

Diena Georgetti

Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2 July – 6 Sep 2008
Institute of Modern Art (IMA), Brisbane, 18 Oct – 6 Dec 2008

The first substantial exhibition by this respected artist reveals a significant body of work that channels postmodernism and abstraction – and the work of Joseph Beuys and Cy Twombly – but in a style all its own

WORDS: Rosemary Forde



Installation view

The Humanity of Abstract Painting 1988–2008 is the first exhibition to bring together a substantial selection of works by Diena Georgetti. The chronological hang at Monash University Museum of Art revealed Georgetti's reverse journey through art and design history, starting in the late '80s with her postmodern text works, running back through the bright formal abstraction of the '90s to her more recent riffs on cubism.

Georgetti commanded attention early. Her blackboard paintings first appeared in 1989 at the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) in Brisbane – just three years after she graduated from Queensland College of Art – and were promptly included in the 1992 Biennale of Sydney. A juggernaut of an assault on language, the blackboard paintings feature chalky white text: German and Italian words scrawled in such a way that they become purely visual forms.

There is a palpable urgency in these early paintings, as in *Enhalten* (1992). This sense of urgency remains intensely evident today and fits Georgetti's recollections of painting these early works: "A kind of panic made the blackboard paintings," she wrote to me in an email. "In the last hours of the last day of the week I drank some wine and a few espressos. It was a stop-start combination."

Describing the kind of frantic mood that accompanies the making of her work, Georgetti remembers being alone in her studio, wearing a tight black pencil skirt over tight black jeans, and blasting punk music: "There was a violent discomfort upon me. I was thinking it might destroy me. I wanted some sex act to settle me. I should've watched some TV or called someone on the phone to bring me an everyday calm. But I made the blackboard paintings instead."

In the postmodern fervour of the early '90s one would not expect to paint and smudge white text on a blackboard without calling into association the spectre of artists such as Joseph Beuys or Cy Twombly – the pedestal-perched mega figures of the patriarchal avant-garde. In his *Actions* series in the '70s Beuys famously performed in a manner that blended shamanism with teaching, leaving behind a series of blackboards covered in diagrams and slogans.

While Beuys's works were rooted in the faith and power of authority and pedagogy, Georgetti's blackboard paintings have a sense of mistrust and frustration about them. Words, after all, are untranslated symbols in her paintings – squashed and wiped out. Their forms are recognisably familiar to an English speaker, but not quite right, like "konsequenz", "abstrakt" and "analysen."

Scepticism of the revered has been productive for Georgetti. "I'm not interested in art," she says. Instead, her disregard for the elevation of the "fine" arts above all others has enabled her to draw on fruitful obsessions with fashion, music, design, architecture and cinema. For years Georgetti kept scrapbooks. Now she collects and files thousands of images into ordered categories on her computer. Some will become source material for the artist, who finds

comfort and security in her method of tracing and copying rather than drawing freehand.

Georgetti never makes preparatory sketches for her works so it is easier to select and reuse the preordained symbols and signifiers she is attracted to. Copying becomes a way of consuming or absorbing the object of desire. As she describes it: "I have to have that here with me now!... So I put it in a painting." Yet her compositions are built from unnatural juxtapositions and stylistic contradictions that somehow work in a uniquely "Georgetti" way. As Robert Leonard points out in his catalogue essay, a painting like *As shapable as wood: I get my pictures through you* (2001) might use forms derived from Jean Arp sculptures to stand in for central figures, with a Versace textile design in place of the sky.

Georgetti's small-scale orientalist paintings, such as *News of the existence of the world* (1993), intentionally use motifs foreign to the artist's own idiom. By adopting the traditional pictorial style of a different culture, the figurative elements in these paintings remain somewhat alien. The borrowed symbols in these works operate in the same way the foreign words do in the blackboard paintings – they may be familiar and recognised as signifiers of meaning, but they're not easily read.

Georgetti plays with this gap between art and interpretation in the act of giving titles to her paintings. In such an aesthetically driven practice, it can feel like an affront to attribute words to paintings that revel in their own ambiguity and abstraction. "Titling can act as a humiliation upon a painting," she explains. "A degradation occurs in the isolation of paintings and parts of paintings into words. The distraction of that worded insistence can end a closeness."

