

URBAN COSMOS

Simon Barney

The Streets of Darlo

Anyone encountering Gunter Christmann in recent years might have found a stubborn, irascible character. Amid the studied techno-optimism of the new inner-city crowd, Gunter was like an escapee from a one-handed Beckett play, a character existing in his own interminable monologue, delivered to the world regardless, its repetitions the only discernible pattern.

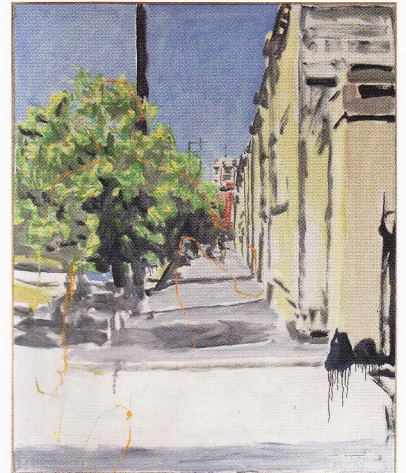
On the street he was a weary figure, dressed sufficiently like a bum that the homeless would offer him smokes. His taste was for fabrics softened by wear but eventually even the thinnest stuff seemed too heavy on him.

Sagging pockets and cloth bags full of tools, supplies, a jaw harp and whatever had been collected along the way helped complete the look. An ensemble that suggested the obsession of the distracted in fact testified to the intensity with which he made a world from his Darlinghurst beat. There was nothing Gunter carried that didn't have a role to play in a larger enterprise—a life in art.

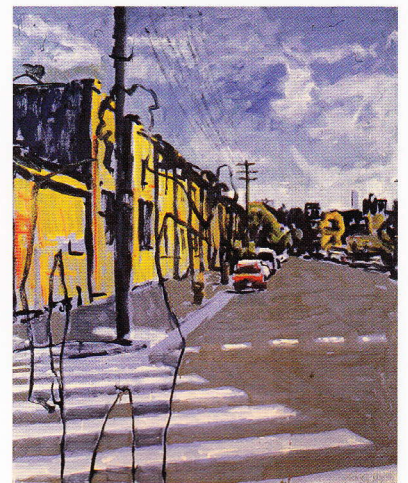
Gunter wore down a track around his locale. His first room in Sydney was in the Beresford Hotel on Bourke Street, where the cabbie dropped him in 1959;¹ he was thirty-eight years in Burton Street, the flat he shared with his wife Jenny, and ten days in Darlinghurst Road, in the Sacred Heart Hospice. A few blocks link all three places.

A circle of about two kilometres from home held most of what he needed: coffee, cigarettes, a cheap meal, a supermarket and the dope dealer up at the Cross. There were art supply stores though he hardly used them. He had a roll of canvas from a wholesaler who closed up years ago and a stash of pigments and a vat of clear acrylic with which he could mix paint. Then there was the street. He had a collection of pencils you couldn't step over, all of them sharpened to a long point and all picked up on his travels. In season he'd collect nuts in Hyde Park. But the best finds of all were the ochre deposits. No need to go bush, let it come to you. Where the soil washed out in parks and under trees it exposed little lumps of rock—mostly red, but sometimes yellow. Ground and mixed with acrylic it made a nice soft colour, and a good red yielded a sweet range of pinks.

As the pull of global networks emptied out the local scene, Gunter's circles got tighter. His theory of art was simple: expose yourself to your environment. That already reduced things to a workable range of options. And keep your eyes out.



North 1987
oil on canvas
168 x 137 cm
Collection of Bill Nuttall and Annette Reeves,
Melbourne



South 1987
oil on canvas
160 x 137 cm
Private collection

Ground

He got his break as an artist when he put the canvas on the floor. In 1969 he was hardly the first but he had a simple logic. Flat colour was tiring on the eyes. Where large areas of colour met there was a dirty optical afterimage. He had stippled an area in one painting and noticed the colour stayed clean. The practical way to follow up this discovery was with thrown paint—on a big canvas he wasn't going to paint in all the dots. So the paint was flicked off a four-inch brush 'from six feet out in space'.²

