



# Gretchen Albrecht

## *between gesture and geometry*

LUKE SMYTHE



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### A GLORIOUS SURVEY OF THE CAREER OF ONE OF NEW ZEALAND'S BEST REGARDED CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

Gretchen Albrecht CNZM is one of New Zealand's most influential painters. Over the course of her long career, her work has continued to surprise and delight, and her paintings feature in many important collections both in New Zealand and overseas. This comprehensive survey of her much-admired work reveals a painter steeped in art history, drawing freely from a range of sources to create vivid, intellectually persuasive and deeply affecting work, and determined to push her work in new directions. With a text by leading art writer Luke Smythe, plus a preface by art curator Mary Kisler, this magnificent book both interrogates Albrecht's work and celebrates her accomplishments.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr Luke Smythe** is a lecturer in art history, art theory and curatorship in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. He has previously taught art history at the University of Otago and the Wesleyan University. From 2013–2014, he worked as a Curatorial Fellow in Postwar Art at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich. His historical specialty is modern art from the postwar period until today, with a particular focus on the global evolution of modernism since the Second World War, identity art and its constraints, and the passage of analog media into the digital era. His articles and essays have appeared in many journals and catalogues, including *October*, *Modernism/modernity*, *Art Journal (US)*, and *Oxford Art Journal*. He has worked on exhibitions at a number of museums and galleries, including the Chinati Foundation, Yale University Art Gallery and the Pinakothek der Moderne. His work has been supported by the DAAD, the Fulbright Foundation, the Yale Centre for British Art, the Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst, and Creative New Zealand.

#### SALES POINTS

- A beautiful, comprehensive book that will delight all lovers of Gretchen Albrecht's work over her long career
- Over 250 images, from the beginning of Albrecht's career in the late 1960s to brand-new work
- A detailed and rich text by leading art writer Dr Luke Smythe
- Preface by well-known art curator Mary Kisler
- French-fold jacket and two gatefolds set a luxurious design note

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with the squeegee not only helped her apply her colour, but also brought with it the further benefit of allowing her to work more expeditiously. Since a sponge is more absorbent than the hairs of a conventional brush, she could distribute more paint with the squeegee before needing to recharge it. She could therefore work more rapidly and cover larger areas before the pigment soaked so deeply into the canvas that she could no longer manipulate it.

In the wake of these encounters, Albrecht began making minimal abstract compositions of her own, creating close to forty new works in 1971, followed by many more in the years to 1981. Unlike Walter's crisp and even strokes, her bands were richer and irregular, to the point where they strained against the limits of the stretched format. They were also far more varied in colouration.



View of Louise's landscape with  
extended horizon, 1971, oil on  
canvas and fibre fabric, 40x40cm

These qualities and her use of staining brought Albrecht's works closer to the spills of Louise, though since again her own bands were more irregular. This essential variation was one of many differences between the two painters' works. Louise, for example, avoided brushes, preferring to spill paint across an inclined or flattened square of canvas, before letting gravity take its course. As she had seen in 'Falsification and Gardens', Albrecht continued working on a horizontal canvas laid out on the floor of her workspace. After splashing and spilling colour across its surface, she adopted a more hands-on approach to painting than Louise, using brushes to manipulate and shape her masses until they were absorbed by the canvas fibres. Unlike Louise, she did not place adjacent spills in sequence, but moved freely and intuitively around the canvas, adding new touches of colour here and there until a painting was completed. As this process progressed and her margin for error narrowed, she would typically slow down, sometimes letting an image lie in situ before making her concluding interventions.

Since Albrecht used water to thin her paints and Louise favoured turpentine, the two artists' colours differ notably in appearance. Louise's choice of thinner gave his spills a glossy sheen that is absent from Albrecht's work. In cases of extreme blurring, the turpentine dissolved the acrylic, leading to areas of uneven colouration and points where the edges of his spills bled outward in meandering trails.<sup>16</sup> Having occasional instances of dripping and staining, Albrecht's spills remain clean-edged and even-toned.

Such formal and technical discrepancies were echoed by the two artists' divergent approaches to abstraction. Louise was a thoroughgoing formalist who saw his work solely as an exercise in colour composition. In keeping with the tradition, his conception of abstraction was essentially nondescriptive. He developed his motifs through a process of formal exploration that made no reference to external reality. Key resemblance between his images and real-world subject matter was unintended since it could only draw attention from the formal and material aspects of his works.<sup>17</sup> Albrecht's engagement with abstraction was more complex and ambivalent. On one hand, she sought her images to be sufficiently non-representational that viewers could respond to it at the level of pure form, but she also wished to leave it tethered to the outside world through relationships of fac correspondence and oblique resemblance.



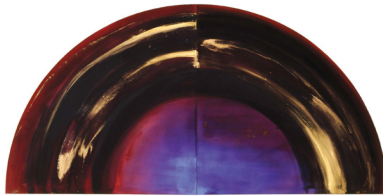
Alan Gilpin 1971  
Purple's Lament, 1971 x 101.5 cm  
Alan Gilpin, 1970



Alison Clark 1973  
ATYD in colour, 1973 x 128 cm  
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki



Alison Clark 1974  
Purple's Lament, 1974 x 101.5 cm



Alison Clark 1976  
Acrylic on canvas (two panels), 103 x 94 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 reverence enabled her to lay out 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 aim, to give her foregrounds its forward-leaning and unbalancing appearance.

The midsize paintings share the continuous, shaped surfaces of the single-canvas homologies, but combine these with key features of the cut-paper collage, most notably their clear division between fields of gradual brushwork and geometric forms that float above them. Some of these 'geometric' (as Albrecht terms them) are solid blocks of colour that hover at the margins of the canvas. Others consist of finely grained imagery akin to the streaks and patches of colour that colonise the background of each image. Like the collages, these works evoke liquid expanses. Rather than a firm edge, however, they call to mind a weed-covered pond or reservoir. These associations point to two key influences on the artist: Charles Bonnet's paintings of the Pink and White Terraces and Claude Monet's landscapes. His late career paintings of waterlilies.

This former work had already had an impact on collages like *Wind Terrace* (1970), with its layered arrangements of pink brushwork, now it was the spreading, oval shape of the ponds themselves that made its presence felt. Albrecht's work. Monet's *Waterlilies* also depict bodies of water, specifically the pond in the garden. The link between works in this series are loosed in the *Orange* in Paris in an elliptical gallery, a space that came to mind for Albrecht as she developed the *Problema* series. In much the same manner as *Wind Terrace*, she created the impression of a liquid surface by hanging out an open field of blue, then shading 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 surround, but they also evoke the realm of culture instead of nature — the geometries through their rationalised overtones, gold pigment through gold's value as a precious substance.

While each of the *Problema* 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 contrast with images that speak of nature is finally unclear. Although drawn to the prospect of combining these three elements in the work, Albrecht was still feeling for a more cohesive way of doing this. During the next six months, she would continue to make headway on this problem, as part of her broader exploration of the shape's expressive capabilities.

In the weeks of her *Sea* exhibition in September 1980, Albrecht created producing large collages and focused more intently on the ovals. Throughout 1990 and the early part of 1991, she produced



Charles Bonnet 1971  
Pink and White Terraces, 1971  
Monet 1971  
Waterlilies, 1971