a mere species and a mere geography into sacred landscapes (Langton, 2000: 12).

This is the point to which one must always return no matter how far one travels trying to understand the work. Langton proposes that as Western readers of Aboriginal landscapes we “…are required to learn the conventions of Aboriginal art, just as much as any reader of European art must learn the conventions of historical periods and genres” (Langton, 2000:14).

Naturally any reading of the Indigenous painting never matches the knowledge of the Indigenous artists. However the more knowledgeable the viewer is in the specifics of the language and symbols pertaining to a specific area, the more equipped the viewer is to understand the deeper layers within the work and, as Langton suggests, to understand culture and country.

Vibration in Balgo painting

The art from the Balgo region combines several language groups including the Kukatja, Ngardi, Walmajarri, Wangkajunka. In a recent essay writer Christine Watson adds to our understanding of Indigenous art showing that the local conception of painting on canvas is a “matter of poking” (Watson, 1999: 164) mimicking the jabbing motion of a stick or finger against the earth as in sand painting. She relates this idea to “an assertion of a three-dimensionality that does not coincide with the European conception of painting as applying pigment to a two-dimensional surface” (Watson, 1999: 164).

Watson highlights the various forms of sand painting which range from the secular to the sacred, and the various methods used for striking or stroking the earth which have a sonic aspect. This sonic aspect is manifested in both sand
painting and ceremonial dancing releasing a vibration into the earth. Watson relates the aesthetic qualities of Balgo painting to the action of striking and also to the resonance of sonic vibrations produced when dancing or tapping the earth. Watson shows us examples of how the vibration produced by the striking action is manifest in Nancy Naninurra’s painting *Mina Mina Ceremonies at Kimayi* (1997) (Plate 10). The main forms in the painting are surrounded by bands of dotted colour that emanate outwards from the central forms in a vibratory sense. In chapter four I will discuss further my connection to the vibratory power inherent in the Kimberley landscape expressed in my *Pulse* series (1999-2002).

Watson also tells us that the Kutjungka elders relate the violent practice of cicatrisation (scarring the skin), “with the action of drawing in the ground to tell stories” (Watson, 1999: 169). This furthers the cultural connection between body and earth. The act of painting thus relates to both an action within the land and upon the body. Often sticks are used in the painting process to apply the pigment imitating the effects of light against the ridged surface of a sand painting and to the skin of the painted body. The painted ceremonial body is covered with a layer of fat or oil before pigment is applied, allowing the body to glisten in the sun (Watson, 1999: 180). The importance of light upon the surface of the earth or the skin in Balgo painting creates an art that is shimmering with ancestral power.

**Ancestral Power in Yolgnu Bark Painting**

Indigenous Yolgnu painters of Northeast Arnhem Land are also engaging Western political domains through the expression of an Indigenous spirituality. This is seen in their current fight for recognition of native title land and surrounding coastal areas. This use of art for political purpose emerged in 1962 – 1963 as exemplified by the Yirrikala Church panels painted by the Yolgnu people to “show the authority of Yolgnu power structures...” (Mundine, 1999: 22). Recently a major exhibition *Saltwater – Yirrikala Bark Paintings of Sea Country* (1999) was produced in response to the violation of the sacred site of...
Garrangali (home of Baru – the crocodile/ human ancestor figure) by illegal fishermen (Blake, 1999: 6).

The exhibition catalogue links the significance of painting to various clan groups describing their ancestral links to sea country through significant sites, states of water and underwater topography. Clan ownership of sea country and mythology is depicted in the paintings through the variations in geometric clan designs. The anthropologist Howard Morphy tells us Yolgnu painting is based on “inherited designs passed on by the ancestral beings who created the land” (Morphy, 2001: 1). Their stories link events which shape the land to the movement of the ancestral beings through it, such as the “great fire spread by the crocodile Baru...” (Morphy, 2001: 1). In exhibitions such as these the spiritual is given muscle. Instead of the spiritual being a nebulous and transcendent indescribable phenomenon, the spiritual becomes something of real substance and currency.