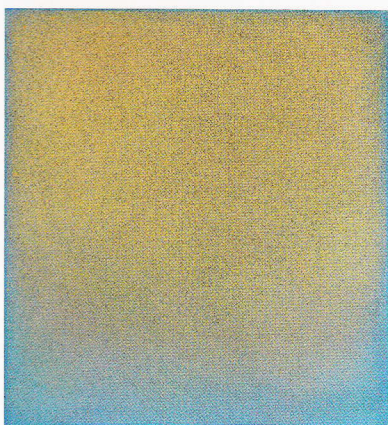
He said he became ground conscious. What he saw there, in the drift and wash of the ephemera underfoot, was nature. Leaf, twig or bottle cap—it was all nature. Control of the brush was tenuous. Paint rained down forming patterns akin to nature. The geometry of his earlier abstraction had been Fibonacci and the Golden Mean, a proportion he described as natural.

These thrown, or 'sprinkle', paintings place you under the work looking up—like under a cloud or tree, he said. He complained that local abstraction used traditional landscape space or cubist space. He wanted the weight at the top—he'd seen this in Rothko.³ Layers of dots in the paintings overlap. He put the cool over the warm to hold the image on the surface and only allowed a deeper space at the base, bringing the top of the painting forward. The approach in his earlier Op and geometric paintings had to be totally constructive, not emotional. He said it wasn't until the sprinkle paintings that he thought they could have both, or 'as much emotional content as constructive'.⁴ Constructive here meant a system—a practical method. He selected colour combinations using the contrast or colour-wheel diagram used by Seurat.

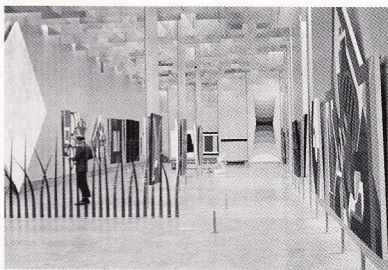
Emotion was in the colour. Colour Field painters believed that structure wasn't so important; the area of painting left to explore was colour.⁵ The optically mixed colour of these canvases hums with a meditative intensity. It never quite sits on the surface, appearing to hover just off it or just behind.

His timing was good. The Australian version of Colour Field was dominant.⁶ The Field show, of legend, had been in 1968. Gunter had been unhappy with the work he'd shown in that exhibition; too soft he thought, but it made him reassess. In 1971 he was included, with David Aspden, in the São Paulo Bienal. On the way home, he visited Berlin. He started photographing the drifts on the ground. In the studio he was weighting the paint toward the top of the canvas and wanted the edge of the paint to 'break', in the way he'd seen the edge of clustered debris break on the ground.⁷

The thrown paint had a long life, into the late seventies. But by then it was sharing his attentions with other developments.



M.S. 1978
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
183 x 170.4 cm
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
Purchased 1979. Trustees' Purchase Exhibition



Installation view, The Field,
National Gallery of Victoria, 1968
Courtesy of National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne

Shuffle Boxes and Float Tanks

Some of the photos of natural arrangements on the ground found their way into slide carousel works. Initially they couldn't be used for painting. The photo represents a fragment of a larger world. In the sprinkle paintings, Gunter had developed framing devices to both register the surface and avoid the suggestion that the painting was just a patch cut from something larger.⁸

This led to him making up shallow boxes in which he could collect debris. He could then find a composition by tapping and gently shaking the box.

I still wanted nature, but nature within a measurable area, my picture plane in fact, and acting totally within those limitations. Any forms inside my four edges (known limits) had to result from the very limits themselves. Which meant: moveable elements. So I made myself boxes and water tanks in the proportions of the painting I intended.⁹

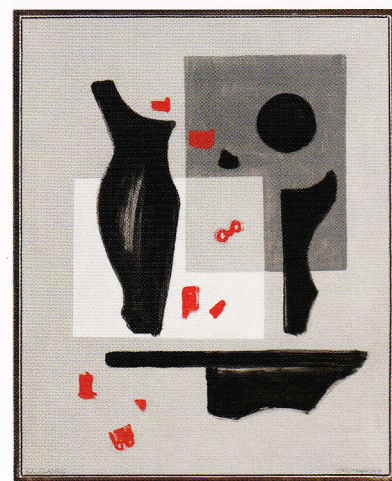
Gunter distinguished nature from a natural order or pattern that could be found even in the urban environment. Observing this pattern could produce an image of nature he regarded as more realistic than a landscape painting. What determined a box was always combination: how the colour and forms related. Recognisable elements might suggest a mood, however the compositional order was fundamental. In some early notes about the boxes, Gunter writes about pollution and the ubiquity of trash—even in supposedly natural places. But the paintings aren't really about such issues. Their strength is the transformation of the crumbs of the city, the minutiae, the debris so negligible that it goes unnoticed, into an entire world—the cosmos of the dry box or float tank.

