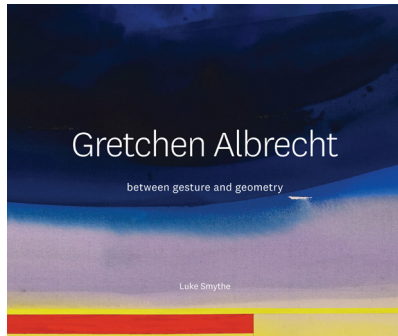




Gretchen Albrecht

Between gesture and geometry

LUKE SMYTHE



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THE CAREER OF A DISTINGUISHED CONTEMPORARY ARTIST

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.

This revised edition includes her practice since 2019 and also interrogates her *Illuminations* work of the 1970s, which she revisited and re-presented in 2022.

With a detailed and rich text by leading art writer Luke Smythe, plus a foreword by art curator Mary Kisler, this magnificent book both interrogates Albrecht's work and celebrates her accomplishments.

Best Art Books of the Year 2019 — NZ Herald

100 Best Books of 2019 — New Zealand Listener

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 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
- This revised edition includes over 260 images, from the beginning of Albrecht's career in the late 1960s to brand-new work
- Preface by well-known art curator Mary Kisler
- French-fold jacket and two gatefolds set a luxurious design note



with the speedbrush 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 hair of a conventional brush, she could distribute more paint with the speedbrush 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.



How of Heaven is a Landscape 1971
acrylic on canvas 110 x 110 cm
Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand

In the wake of these encounters, Albrecht began making staccato abstract compositions of her own, creating close to forty new works in 1971. Followed by many more in the years to 1974, unlike Mosler's crisp and even strokes, her bands were more torn and irregular, to the point where they strayed against the limit of the printed format. They were also far more varied in colouration.

These qualities and her use of staining brought Albrecht's works closer to the spills of Louis, though since again her own bands were more irregular. This extensive variation was one of many differences between the two painters' works. Louis, for example, avoided brushes, preferring to spill paint across an inclined or furrowed expanse of canvas, before letting gravity take its course. As she had with her fabric sheets and gardens, Albrecht continued leaning on a horizontal canvas laid out on the floor of her workshop after splashing and spilling colour across its surface, she adopted a more hands-on approach to painting than Louis, using brushes to manipulate and shape her stains until they were absorbed by the canvas fibres. Unlike Louis, she did not place adjacent spills in sequence, but moved freely and relatively around the canvas, adding new touches of colour here and there until a painting was complete. As this process progressed and her brush for error corrected, the spilled spots also slow down, sometimes setting an image in for days before making her concluding interventions.

Since Albrecht used water to dilute her paints and Louis favoured turpentine, the two artists' colours differ notably in appearance. Louis' choice of thinner gave his spills a glow when that is absent from Albrecht's work. In cases of extreme thinning, the turpentine dissolved the acrylic, leading to areas of uneven colouration and points where the edges of his spills bleed outward in meandering trails.¹⁴ Barring intentional instances of dripping and bleeding, Albrecht's spills remain clean-edged and even-toned.

Such formal and technical discrepancies were echoed by the two artists' divergent approaches to abstraction. Louis was a thoroughgoing formalist who saw his work solely as an exercise in colour composition. In keeping with this outlook, his conception of abstraction was essentially nonobjective. He developed his motifs through a process of formal exploration that made no reference to external reality. Any resemblance between his imagery and real-world objects merely was coincidental since it could only divert attention from the formal and material aspects of his work.¹⁵ Albrecht's engagement with abstraction was more complex and ambiguous. On one hand, she too sought her imagery 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 felt correspondence and oblique resemblance.



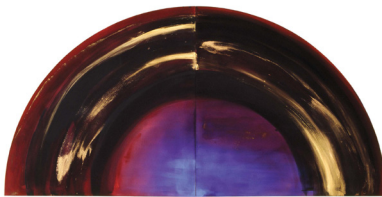
Blue Sky 1971
acrylic on canvas 140 x 100 cm
Alan Coates, Kippen



Golden Cloud 1971
acrylic on canvas 122 x 118 cm
Auckland Art Gallery, New Zealand



Redness 1971
acrylic on canvas 122 x 118 cm



Midnight 1971
acrylic on canvas (two panels) 123 x 94 cm

were also less symmetrical than their predecessor, an effect facilitated by Albrecht's use of a single canvas rather than a pair of matching quadrants. Removing the painting's centre emphasis enabled her to lay on paint more freely, especially in her paintings' upper reaches. Subscribing to 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 brushwork its forward-leaning and unfolding appearance.

The *Noblesse* 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 general 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 contain finely painted imagery akin to the swells and patches of colour that contribute the background of each image. Like the collages, these works evoke liquid expansion. Rather than a firm's edge, however, they call instead to mind a more fluid and ethereal. Their associations point to two key influences on the series: Charles Woodford's paintings of the Pink and White Terraces and Claude Monet's *Ampleson*, his late-career paintings of waterfalls.

The former works had already had an impact on collages like *Pink Terraces* (1971), with its layered arrangements of pink brushwork. Now it was the spreading, void shape of the pools themselves that made its presence felt in Albrecht's work. Monet's *Ampleson* also depicted 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 *Noblesse* 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 adding this with red swells 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 geometry through their representational overtones, gold pigment through gild's value as a precious substance.

While each of the *Noblesse* paintings spills in three 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 hardly unclear. Although drawn to the prospect of combining these three elements in the work, Albrecht was still testing 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 Crockett exhibition in September 1970, Albrecht created producing large collages and focused more intently on the oval. Throughout 1970 and the early part of 1971, she produced



Pink Terraces 1971
acrylic on canvas 100 x 100 cm
Hastings of New Zealand, Te Papa, Wellington



Ampleson 1968
acrylic on canvas (two panels) 80 x 120 cm
Hastings of New Zealand, Te Papa