However the ‘muscle’ of Yolgnu painting lies not only in its ability to provide the outsider with a glimpse into the Yolgnu world but it also lies in the work itself which imparts an optical vibrancy expressive of spiritual power. The Yolgnu believe their work is powerful when the layers of cross-hatched white lines are applied, traditionally the last stage of the painting. The vibrancy these lines add is known as bir’yun (Morphy, 1992:188, 189) which transforms the painting from a state of being “‘dull’ or ‘rough’” to “shimmering brilliance” (Morphy, 1992: 188) associated with spiritual power deriving from the wangarr (ancestral past) (Morphy,1992: 192). Bir’yun expresses feelings of joy through the presence of light in nature, the shimmering effect projecting a “brightness that is seen as emanating from the wangarr beings themselves” (Morphy.1992: 189) giving the painting its power.

Morphy does not isolate the qualities and effect of bir’yun as a purely Yolgnu phenomenon. He proposes that it is an effect which operates cross-culturally,
and transcends particular cultural contexts. He tells us “the shimmering effect of the cross-hatching, the appearance of movement, the sense of brightness… can be experienced independently of any other knowledge about Yolgnu paintings” (Morphy, 1992: 202). Morphy relates the visual effects of bir’yun to some Modernist works and refers to the American Op artist Bridget Riley (Morphy, 1992: 202). Morphy suggests that “the response is associated with phrases that in the context of contemporary European art would be interpreted as being concerned with an aesthetic appreciation of the work as art, to do with feelings of lightness, joy, happiness and power. In the Yolgnu case, however, the emotional effect is interpreted as representing or being a manifestation of ancestral power” (Morphy, 1992:196).

Following Saltwater, a small group of Yolgnu artists from Blue Mud Bay have made bir’yun the focus of another exhibition, Buwayak: Invisibility. Of this work Jennifer Isaacs writes that the works are not only an “exercise in creating a surface shield of power and a shimmer that denotes metaphysical or spiritual presence but also… a Yolgnu response to the outsiders world of art” (Isaacs, 2003: 3). Isaacs makes the point that the white on white cross-hatching as exemplified in Galuma Maymuru’s Ngoykal at Wayawu (2002) (Plate 11) is not used in body art for ceremony but has evolved in response to the interest of a white audience and an aesthetic sensibility (Isaacs, 2003: 3). In doing so they are using the spiritual phenomenon and power of light in the landscape as a metaphor for both what is visible and what is not visible.

The visual forms of expression between a painting by Caspar David Friedrich and a bark painting by Galuma Maymuru differ vastly, coming from two very different cultural bases; however, the feelings that nature inspires in the viewer may be experienced in similar ways and divined as spiritual. For Yolgnu people this feeling is a manifestation of ancestral spiritual power present in the land. For non-Indigenous people from a European cultural base it may inspire
the spiritual in ways that link the natural world to ideas of God - or the lack of it in the case of secular existentialism.

The diversity of styles that are apparent from the acrylic on canvas abstractions of Kngwarreye and Balgo painters to the bark painters of Northeast Arnhem Land, express light in the landscape through links to an ancestral heritage. These Indigenous paintings have a strong classical base that maintains their visual and cultural integrity, and we are reminded of Lynn’s comment “that abstraction engenders perpetual expansion” (Lynn, 1990: 11). Through examining the common ground between Indigenous art and the Western contemporary gaze, it is possible to see how Indigenous art plays an active role not only in preserving cultural values, but also widening and educating the European viewer. As we see, this is done through the shared pictorial language of aesthetics, which includes both the Indigenous and Western contexts, to create a cusp in which the common visual language of ‘abstraction’ is creating new dialogues, offering the potential for future reconciliation.
4. My Work - Occean

In this exegesis I have explored the influence of abstraction and spirituality upon my aesthetic and I have paid homage to a contemporary Indigenous expression. In this chapter I explore the influence of my past histories and relationship to place. My work is situated on the cusp of inherited Western cultural concepts regarding abstraction and spirituality whilst at the same time responding to the powerful influence of the layered cultural landscape of the Top End. In this chapter I draw together the insights from previous chapters and trace the trajectory of my Master of Visual Arts project that has resulted in two exhibitions. Occean at Raft 2 Gallery in November 2004 and Occean II at the Charles Darwin University Gallery in December 2005.