The boxes were part of his mantra that art was all around you—don't look for it in an art school. The raw material waited for him everywhere. Walking with him on one occasion I'd noticed some broken plastic. Later, on the way back from coffee, he picked it up with a 'what the hell' attitude. The elements became *CC Classic*, 2010. One of them suggests a female form or evening gown, hence Coco Chanel.

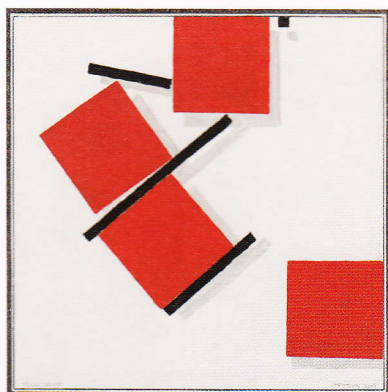
The early float tanks were stainless steel boxes that Jenny brought home from her job as a tea lady. Elements would sink or float and develop a static that held them in place. When he returned to the method in his last decade the tank could just as likely be a takeaway container holding bits of plastic or straws. These things were tools, not precious, made from what was to hand. He titled one of the late water-tank paintings *Young Ernest*—a reference to a Kurt Schwitters work of 1946. Schwitters's Merz collages were an influence.



Shuffle box c.1977
8.5 x 7 cm
Gunter Christmann papers
Private collection, Sydney



CC Classic 2010
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
69 x 56 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Gunter Christmann
and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne



Young Ernest 2009
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
77 × 76 cm
Private collection, Sydney



Blau, Weiss, Gelb, Rot
(*Blue, White, Yellow, Red*) 1975
watercolour
65.9 × 49.9 cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of the artist 1979

Occasionally the boxes were shown and sold as works in their own right. But Gunter came to the view that showing them might have detracted from the paintings. Most of the material he used in boxes in later years would be thrown out rather than retained as a discrete object. While exhibition of the boxes fitted the conceptual mood of the 1970s they were, for Gunter, primarily a means to pursue his interest in painting. The natural aesthetic matched what he'd said in 1970 about the sprinkle paintings: 'We can never say of a rose that it is "a bit too red", a tree or flower cannot be wrong. A painting should have an equivalent sort of integrity and rightness, while remaining of course, a painting, a thing of its own kind'.¹⁰

Transitions

Gunter came to prominence in the closing days of modernism, in one of its last, late outposts, where painting as subject remained the pursuit of any serious artist. Yet at that moment those modernist assumptions were internationally under siege. Colour Field painting might have been ascendant in Sydney but by 1969 word of major shows of post-object art would have been filtering back from overseas. Around 1974 Gunter began to introduce conceptual and process methods into his work. He had a year's residency in Berlin during 1973–74 and commented later that there wasn't much painting going on. It was the year of the Yom Kippur War and the oil crisis. He returned to a country in recession and a changed art market. His career here divides and from its short period of dominion can be regarded as a negotiation with this new state of affairs. While it's the lot of any artist to lose the early status of game-changer, for the artists of this generation the change was greater. The very idea of art was challenged and principally the priority of their mode—painting. Post-object artists worked in a range of formats and materials, and often outside a gallery system that presented art as a commodity.

For Gunter these shifts offered a way out of the dead end of 1960s painting. A conceptual focus on tools and method was an easy fit with his earlier constructive thinking and with the tradesman-like approach that he'd learnt in his years as a bricklayer. The turn to local subject matter, or 'ground' matter, was a short step from the broken, natural edge of the late sprinkle paintings. Sound and slide works, like the shuffle boxes, used simple compositional structures to introduce urban textures. Although the look of Gunter's work changed markedly in these years, there was never a complete break with his earlier approach.