Over the years Georgetti has used different strategies to get around this difficulty of language. In works like *Reconstructing the physical nature of the world* (1994) "the titles began as an obligation to name a thing and were attempting an honest retelling," says Georgetti. Later, in abstract paintings like *I hardly know her and my life is nearly over* (2000), "the title attachments became an opportunity to contradict the painting, to make it more of a total document. The titles then behaved as a separate picture, almost another project."

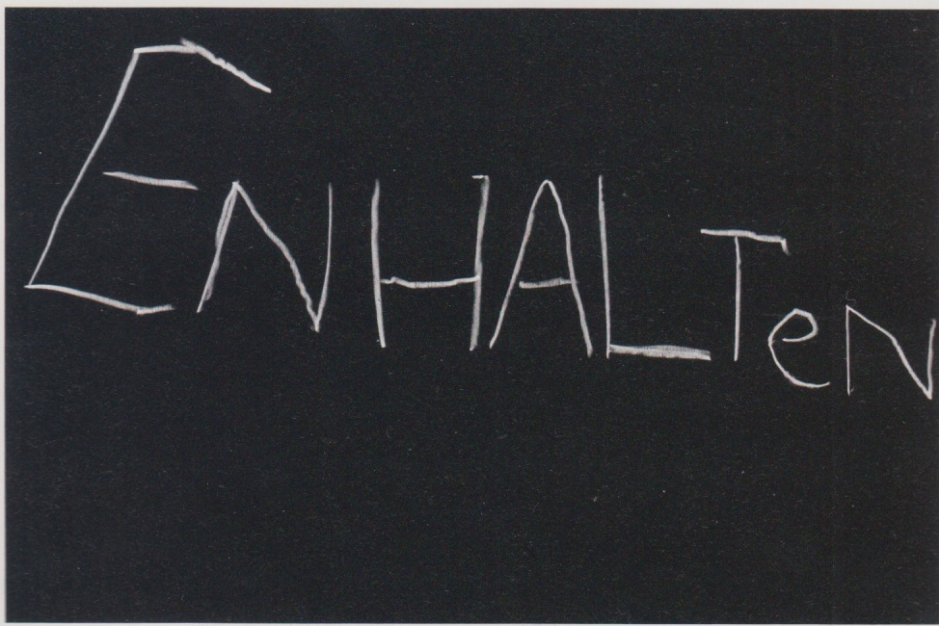
The direct emotion of some of the titles is a surprise when they're considered alongside the formal paintings. "I like that the picture is stoic and the title can be emotional," Georgetti says. The emotional content is central to her project and is referenced in the title of the MUMA exhibition, which suggests that there is a humanity to be found in abstract compositions of colour and form.

In recent works Georgetti borrows from modernism – including the work of Léger – with some compositions reminiscent of Malevich's Suprematist paintings. Her titles have also come full circle, and are now often a direct description of the paintings, such as *BLOK PLASTIK/ asymmetric trapeze above geometric hardware panel with zigzag trim* (2007). This is, of course, not all the titles contain. As Malevich wrote in 1927, "the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling."

I asked Georgetti what she might be feeling excited about next. As well as wanting to return to the physicality of larger-scale paintings, she was particularly enthusiastic about '70s American movies set in cheap roadside motels with delicious, mass-produced art prints hung on fake wood-panelled walls...



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Collection Hamish McKay, Wellington

1 BLOK PLASTIK/asymmetric trapeze above geometric hardware panel with zigzag trim (2007), acrylic on board, 67 x 57cm

2 Enthalten (1992), chalk and blackboard paint on masonite, 61 x 91cm

3 I keep falling over, I keep passing out, when I see a face like you now that I don't think of you (1998), acrylic, rubber and wire on canvas, 91.5 x 61cm

4 I hardly know her and my life is nearly over (2000), acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40.5cm

5 News of the existence of the world (1993), white tempera and acrylic on masonite, 23 x 34cm

6 Reconstructing the physical nature of the world (1994), white tempera and acrylic on masonite 40.5 x 31cm



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Collection Monash University, Melbourne

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