During the course of the research for my Master of Visual Arts Degree I have worked as an artist-in-residence in various locations. For a total of three months I worked with senior girls from the community of Numbulwar in the Gulf of Carpentaria, one of the major Yolgnu communities of Northeast Arnhem Land. This experience has been both inspirational and educational and has influenced the direction of my work and research. In the latter part of 2005 I was invited to be an artist-in-residence at Darwin High School. This residency has supported my project through the use of a large studio space with a sea view, enabling me to work on a much larger scale than previously possible.

Life Stories
I grew up in Tasmania in a place called Lenah Valley (Kangaroo Valley). Lenah is the Palawa word for kangaroo. It is ironic that this place, at the foot of Mount Wellington, overlooking Hobart, should retain its name, but not its Indigenous traditional owners. Our family lived on the edge of suburbia, down a dirt road with bush opposite on the other side of the road. Further down the dirt road a track led to a small church near the creek. When I was about seven,
my parents decided to send my four year old sister and myself to Sunday school. We were dressed in our best clothes, given two cents to put in the collection jar, and sent on our way. My sister was placed in one room with the little kids, and I was in with the bigger kids next door. The first couple of times we went, my sister cried for me and I had to go and sit with her. I decided we wouldn’t go any more and we spent our two cents on lollies at the local shop and went to the creek to play.

Many Sundays went by before I told my parents we weren’t attending Sunday school. Dad took a philosophical approach. He took me out to look at the stars. We looked at the Southern Cross, the Milky Way and so forth. My father told me that it didn’t really matter if I went to church or whether I believed in the Bible but he wanted me to consider, “Where did the first spark come from that created all of this?” His question has always remained with me and remains an important inspiration as I ponder the greater questions of our existence. I continue to explore ideas of the spiritual through the natural environment in my work.

As Australians on the coastal fringe of the continent we are close to a constant source of primacy in nature. The ocean provides us with an ever-present reminder of the rhythms and sheer power and beauty of nature. In the island state of Tasmania I was surrounded by water. Whilst I couldn’t see it at all times, I was constantly aware of its boundaries. As a family we spent many holidays by the sea, and also later I went camping as a teenager. As a child, like the Tasmanian historian Henry Reynolds (Reynolds, 1999: 12), I remember finding Aboriginal middens, stone tools, and fresh water pools at Dolphin Sands beach, then destined for re-development. In the bush, I picked blackberries and rose-hips when they came into season, selling them to the jam factory and I knew when to look out for all the fruit trees that hung over the fence in my neighbourhood. I was attuned to the rhythms of the southern four seasons in my local natural environment.
For a short time in the early 80s I worked for the forestry in a logging area at
Browns Mountain collecting gum nuts and planting pine trees. It was at this
time I became aware of the fragility of nature and the potentially devastating
effects of deforestation. Down below was a blanket of early morning fog
bathed in sunlight. These mountains were the stuff of painters such as the
Tasmanian, Piguenit, whose skies are lit with a luminescence that contrasts
with the magnanimous solidity of his forms as seen in a painting such as *A
Mountain Top, Tasmania* (c. 1886) (Plate 12). Piguenit made expeditions into
the wilderness areas of Southwest Tasmania and the Lake St Clair region that
is now a national park. These journeys informed his work as he painted the
inner Tasmanian landscape. I have childhood memories of some of these
works by Piguenit from family and school visits to the Tasmanian Museum. In
my memory these images combine with a glass-fronted diorama of an
Aboriginal family around a fire before a painted seaside vista. In the adjacent
wall the bones of Truganini, whom we were told was the last surviving
Tasmanian Aboriginal, remained hidden behind a stainless steel vault -
testimony to a past culture. Today the bush I knew as a child is largely
suburbia and old growth forests are still being cleared. Today Piguenit’s
paintings are not only a witness to the influence of Romanticism on early
Australian painters but they are also documents of a disappearing wilderness.
When I revisited Piguenit’s work in the Tasmanian Museum in 2004 as an
adult, I still found awe in his translucent and glowing skies.

