Gretchen Albrecht

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between gesture and geometry

Luke Smythe



To Jamie and Andrew

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foreword

Gretchen Albrecht and I first realised we had a certain affinity when she came to stay with me in Florence in the spring of 1992. I had received an Italian government scholarship to research my master's thesis. After four months working in isolation in libraries I was looking forward to her company. When she arrived Gretchen dropped her bag, and almost immediately asked if I would walk her around the city, 'speaking' my thesis as we went.

Rather than the grander paintings of Renaissance art, my research was based on works that were more minor but held important clues about women's real lives, a history at the time half hidden in a city carrying the full weight of Renaissance art and culture on its shoulders. Over the next few days we visited frescoes and wall panels of the pregnant Madonna tucked away in museums or newly discovered under later wall coverings in local museums and churches. At every step Gretchen questioned, concurred, challenged and absorbed what I was hoping to elucidate. By the end of her stay I felt I had drawn my research together for the first time.

Just as importantly, Gretchen opened my eyes to her own approach to Renaissance art and how it had fed into her own practice within abstraction. I had viewed the columns and lunettes and arches as secondary to what was depicted within them, but her artist's eye translated them into forms that could shape and contain her painting.

If Renaissance art marked the beginning of our friendship, over time the dynamism of the Baroque entered our shared vocabulary. Caravaggio's light and shadow as mediums for meaning; Borromini's lantern and oculus in the Roman churches of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza and San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane — elements that work their way into her oval canvases, such as *Nocturne (The Spiral Unwinds)* (1991) and *Nomadic Geometries (Dancing Shall it Name)* (1993) — discussions woven back and forth, from inspiration to elucidation, to a broadening of understandings.

Later, speaking of her own first visit to Italy in 1979, she recalled: 'a revelation about the power of painting hit me when I looked at these historical works. The ability of paintings to emotionally affect and carry meaning is as relevant today as it was then . . . aspects of the everyday [are] found in many Renaissance paintings — [the] things we all recognise and can share can also be imbued with a sense of mystery and significance.'

Gretchen's canvases are sites of containment where meaning is explored, revealing truths that are both specific and universal. Instead of depicting the Virgin's response when the Angel Gabriel, his wings still in the act of folding, tells her she has been chosen above all women to bear the son of God, in Gretchen's painting *The Annunciation* (1992) the message becomes gestural as the movement of narrative is translated into the fluidity of paint itself. Sweeping arcs of colour, the deepest blue shimmering against delicate pink, two quadrants fraught with a pause, an expectation, a desire, an acceptance, are captured within the tracing and retracing of the hand, the brush, the palette knife or squeegee in a broad arc over the canvas, so that we *feel* movement, absorbing the essence of narrative. Her paintings are kinaesthetic, like Leonardo da Vinci's *Measure of Man*, the span of a human's arms encapsulating our existence.

Words — as titles, inscriptions, counterpoints, epiphanies — are an intrinsic part of Gretchen's paintings, leading us over the decades through the milestones of human existence. Her love of poetry is equalled by her acute observation of nature in all its fire and beauty: the last of the light at Piha as the sun slips beneath the horizon, the blaze of red in a summer pōhutukawa. The wild west coast's black sand becomes a metaphor for grief — the death of a parent, a friend, someone's darling child; the engulfing power of grief replaced with a silent mourning, a gradual acceptance: *Seven Sorrows of Mary (Burial)* (1995); *Meditation (My Father's Spirit)* (1996); *Darkening Lake* (1997) — the rise and fall of gesture replaced with stillness, reflection, imponderable depth. These are universal themes of love, friendship, nurturing, loss and grief that can only be addressed from a lifetime of experience.

Mary Kisler, Senior Curator, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

introduction

Poetry's impulse to use metaphor, to discover resemblance, is not to make comparisons . . . or to diminish the particularity of any event; it is to discover those correspondences of which the sum total would be proof of the indivisible totality of existence. To this totality poetry appeals . . .

— John Berger

'I PAINT WITH MY BACK TO THE WORLD,' the abstract artist Agnes Martin once declared.' For Martin, who painted simple stripes and grids, abstraction was a way to escape reality into a perfect realm of geometric order. She saw this order as a source of reassurance in a world she found messy and unpredictable.