The Brushmark

Around 1975 Gunter added to his mix of conceptual strategies and Colour Field principles a return to the painterly mark—a concern of an even earlier era. With the brush back in contact with the canvas he needed to find his own hand. He again introduced constructive principles,

here to guide a loosely held brush. He would fill an area by working the edges in first then working from bottom to top. Any run or drip from the top would be over the lower half, fitting with his principle of inverted spatial recession. An example is *Blau, Weiss, Gelb, Rot*, 1975.

When painting the shuffle boxes he'd tried to get a kind of reproduction without style. In fact they'd benefitted from simplification and absence of elaboration. The water tank works are often more painterly. In 1980 there was talk of 'a swing back to painting'. At the 1981 *Perspecta* of Australian Art it was in full swing. Gunter's subject was still ground debris, but now painted from slides. Such photos held too much information for his purposes. Instead of reproducing them they were used as a scaffolding for drawing with paint. He'd use one large brush and work his way from the light to the dark colours, thereby avoiding the need to wash the brush as he changed colour. A tonal ground would take care of the bits he 'missed'.

Inverted space returned in works like *Bouquet Bourke*, 1980, but here the top half of the frame is taken up with coloured form—painted rubbish. The bottom half is empty by contrast. This is what you get when you invert a photo. It is a means of delaying recognition, giving precedence to painterly effect over assignable shape.

Personae

In the 1980s or 1990s a visit to Jenny and Gunter's flat could seem like a trip back to 1930s Berlin. They recreated the norms of a German household as they remembered it—without the modernising influence of later decades.

But cast adrift on another continent, this household wasn't typical at all. It was an imaginative world, one of their devising. On the one hand was the hot, leaky flat. On the other was all they filled it with—the artworks that reflected their lives back to them, now free of all the obvious constraints that tied them to this place.

The inclination to create a cast of characters, of stand-ins, went a long way back. The 'Ozkar' of Gunter's tag paintings was a character with beginnings in a painting Jenny made in the 1960s. Ozkar would re-emerge later. The first paintings that worked with this kind of identification were those of the *Caenus* series, the major work being *Caenus To Be*, 1982.

Gunter favoured the version of the story in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a book to which he frequently returned. Caenis, raped by Neptune, and granted her wish to be a man, receives a power of resistance to spear and sword. Caenus now, he fights the Centaurs, falling only when they realise his immunity and strip the ground of trees under which they smother him.



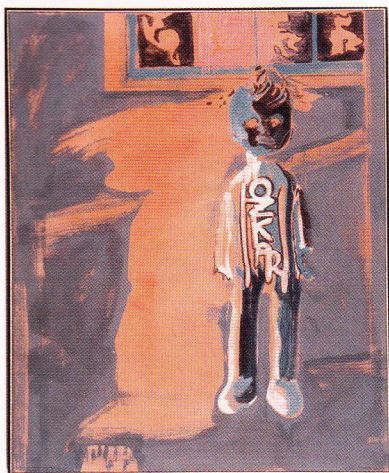
Bouquet Bourke 1980
oil on canvas
120 x 175 cm
Wollongong Art Gallery, New South Wales
Gift of Nuttall Holdings (Palcolor) 1980



Jenny Christmann
Ozkar 1964
oil on canvas
28 x 28 cm
Private collection, Sydney

When Gunter hung *Caenus To Be* at the 1982 Biennale of Sydney, there was a reaction from Salome, a German performance painter. He wouldn't be hung near what he referred to as 'this Baselitz'. In this work a figure and rubbish fill the top of the picture. The lower section drifts off into a vague infinity of brushstroke and scattered form.

The two Biennale artists, or at least their works, were separated. Since Georg Baselitz had by that time long made inversion a trademark, the association was inevitable. But the aims of each painter were different. Gunter was always after a top-heavy, somewhat unbalanced, yet embracing spatial effect. Here inversion fits the theme of metamorphosis and limits a viewer's possession of what is, in Ovid's story, a scene of rape. Jenny regularly assured people she wasn't the model for the painting. The girl was a local Gunter knew, a drug user who was living rough.