Moving to the Top End in February 1987, vast climatical differences were
immediately apparent. Nature’s forces and rhythms were extreme and
confronting. The Top End is isolated by sheer distance from the major capital
cities of Australia and faces north towards the Asia Pacific region. Here, the
gravitational pull of the full moon affects massive variations upon the tides.
Nature is an ever-present reminder of our mortality, and as a woman, of our
cyclic connections to nature. In the Top End, nature is a vital and pervading presence in our daily life.

**Landscape to Ocean**

This Masters of Visual Art project builds on earlier work that I have undertaken in the Top End. My first focus was the landscape inspired by the exotic ‘other’ of the Top End initially focused around land-based themes depicting various seasonal and cyclical phenomena such as the wet and the dry.

In 1995 I began investigating the use of a simplified angel/insect form which related to the white ant, and also to concepts of transcendence and human existence creating narratives within a cyclic tropical landscape. Early works played on different perspectives ranging from raised viewpoints creating a God’s eye view, to underground caverns relating to themes of the underworld and womb-like states. *Red* (1977) (Plate 13) was a transitional work that combined the idea of an inner and outer landscape leading into the *Pulse* series. This angel/insect icon became layered with meaning as it evolved over a period of years and in its latter and most minimal form, it is expressive of the Top End landscape.

From 1998 – 2002 I began work on a series of *Pulse* paintings inspired by journeys into the Kimberleys. In this country I could feel a sense of vibration in the land present even when travelling at night which made it feel alive. This sense of vibration and active power in the Kimberley landscape became a motivating concern in the development of the *Pulse* works. Christine Watson has similarly focused on the cultural importance of sonic vibration in the contemporary Indigenous art from Balgo Hills. *Pulse* (1999) was shown at 24HR Art, Darwin, and Watch This Space in Alice Springs in 2000. *Pulse II* (2002) (Plate 14) was shown at Luna Artspace, Cebu and The Australia Centre, Manila in the Philippines. *Pulse 2:2* (2001) was part of this latter series. *Pulse* works were constructed from the angel-insect form and actively engaged the
viewer through various optical vibrations. This was achieved not only through the scale, frequency and apparent speed of the mark, but also through flickering of light over the surface. In relation to this exploration of optical vibration I am reminded of Morphy’s essay “From Dull to Brilliant: the Aesthetics of Spiritual Power Among the Yolgnu” (Morphy, 1992), which discussed the Yolgnu concept of bir’yun. Just as the addition of cross-hatching in the final layer adds spiritual power to Yolgnu bark painting, similarly the *Pulse* works are more optically active through the random addition of light in the wings. *Pulse* engaged both planar and perspectival viewpoints contrasting the point to the line, to represent both inner and outer states of reality. *Pulse* also engaged with the notion of the void and utilized symmetry to allude to the idea of parallel worlds.

On my first overseas trip to the Philippines in 2002, I became aware of the vast body of water that connected other worlds to ours. The importance of hygienic drinking water in the Philippines and the importance of the well or spring in Filipino daily life cannot be underestimated. I also recalled the system of wells and springs that play such an important role in Indigenous culture of the Central Desert. On my return to Australia, the airport was scattered with the wings of termites that seemed to greet me. These scattered remnants became the central motif used in the construction of *Wellspring VI* (2002) (Plate 15) in which the wing form again became the carrier of light within a series of gentle horizontal emanations relating to the water of an inner landscape rising from an underground source.