Gretchen Albrecht has a similar understanding of her own abstract work. 'I think I paint to still the anguish I feel in my heart,' she wrote in the early 1980s; 'To order the chaos I sense is just outside the magic circle I draw around me with my painting.'² She, too, employs abstraction in this process, but keeps her painting anchored in the real world. Although a great admirer of Martin's work, she has no wish to escape from reality, which is why she invests her compositions with worldly associations. Her softly striated paintings of the 1970s evoke the layering of the landscapes that inspired them. Later series, like her hemispheres and ovals, and her more recent rectangular paintings, allude to many other themes and subjects. Abstract artists of a purist persuasion, like Martin and many of the genre's greats, would find these references unwelcome, but for Albrecht they are a part of the chaos that she is trying to keep at bay in her art.

Rather than attempt to escape from the world's disarray, she seeks to give it structure in her work, drawing on the power of abstraction to assist her in this process. Her paintings of the 1970s distil a basic order from the landscape that becomes apparent only when we abstract it. In her hemispheres and ovals, she refers to an array of phenomena that in concrete terms seem wholly unrelated. All, however, have a broad association

with semicircles or ellipses. She uses this abstract affinity to weave a network of correspondences between them. As in her works of the 1970s, but in a more complex fashion, these shaped paintings use geometric structure to proffer an experience of reality that is more orderly and reassuring than would normally be the case. Reality itself remains unchanged, of course, but we are coaxed by Albrecht's paintings to see it through a more comforting lens. It is this distinctive capability of *impure* abstract art that she has worked with for close to fifty years.

Focusing primarily on painting, but also working in a range of other media, Albrecht has developed an abstract idiom in which shapes and their associative potential feature prominently. Colour and free-flowing gesture are also integral to her practice, as is the written word in the guise of her evocative titles. Allusive and descriptive in equal measure, her titles help us grasp the connotations with which she has invested her imagery. Placing these focal aspects of her work in the service of her search for reassurance, she fashions images whose poetry and power derive from the several kinds of experience they elicit. The first of these is physical. It consists of the felt intimations of expansion and contraction, implied movement and implacable stasis that her colours, shapes and brushwork awaken in us. With the promptings of her titles, these forms become suggestive of the real world and our immediate response to them is joined by the thoughts and feelings they call forth. Musing on how works of such economy can give rise to this multi-threaded experience is one great pleasure of encountering Albrecht's art. Another is tracing her enrichment of this dynamic from one abstract series to the next. This book surveys the different stages of that process, along with the early years of her practice, in which, throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s, she slowly made her way toward abstraction.

During that initial phase of her career, Albrecht struggled to find her feet as an artist while juggling the demands of solo motherhood. It was only through sheer perseverance and occasional moments of good fortune that she was able to establish herself professionally and, by the end of the 1980s, secure her position as one of New Zealand's leading painters. In the years since her rise to prominence, her work has received considerable attention, with the hemispheres and ovals proving to be especially popular. There are many other series, however, that have received less exposure, and in some cases have faded from public memory. Her collages of the late 1980s, for example, were last discussed by Linda Gill in the early 1990s, when she published the first survey of Albrecht's work. Gill's concise yet informative study remains an invaluable resource, but now covers only half of Albrecht's output. In the time since it appeared, much of the early work it addresses, from the 1960s and 1970s, has also been forgotten. With several decades of new work to take account of, and new archival sources available that shed light on many of the early series, there is much that



can be added to Gill's account. There is also scope to bring together insights from the many other writers on Albrecht's work and assess these in the context of a new synthetic overview of her practice.

As this book tracks the vicissitudes of Albrecht's pursuit of reassurance, it undertakes this second task as well. From the ensuing discussion of both the insights and the oversights of past commentators, a clearer picture of her achievements is established. Her paintings of the 1970s, for instance, are shown to be distinctive precisely by virtue of their impurity. At a time when abstraction in New Zealand was viewed in purist terms by nearly every critic and artist, the landscape references of her stained canvases were unusual. More abstract than the expressionist landscapes of older figures like Colin McCahon and Toss Woollaston, but less abstract than the geometric paintings of her male contemporaries, this series was an outlier of the period. This situation soon changed, however, and by the mid-1980s an impure approach to abstraction had become the norm. Albrecht's status as a pioneer in this regard needs to be acknowledged, something that has yet to occur.

