

From the collection



After studying at the Elam School of Fine Arts in the 1970s, Stephen Bambury travelled to North America. There he encountered paintings by the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich who had undertaken “a desperate struggle to free art from the ballast of the objective world” by using basic motifs: the square, the circle and the cross. This last shape was a loaded sign but also an exercise in pure geometry, dividing the canvas into nine squares. As many geometrical abstractionists have observed, the cross is the mother of all grids.

Malevich’s aspiration was to create paintings that everyone could understand and which would operate like icons, hung across the corner of a room for veneration. This early twentieth century Russian artist aimed to collapse the dualistic opposition between form and meaning, vesting the meaning in the form – the physical fabric of the work itself. As critics would remark later,

Malevich’s strand of Suprematism led to Minimalism, where the subject became the object.

Stephen admired Malevich’s quest for compositional wholeness, commenting that: “Malevich tilted the form on traditional ground. The ground became a zero, non-objective, nothingness...He used traditional composition to achieve this liberation of form. I want to do it without needing to paint a field. I will construct the forms – the wall is the field...” At a time when many New Zealand artists were producing work which related to locality and identity, Stephen’s dedication to an international context for his work was unusual. He proceeded to develop a series of two-colour paintings which were like binary sets: each colour implied the situation for the other colour to exist.

Integrating his painting with architecture would become Stephen’s ideal as he aimed for an ambiguity of figure and ground.

Rather than applying materials to a substrate or surface as is customary in painting, Stephen produces complete entities out of geometric forms which bond with the industrial materials used to construct them. In *IC089321*, he uses chemically generated pure iron pigments. The fast rusting iron filings are applied as a coarse grey powder to the aluminium support, and the colour is the result of oxidation in the atmosphere. Time, therefore, is one of the artist’s materials, and he is aiming for a slow burn. Stephen says: “I use the allure of the beauty of surface, colour and space to provide a runway into the work. This offers people a ‘painting

experience’, something you don’t have with anything else in the world.” The play of light on the surface of his paintings transforms his seductively-crafted sensuous materials to create an oasis of interest for refugees from a media-rich world.

Stephen’s works are logically sequenced through experiments with materials and effects, the numerical code which identifies each one becomes its title, in this case *IC089321*. For Stephen, the terms “no title” or “untitled” were stylistic conventions, and employing them would consign his paintings to the era of late modernism. In each painting in this series, the Greek cross is both a constructive element and a spiritual symbol. Deployed within consistently-sized quadrilateral forms with no exact right angles, the cross shape facilitates an infinite variety of texture, surface and colour, while segments are harmoniously proportioned. With his extension of Malevich’s legacy, Stephen engages the historical field while accessing the contemporary moment.

Linda Tyler

Stephen Bambury, IC089321, 2008, iron filings and acrylic polymer on aluminium panel, 795 x 795 x 100mm.