**Oceean II**

In *Oceean* and *Oceean II*, I have ventured into the abstraction of the painted surface through an exploration of the waters of the Top End. The *Oceean* exhibitions continue the theme of water first explored in *Wellspring* however, instead of representing an inner source, *Oceean* seeks to represent an outer realm which is less based in the physical and more based in a psychic
response to the local environment. Hence the use of the Old French spelling which refers back to Greek mythology: Okeanos, the name of the great river or sea that was believed to surround the world (Ayto, 1990:371). This term embodies not a physical ocean but one that resides in the imagination. In An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols (1978) the ocean is described as: “the primordial waters; chaos; formlessness; material existence; endless motion; it is the source of all life... the anima mundi, the Great Mother. The ocean also symbolizes the sea of life which has to be crossed...” (Cooper, 1978: 121). However, symbols have many connotations in addition to their conventional and obvious meanings: they also imply meanings which are vague, unknown or hidden from us (Jung, 1964: 3). Therefore in the Ocean project I am involved not just with the physical entity of the ocean, but also with the psychic aspect. Ocean evolves around a process of imaging and imagining.

The ocean is embedded in the Australian consciousness. Historian Ian McLean acknowledges the nebulous role of ocean in the Australian psyche as being a “figure of the unconscious; ... condensed as an emblem of the tyranny of distance which marks the odyssey of Australian identity; and it is interiorised in the Australian psyche as the mythological inland sea...” (McLean, 1998: 5). This description gives to the ocean both inner and outer properties that relate to both its physical and the psychological dimensions. Viewed negatively it can be seen to refer to our convict history. Historian Robert Hughes tells us that in the convict era “the whole transparent labyrinth of the South Pacific would become a wall 14,000 miles thick” (Hughes, 1986: 1). Writer David Malouf contrasts this with a sense of colonial familiarity telling us that the ocean was “what we looked to for all our comings and goings, for all that was new – for news” (Malouf, 1998: 9).

Otherworldly conceptions of the ocean in European histories include tales of Atlantis, mermaids, Jonah and the Whale and so on. Early explorers and
navigators mapped and charted the coastlines and waters of new lands, now oceanographers examine the temperature and condition of the ocean through satellite technology, yet the ocean still maintains a sense of mystery in the Western consciousness.

In the Top end the interface between contemporary Indigenous art and culture and a European cultural heritage creates new arenas and facets for exploration and dialogue. Living in the Top End repositions this dialogue to become the interface between art and life. The Top End community of Numbulwar where I have worked is home to the band Yilila mainly composed of the Nundhirribala clan. Their songs tell stories about the Red Flag culture and history of contact with Macassans from South Sulawesi who traded with the Yolgnu from the 1600s until early twentieth century (Morphy, 1998: 221). The Red Flags Dhumbala relate to the Maccassan word meaning sail. All Yilila’s songs relate to “the Maccasans arriving and leaving, raising sails, dropping and raising anchors, looking through telescopes” (Yilila, 2005) and so on. I have had the opportunity to practice with the ladies dancing at the Numbulwar School. These dances embody any activity that takes place on a boat, including dealing cards.

Will Stubbs, the co-ordinator of Buku-Larrngay Mulka Arts at Yirrkala describes his response to being in the Gulf environment:

> What happens is that all sense of division is lost between the water, your eyes, the sky, the sand underneath the water, the horizon and the humid air you breathe... The sea is like distilled sky and the sky like shining water. The horizon can’t be felt anymore. Your heart jumps with joy at the beauty of the world (Stubbs, 2003: 10).