As several earlier authors *have* acknowledged, and as this book reaffirms, Albrecht was also a forerunner of the women's art movement, which rose to prominence in New Zealand in the early 1980s. At that time, she was attacked in some quarters for failing to tackle social issues in her work, and for making paintings that were allegedly unfeminine. Both charges were tendentious, however, because they rested on narrow views of what it meant to be a feminist and a female artist. A more open-minded assessment of Albrecht's practice makes her credentials as a feminist abundantly clear. In addition, it reveals that she anticipated key aspects of feminist art practice in her work of the 1960s and 1970s. Clarifying these and other matters affirms the importance of her position within the histories of abstraction and women's art in this country.

History only matters, of course, if it enriches our sense of art's significance in the present moment. It is here that this book hopes to make its most important contribution. Like any art worth looking at, Albrecht's work requires no assistance to convince us of its merits. It is the task of an art writer, however, to offer his or her assistance — whether needed or not — by furnishing responses to the work that enhance it for other viewers. Just as Albrecht's paintings refine our experience of reality, so the text that follows aims to do the same for the viewer's experience of the paintings.



1990 - 1994

nocturnes and nomadic geometries

Wilton Street studio, Grey Lynn, 1992 Photo: Robin Morrison Courtesy of the Robin Morrison Estate **TOWARD THE END OF THE 1980S**, Albrecht began searching for a new shaped format that could complement her work with the hemispheres. As her thoughts moved in this direction she was drawn to the idea of 'completing' the hemisphere's curve, a gesture that would sever its connection to the ground beneath it, allowing it to 'float' free on the wall. A completed semicircle would, of course, be circular, yet she preferred the oval by virtue of the richer and more positive connotations that it bore for her. As she recalled in her notebook some years later:

I wanted to complete the curve of the hemisphere — release it from gravity — make it float on the wall ungrounded. But I did not want a circle — (too male) too resistant/too uninflected and unable for me to bring my ideas into that circular form.¹

While a circle can indeed function effectively as a floating motif, for Albrecht's purposes it felt too regular and target-like. The former aspect made it seem too rigid despite its curvature, and in this sense too implacably masculine. The latter aspect was also masculine in her eyes, since it suggested an aggressively narrow focus on whatever it should happen to contain — a centripetal zeroing in on its contents instead of an encompassing embrace. By contrast, the oval seemed more pliant and accommodating. It could thus enfold its imagery more gently, in a manner she regarded as more feminine.

Albrecht painted her first ovals in 1989. Entitled *Poēsia* (the Ancient Greek term for poetry) [p.192], these paintings, which were canvas on plywood panel, were first shown that September at Sue Crockford Gallery in Auckland, alongside two related groups of images. The first group featured large-scale collages like *Night Lake* (1989) [p.142], which brought together passages of dripping pigment with a handful of floating coloured shapes. The second featured hemispheres like *Sea of Faith* (1989) [p.167], which wrought two key changes to the series.

For the past several years, the hemispheres had grown more complex, building on the precedent established by the *Seasonal* quartet [pp.138–139]. In 1989, however, Albrecht reverted to a simpler approach. Exchanging deft, impressionistic strokes of colour for the more forceful paint application of gestural abstraction, she spread pale arcs of energetic brushwork atop a dark, stained background, creating the suggestion of a looming wave. The impetus for this form had come from the poem *Dover Beach* (1851) by Matthew Arnold, from which *Sea of Faith* took its title. Lamenting the decline of religion in the modern world, Arnold wrote of a 'Sea of Faith' that once was '. . . full, and round earth's shore/Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled'. Now, however, this sea was in retreat and he could only hear 'Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar'.

As she had in *The Fire and the Rose*, Albrecht transposed and condensed Arnold's lines into a single, intensively charged image.² Far starker than the works that preceded them, hemispheres like *Sea of Faith*



Sea of Faith 1989 acrylic on canvas 120 x 240 cm Erika and Robin Congreve, Auckland



Nocturne 1989 acrylic on canvas (two panels) 153 x 306 cm were also less symmetrical than their predecessors, an effect facilitated by Albrecht's use of a single canvas rather than a pair of matching quadrants. Removing the painting's centre severance enabled her to lay on paint more freely, especially in her paintings' upper reaches. Exploiting this new freedom, she often pushed her colour beyond the midpoint of the canvas. Closer to the painting's base, she hung back from this axis, to give her brushwork its forward-leaning and unfurling appearance.

The *Poēsia* paintings share the continuous, shaped surfaces of the single-canvas hemispheres, but combine these with key features of the cut-paper collages, most notably their clear division between fields of gestural brushwork and geometric forms that float above them. Some of these 'geometries' (as Albrecht terms them) are solid blocks of colour that hover at the margins of the canvas. Others contain freely painted imagery akin to the streaks and patches of colour that constitute the background of each image. Like the collages, these works evoke liquid expanses. Rather than a river's edge, however, they call to mind a weed-strewn pond or estuary. These associations point to two key influences on the series: Charles Blomfield's paintings of the Pink and White Terraces and Claude Monet's *Nympheas*, his late-career paintings of waterlilies.

The former works had already had an impact on collages like *Pink Terraces* (1988), with its layered arrangements of pink brushwork. Now it was the spreading, ovoid shape of the pools themselves that made its presence felt in Albrecht's work. Monet's *Nympheas* also depict bodies of water, specifically the pond in his garden. The best-known works in this series are housed in the Orangerie in Paris in an elliptical gallery, a space that came to mind for Albrecht as she developed the *Poēsia* series. In much the same manner as Monet, she created the impression of a liquid surface by laying out an open field of blue, then studding this with red streaks and green patches. She diverged from his example, however, through the addition of gold accents and geometry to her pond-like expanses. Not only are these supplementary elements more abstract than the imagery they obscure, but they also evoke the realm of culture instead of nature — the geometries through their rationalistic overtones, gold pigment through gold's value as a precious substance.

While each of the *Poēsia* paintings pulls in these contrasting directions, it is not easy to make sense of this dynamic. What it means in these works for gold and geometry to coexist with imagery that speaks of nature is finally unclear. Although drawn to the prospect of combining these three elements in the ovals, Albrecht was still feeling for a more cohesive way of doing this. During the next 18 months, she would continue to make headway on this problem, as part of her broader exploration of the shape's expressive capabilities.

IN THE WAKE OF her Sue Crockford exhibition in September 1989, Albrecht ceased producing large collages and focused more intently on the ovals. Throughout 1990 and the early part of 1991, she produced



Charles Blomfield White Terraces 1882 oil on canvas 60.8 x 45.4 cm Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington



Pink Terraces 1988 gouache and collage on paper 29 x 38 cm Helen and John Woelders, Brisbane

two transitional groups of paintings as well as a raft of works on paper that delved into her new shape's potential. The bulk of the works on paper combine painterly expanses of gouache or watercolour with flat geometric segments, typically applied as collage elements [p.160]. Many feature foil geometries layered over bright beds of colour. Bearing titles like *Sea Rose* and *Oceanic*, they continue to frame the oval as a liquid space.

A second run of works is darker and opens up a different thematics. Though they are still divided between gesture and geometry, their backgrounds are more uniform, varying more in their texture than in their colour. Around the dark perimeters of these images, a halo of thinned-out, weeping pigment is often present. This dripping and diffuse corona imbues the oval housed within it with the sense of hovering suspended in an atmospheric medium, an amniotic sac perhaps, or a celestial haze. With the addition of names like *Eclipse* and *Orbital*, images like these gain cosmic overtones, calling to mind the flight paths of planets, the darkness of a solar eclipse, or the gleam of celestial bodies in the lightless void of space. A number of images from this period also have a geological aspect. Cross-threaded with veins and runs of colour, and studded here and there with glinting fragments, they resemble egg-shaped stones in cross-section — meteorites, perhaps, or some precious mineral deposit.