Stubb’s experience conveys the sense of boundlessness that occurs through a loss of division between forms in nature resulting in a sense of joy. This he relates to Yolgnu ideas of *bir‘yun* in which light in the environment not only has an ancestral connection but also, through its brilliance, evokes an emotional response in the viewer.
Stubb’s experience of the loss of division between sea and sky parallels with my recent experience of flights over Gulf country to work in the community of Numbulwar where an aerial perspective of the land and sea makes possible another dimension. On these occasions I have become aware of the endless palette of the sea and the immense beauty of the Top End marine environment. The sea contains all the colours of the rainbow in muted hues reminiscent of Turner’s paintings or, closer to home, the Australian painter Lloyd Rees (1895-1988) who created many views of Sydney Harbour using raised perspectives and softened palettes. Ian McLean includes Rees among others as painters who reduced the landscape to its essentials producing a “more symbolic, ideal and iconic landscape” (McLean, 1998:79), and also refers to a “limitless silent space reminiscent of the sublime” (McLean, 1998:79). Boats in the Bay (1982) (Plate 16) shows human activity in the form of sailboats but they are reduced to shapes that hover within a swathe of pale blue. The horizon in the background mutes into oblivion whilst in the foreground a building with tall arches dissolves as though nothing is real hinting at colonial ideas of an arcadian paradise. Whilst beautiful in appearance and based in the locale, somewhat silent and reductive, the work seems remote and strangely disconnected from the issues facing the artist of today in a postmodern, postcolonial environment.

Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* wrote that “the Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries, the Sublime is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it, or by occasion of it, boundlessness is represented.” (Kant cited by Smee, 2005: 18). If I apply Kant’s ideas to the first series of work, *Ocean*, then the majority of the work lies in the aesthetic category of the ‘Beautiful’ that aligns to the form and the boundaries established by forms in nature. In *Ocean* I sought to create a dialogue between multi-faceted viewpoints by investigating layered references to surface, distance and depth. My technique required many layers of thin
transparent paint that convey the impression of light trapped between layers of paint and retain elements of the original surface. Occean was also concerned with aspects of the sublime in nature evoked by the phenomenon of light. Light has the ability to reveal and veil form, turning the material into the ethereal as exemplified by Rees. However, light over the water creates a myriad of effects which visually activate an already moving, fluid realm. This active effect of light can evoke feelings of elevation that could be defined as spiritual. This is not the tragic sublime of past Romanticism from which Friedrich evolved, but rather one that finds beauty in the natural world and a sense of awe in the wonder of nature.

I am ‘stripping’ back the content and idea of multifaceted viewing points that were present in Occean to become a dialogue between just two paintings in Occean II. These two works create a dialogue of contrasts. Both paintings reference the horizon and aim to capture a sense of the boundless that is experienced as sublime. In these two paintings I use symmetry above and below the horizon to relate to ideas of the material and the immaterial realm, positive and negative, and the idea of parallel worlds, representing a union of opposites. Like Adsett, I am exploring larger concepts relating to dualities created by the contrast of light and dark, which, in Occean II have been separated out to become two major works.

In both works a sea is mirrored either side of a horizon. Through the symmetry and space in between, I am reflecting the split between these realms embodied as a void. In a sense, this horizon, this void, is the lacuna which on the one hand appears as nothingness and on the other hand is pregnant with the mysteries of the universe. As Rothko reduced the picture plane to a set of essentials based on the horizontal division which many writers, inspired by Rosenblum, to link his painting to the earlier works of Friedrich, I too reduce the content of my work to a basic landscape format devoid of human presence. I also invite the viewer to contemplate the void. In this objective I am aiming
to evoke a sense of silent space in which contemplation first encounters the split, and then traverses the depth or rhythms contained within the surface.

Ian McLean in reference to colonial painters tells us that “The sublime pacifies the unknown or newly discovered by making it an empty, silent ahistorical space, a virgin state ready to be occupied...Its purpose is the suspension of terror and strangeness” (McLean, 1998: 23). Whilst McLean connects this idea to the art of exploration, the basic act of contemplation, and the creation of a silent space in which this can occur, offers a moment away from the hectic and materialist dimension of contemporary life. Writer Clare Lewis tells us that the absence of image or activity gives us, the viewers, a heightened sense of our own physicality, our own presence, away from a sensory excess of image and sound” (Lewis, 1998: 21). She also tells us that in Jewish ideology the “absence of an image can promote boundless contemplations of His infinity” (Lewis, 1998: 21). Here we are brought back to both the self and also to the greater questions of our existence.