There are fewer oval paintings from the early 1990s than there are works on paper, but they developed along similar lines. First their compositions became simpler, then they became darker in colouration. In *Veronica's Veil* (1990) [p.193] and related canvases Albrecht replaced the several layers of the *Poēsia* paintings with a cleaner foreground-background division. In *Colloquy (Pacific Annunciation)* (1991) [p.183] and paintings like it, she strengthened and refined this contrast further. Instead of painting solely with oil, as she had in her preceding ovals, she now used oil to fashion her geometries and stained acrylic to articulate their backgrounds. The thickness of the oil makes the geometries stand forth above the weave of the canvas, allowing them to register more firmly as objects in a void.

In both of these transitional workgroups, Albrecht revived the religious subjects she had first engaged with in the early hemispheres. The white square in *Veronica's Veil* alludes to the Veil of Veronica, a sweat cloth with which Saint Veronica wiped Christ's brow on the way to his crucifixion. When she removed the cloth from his face, she found his features imprinted upon it. Like the other geometries in the painting, but with a stronger indication of transparency, the square masks a portion of the blue ground beneath it. *Colloquy (Pacific Annunciation)* transposes Albrecht's treatment of the Annunciation from the hemispheres to the ovals. As in *Annunciation (Duccio)* (1982) [p.128], the blue and pink regions of this painting stand in for the Virgin and Gabriel. The location of their encounter has been displaced from Italy, however, to the vast, encircling basin of the Pacific, here envisioned as a velvet-blue expanse across which a pink dawn is breaking. Their meeting also feels more dynamic than it does in the hemisphere, for instead of being cleanly segregated the two halves of the painting intermingle, with the pink edging its way into the blue half of the painting like the archangel reaching out to Mary. The geometries in each half



Stygian Passage 1990 gouache, gold paint and collage on paper 60 x 80 cm Private collection, Auckland of the work ensure that it retains its equilibrium. Nestled within its blue depths is a deep-blue upright rectangle that serves as Albrecht's surrogate for Mary. Silhouetted against its pink half is a horizontal bar of gleaming silver, whose role within the work is twofold. Formally, it balances the upright rectangle; thematically, it stands in for the angel's divine stream of speech.³

Although *Colloquy (Pacific Annunciation)* is among Albrecht's most striking ovals, it did not engender other related paintings. More fruitful in this regard was *Stella* (1990) [p.182], which derived from a hemisphere called *Nocturne* (1989) [p.168]. Formally, and to some extent thematically, *Nocturne* took its cue from James McNeill Whistler, an American contemporary of Monet. During the late 1860s and the 1870s, Whistler painted night-time scenes called *Nocturnes*, most of which show the Thames or its environs cloaked in darkness. In general these are languid, dreamy images in which a bustling urban space is reduced to stillness. The most consequent for Albrecht, however, is *Nocturne in Black and Gold* – *The Falling Rocket* (c.1875), a painting that pulsates with activity. Strictly speaking, this coruscating canvas depicts an erupting display of fireworks, whose popping sparks, ballooning smoke clouds and drifting embers are strewn throughout the night's ashen darkness.

In keeping with Whistler's dictum of art for art's sake, however, the work was intended chiefly as a colour study, centred on the use of gold accents amid a field of near total blackness. Drawn to the drama of this image and also to its nocturnal thematics, Albrecht transferred Whistler's colours to a hemisphere. The two halves of her painting form a gold-streaked vault of sweeping black brushwork that encircles a blue and violet core. Within its confines Whistler's fireworks display becomes a cosmic drama, enacted on a much grander scale — a meteor shower, perhaps, or a swarm of solar flares witnessed at midnight.

After making several variants of *Nocturne*, Albrecht transferred its vaulted composition to an oval, where it gained a more expansive lease of life. Instead of looming large over a horizon, *Stella*'s whirling flurries of black and gold encircle a dim purple abyss, creating the sensation of a cosmic storm into which spectators might be plunged. This centripetal effect is curbed, however, by Albrecht's careful placement of her geometries. At the painting's left-hand edge, a vertical red sliver is present. On the opposite side of the canvas floats a horizontal bar of mid-toned blue. As in *Colloquy (Pacific Annunciation)*, these forms add stability to an otherwise dynamic composition. The upright red geometry echoes the vertical bearing of the human body. The horizontal blue geometry conveys a sense of grounding and security. Together, they affirm the two main axes that anchor and structure our existence. Unperturbed by the energies that ceaselessly circulate behind them, they act as ciphers of calm and reassurance in the face of a prevailing tumult.

Stella was the first of many dark and gold-flecked ovals Albrecht would produce in the early nineties, beginning with a series of five canvases from 1991 that are also titled *Nocturne*. At twice the size of *Stella*, the *Nocturnes* were by far her largest ovals to date. They were also the first ovals to be shown independently of her hemispheres. Together, these facts point to her conviction that she had now found her feet with the new format. As with *Stella*, the *Nocturnes* feature hovering rectangles holding their own



James McNeill Whistler Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket c.1875 oil on panel 60.3 x 46.6 cm Detroit Institute of Arts

Nocturne (The Spiral Unwinds) 1991 acrylic and oil on canvas 154 x 244.5 cm Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua, Whanganui against the currents that whirl beneath them. Though the number, size and colour of these shapes varies from one canvas to the next, they evoke the same sensations of stability, an effect due not only to their upright or horizontal bearing but also to their careful positioning, either partly or wholly atop the calm centre of each canvas. This was a refinement with respect to *Stella*, whose red geometry had not been stationed in this manner. Sometimes the geometries of the *Nocturnes* shine forth in pink or gold, creating moments of bright harmony amid the darkness. At other times their tones are more subdued. In all cases, however, the same effect of stillness is preserved.

Throughout the series Albrecht's interest in cosmic harmony persisted, but she enriched the connotations of her canvases with the help of poetic subtitles. Two of these, *Scintilla* and *Nomadic Geometries* [p.174], are especially suggestive. 'Scintilla', a word meaning trace or spark, fosters an understanding of her gold trails not simply as cosmological phenomena but also as interior events. Perhaps they are sparks of insight akin to those evoked by the *Illuminations*, or else they could be currents of emotion that flare up and then fade from awareness. On this reading the *Nocturnes* are inner spaces, as well as evocations of the cosmos.

The phrase 'nomadic geometries' was taken from a poem by Octavio Paz called 'Nocturno de San Ildefonso' [San Ildefonso Nocturne] and published in 1974. Paz's opening evocation of a play of neon signs in the darkness had lately captured Albrecht's imagination:

In my window night invents another night, another space: carnival convulsed in a square yard of blackness. Momentary confederations of fire, nomadic geometries, errant numbers. From yellow to green to red, the spiral unwinds.

Much like Whistler's fireworks display, Albrecht's painting exploits the abstract capabilities of Paz's text, which is sufficiently loose in its descriptions that it can float free of its literal points of reference and become a more general evocation of a play of coloured shapes in a sea of blackness. The forms Paz describes may well be signs, but they are signs whose significance he unfixes. They are therefore nomadic in two senses — both physically and semantically. This pervasive mutability makes them a fitting point of reference for Albrecht's shapes, whose positions and meanings change between canvases, deepening the longer we observe them and expanding from one group of ovals to the next. In this way they can



The Andromeda Galaxy



Nomadic Geometries (Dancing Shall it Name) 1993 acrylic and oil on canvas 155 x 244 cm be literally fixed in space and function as figures of stability, while also being metaphoric nomads that traverse an ever larger semantic territory. Her dark ovals of the next several years would underscore this paradox more firmly through their links to two additional poetic sources.

The first of these is Eliot's poem from 1936, 'Burnt Norton', from which Albrecht took the phrase 'the still point of the turning world' and applied it to several of her paintings. She likens this evocation of tranquillity to the pictorial role of her geometries, which in her words "hold" the spiralling, encircling, swirling blackness of paint around the outer area of the oval . . . in an ordered, calming way — and . . . give a sense of . . . momentary harmony to that painted world.'⁴ Elsewhere in 'Burnt Norton' Eliot writes: 'The dance along the artery/The circulation of the lymph/Are figured in the drift of stars.' There could be no more apt way to describe the manner in which Albrecht's ovals of the early 1990s poetically link our bodies to the cosmos. Just as somatic and astral circulation align with each other in these words, so too are our bodies coaxed into alignment with the circulating, cosmic rhythms of Albrecht's brushwork, which we feel as whirling echoes in our sinews.