Of the two works in *Ocean II* the lighter painting uses the horizon as a void or vanishing point between the sea and sky which dissolves into light to such a degree that the distinction between sea and sky becomes almost boundless, suggested although not defined. This painting is six metres in length requiring the use of peripheral vision to encompass its totality. It echoes aspects of my earlier work such as *One Thousand Souls* (1999) (Plate 17) however is less referential and more abstract using only surface texture and light to create form and meaning.

This is contrasted by the second darker painting where the horizon melts into blackness. This painting is almost formless structured only by this dark divide. These two paintings speak to each other in a dialogue of opposites: night and day, form and formlessness. The dark painting is human in scale, the light painting widens like the landscape. The dark painting pays homage to the
Abstract Expressionist Marc Rothko and also to Peter Adsett. This is not a true black, but is comprised of layered veils of colour. In this sense the dark painting relates to Modernism and the tragic sublime inherent in a Rothko. However Rothko believed that “dark paintings could be more cheerful than light ones” (Rothko cited by Waldman, 1988: 238), explaining that colour was a vehicle to express basic human emotions such as “tragedy, ecstasy and doom” (Rothko cited by Waldman, 1988: 238). In my painting the veils of colour combine to create a depth in darkness maintaining a translucency intended to offer the viewer a warmth rather than a coldness often associated with darkness.

The light painting pays homage to Will Stubbs articulation of his experience in Gulf country referencing the natural rhythms and light of the Top End waters, and aiming to impart a sense of elevation. The surface of this work is meant to be ‘travelled’, and I associate its texture with the organic abstraction common to many women artists both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. This painting is based in an appreciation of the aesthetics of light in the landscape that both delineates and obscures form. Both these paintings lean toward Kant’s idea of the ‘Sublime’ in the representation of boundlessness. However this is not the dreamlike arcadian vision that Rees painting evokes, but aims to address the natural, spiritual and cultural landscape of the Top End.

In the Top End, nature is a major source of inspiration for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, and the language of abstraction takes on new directions. In this project I have explored aspects of my own cultural, experiential and aesthetic history using abstraction and light sourced from nature to evoke associations with the spiritual and the transcendent.
Conclusion

Living and working in the Top End as a female non-Indigenous artist in the field of abstraction has required me to find a response both to my own European histories and also to the environment in which I am currently placed. The environment of the Top End is layered with the history of Indigenous people and their contemporary dynamic presence. As I travel into Aboriginal land in the Gulf region, I also encounter Indigenous thinking, connections and concepts relating to place and also to life.

This represents a learning curve for me as I struggle to learn basic words, to follow the fast and confusing language of Kriol. Slowly, each visit, I learn a few more words. This is a new way of learning that does not occur in texts: it is responsive and momentary. I am always reminded of how little I know about culture. A Kriol word may sound like an English word but will have a completely different context. This gives me a strange feeling of being alienated from my language. I am failed by its systems in the bush. I am an outsider in Australia, as a visitor to Indigenous land. This is new Territory.

However sometimes my experience of living in the Top End connects with a reading so profound that the meaning behind the text is intensified even if it is only with the mystery of the secret-sacred in Indigenous life. The following event draws from my own experience and links with a text from Howard Morphy whose writings on Yolgnu culture do much to illuminate its complexities. When working at the community of Numbulwar in the Gulf of Carpentaria, a boy’s ceremony was going on during the last week of my stay. Young boys from Numbulwar, Groote Island, Ngukurr and further north to Yirrkala and surrounding homelands, were visiting Numbulwar to attend the ceremony. Young boys could be seen walking around the school and community practicing dance moves and wearing their modern version of traditional regalia.
I was about to leave Numbulwar on the morning of the last night of the ceremony. The pilot was unsure if we would be able to fly as there was a heavy fog. Eventually it cleared enough for us to depart. The pilot explained the fog in scientific terms: that it was due to the fact that the water in the Gulf is warmer than the air (Fleet diary, 2005). However in Yolgnu culture, fog is related to the story of the ancestral crocodile figure Baru and the spread of fire.