Elsewhere in her titles of the early 1990s, Albrecht gestured toward the dynamic aspect of her geometries via references to another, older poem that also connects the body to the cosmos. *Orchestra, or A Poeme of Dauncing* (1596) by Sir John Davies was brought to her attention by her friend Peter Shaw. It is concerned with the affinities between dancing and the orbits of the planets, which in Elizabethan times were held to move to the rhythms of cosmic music.⁵ In the stanzas of Davies' poem that Albrecht zeroed in on, this cosmic harmony is said to have been secured by the God of Love, who entrains humanity to mirror it by dancing:

Like this he [Love] framed the gods' eternal bower, And of a shapeless and confused mass, By his through-piercing and digested power, The turning vault of heaven formed was, Whose starry wheels he hath so made to pass, As that their movings do a movement frame, And they themselves still dance unto the same. If sense has not yet taught you, learn of me A comely moderation and discreet, That your assemblies well ordered be; When my uniting power shall make you meet, With heavenly tunes it shall be tempered sweet And be the model of the world's great frame, And you, earth's children, Dancing shall it name.

A number of Albrecht's subtitles were taken from or allude to Davies' poem. Among these are *dancing* shall it name, fixt in this huge mirror blue and chymbe (the latter a blend of two old English spellings of

'chime'). To pursue and grasp the nature of these allusions is to see the ovals of the early nineties not simply as stilled sites of cosmic drama but also as dynamic environments in which celestial and somatic rhythms become one another's mirror images.

BY 1994, ALBRECHT had painted roughly eighty ovals and was confident that this was a format she could continue developing. In a notebook devoted to this prospect she had begun assembling found material, together with her own thoughts concerning the shape's poetic overtones. From reproductions of artworks like Poussin's *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1634–36) to elliptical projections of the globe and cosmos (the latter obtained by NASA using microwave imaging), she brought together visual sources that amplified the oval's connotations in ways she found appealing. In some cases, like NASA's cosmic model, which she came across in 1992, they confirmed or enriched an existing association.⁶ In other cases, like a postcard she had purchased of a Madonna figure with a perfectly ovoid face, they suggested novel linkages and possibilities (in this case the notion that an oval might serve as an abstracted human visage). She also compiled word lists and phrases, like 'water/womb/oval/hidden waters' and 'a perpetual embrace', that functioned in a similar manner. Interspersed among this material are occasional sketches and collages in which she felt out new ideas for the format. Though she did not develop all of these associations, this suggests the many paths her thoughts were taking as her engagement with her new format deepened.

As the contents of this notebook suggest, Albrecht's approach to the oval was similar to her approach to the hemisphere. It, too, was a shape around which she could gather correspondences called forth by its resemblance to other forms. Some of these, like ponds and pregnant bellies, she had herself observed. Others, like her evocation of the cosmos and her nomadic geometries, were imaginative projections. Her pursuit of reassurance in the series thus occurred on the same terms as it had in her prior works, though now her two methods for creating order became increasingly entangled. The internal composition of an oval, for example, does not resemble anything in the world. Instead, it is a synthetic construct that evinces a sense of poise and reassurance on the strength of the relationships it establishes between colour, shape and gesture. Separately, however, each of the components of this synthesis does echo real forms and experiences.

Albrecht's swirling brushwork, for example, evokes gusts of air and liquid currents, her geometries affirm the axes of our embodiment, and her colours are those of existing entities. To the extent that an oval employs these elements to establish a nexus of affinities between actual things and experiences, it proffers a sense of reassurance in the same way as the stained canvases and early hemispheres. To the extent that these affinities are imaginary, however, and the work's compositional structure is synthetic, it functions in the same way as a collage. Ultimately, though, these distinctions are of secondary importance, since what matters most for Albrecht is to foster an experience of equilibrium by counterposing geometric stricture to the disorder of her gestural paintwork.



Planck image of the Milky Way Courtesy of ESA/NSA/JPL-Caltech



Nocturne (We See Ourselves in the Mirror) 1992 acrylic and oil on canvas 154 x 244 cm Private collection