The passing fire leaves a thin pall of smoke hanging over the ground. In Yolgnu song poetry, the smoke becomes part of an analogic chain: it is reminiscent of early morning mist, and reminds people of the webs of St Andrew’s Cross spiders in the light of dawn. Songs that focus on these symbolic connections are sung at the conclusion of ceremonies as a sign of closure. Mist is a sign of closure, but it is also the beginning of a new day... Smoke, cloud, spiders, and mist are the final refrains in mortuary rituals. The intense activity of the ceremony is over, the catharsis of the ritual action has taken effect, and it is time for reflection (Morphy, 2001: 2).

These insights into the deeper and entwined layers of Yolgnu culture add spiritual significance to an otherwise ordinary event. This is the nature of living in the Top End alongside an Indigenous culture that lives in the experiential.

Perhaps the allure of Indigenous painting lies in that which is visible but not visible as seen in the *Buwayak* exhibition. Indigenous painting is layered and coded in meaning revealed in its entirety only to initiates. The abstract essence of the spiritual secret /sacred in Kngwarreye’s work for example, is magnified by the lack of logical explanations attached to the work. The ancestral power inherent in *bir’yun* and its effect on the emotions cannot be understood logically: it is experienced by sensation.

European ideas on the power of the sublime bring an awareness of one’s self in the face of nature. Perhaps a common cultural denominator of the sublime is an emotional response to light in the landscape arousing the viewer to a return to
the awareness of the self. The American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) observed nineteenth century American landscape painting in the following terms: “Natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind”… [a] work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world”… “a leaf, a sunbeam, a landscape, the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind” (Emerson cited by Tuchman, 1986: 42). Emerson’s ‘sunbeam’ may relate to a ‘spiritual light’ manifesting in the face of nature initiating feelings of joy and awe in the vastness and beauty of a world both visible and invisible, crossing cultural boundaries.

Abstraction’s power is intimately connected with its mystery, a mystery that is doubly profound when arising from the Indigenous ‘other’ whose language and cultural barriers inhibit a fuller understanding of the work. Yet it is precisely that which we cannot fully explain which has the power to hold our imagination and to evoke our senses. Light in nature holds the possibility of traversing these cultural boundaries and uniting us on a level of a joyous sensation that defies the rational and the ordinary.

As we have seen, abstraction in Australia and connections to the spiritual arise from very different origins, yet they maintain the ability to transfer knowledge. Cross-cultural exchanges such as that of Peter Adsett and Rusty Peters offer new insights and communication through their similarities and differences. This recognises our combined history and does not aim to assimilate but to educate inviting a form of dialogue through the act of painting.

In this research project I hope to evoke a sense of mystery, of the profound, of the known and yet unknown, culminating in a form of abstraction that arises from nature, its rhythms and light. The form that this body of work takes emerges from European traditions and originates directly out of the experience of living in the multicultural landscape of the Top End.
Plate 1

Plate 2
Plate 3

Plate 4
Caspar David Friedrich, *A Wander above the Clouds*, (1815)
Plate 5
Piet Mondrian, *Composition #10 Pier and Ocean*, (1915)

Plate 6
Plate 7
Peter Adsett, *Pastoral Station no. 1*, (1996)

Plate 8
Plate 9

Plate 10
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Plate 11
Plate 12
W.C. Piguenit, *A Mountain Top, Tasmania*, (1886)

Plate 13
Plate 14

Plate 15
Plate 16

Plate 17
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