AlterOZKAR 2001
synthetic polymer paint and mixed media
on canvas
167 × 137 cm
Private collection, Melbourne

The Tiresias myth was the subject of a large number of paintings in the late 1980s. These consistently feature an outline figure—a projection of the artist, overlaid onto imagery that often derives from earlier paintings. It is also the story of a change of sex. Tiresias lives eight years as a woman, changing his sex by striking two fighting snakes with his staff. When asked by Juno and Jove whether it is women or men who gain more pleasure from love, he answers women, and is blinded by an enraged Jove. In compensation, he receives the power of prophecy. Gunter emphasised that he was punished for telling the truth.

Around this time Gunter made a number of works using the female pseudonym Rosa Detsleven—a German language version of Duchamp's Rose Sélavy. They were exhibited and sold as works by Detsleven, born 16 December 1958, Bremerhaven, Germany, and living in Berlin. The date and location fit with Gunter's departure to Australia. Detsleven's works, such as *Lily Thal*, 1982, are self-portraits.

If Tiresias was the old seer and Caenus the young man, Ozkar was the child. Gunter related the character to the Oskar of *The Tin Drum*, by Günter Grass. The child, horrified by the cruelty of the adult world, responds by refusing to grow up. Each of these characters stands apart and Gunter identified with their displacement.

Ozkar morphed with Tracy of the Northern Territory—an abandoned doll that featured in paintings that followed the Caenus series. She came via James Mollison, who had picked her up when working in Darwin after Cyclone Tracy.¹¹ In *AlterOzkar* and *SeriOZKAR*, both 2001, the doll is depicted as it then appeared—stained ochre red with an Ozkar tag across its torso.



Uptown (Gasolino) 1984
oil on canvas
168 × 120 cm
Location unknown

Uptown (Gasolino), 1984, one of the first paintings to feature this doll, illustrates Gunter's working method. For a proposed council mural he had planned to scale up a splatter work that was on a wall

near his flat—and is probably still there, hidden by a later building in front of it. In the seventies Gunter had lobbed three paint-filled eggs at the stone-speckled wall, a red, a blue and a black. The council mural never eventuated and Gunter later put a section of the site photo to use in this painting. The reduced colour and emphasis on the drawn line are characteristic of his method of working from slides. The doll is like a signature, here writ large, but the work conveys an uneasy exposure, the personal in a disproportionate shift into the public realm.

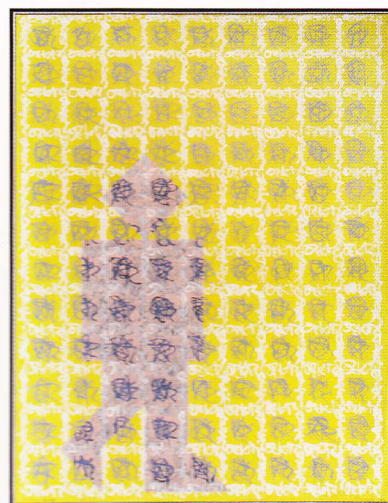
The Ozkar tag of later paintings functioned as a cipher and a passport. The grids of tags were known as MFCs: Magic Flying Carpets. The theme continued—displacement, transformation and unbounded travel through a patchwork space of memory and dream.

Another state of being

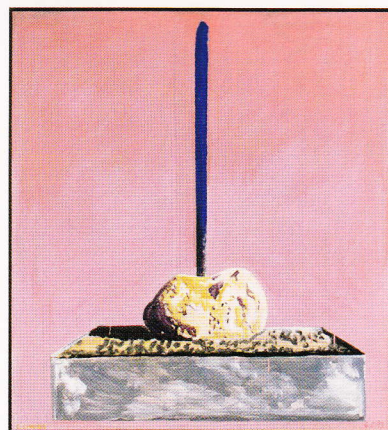
Shrines, talismans and votive figures were dotted, unobtrusively, around the Burton Street apartment. The major one had been Jenny's design—it was known as her grave. It is depicted in *C Change*, 1993, a rock on a bed of earth and what looks like a burnt stick dipped in deep ultramarine. Gunter captioned the painting 'A resting place in another state of being'.

Gunter had, in the 1970s, developed an interest in indigenous culture. He began collecting and playing didgeridoos: 'Reassert your own vibrations to be able to survive'. He was given a box of natural ochres by Nikolaus Lang who had travelled to sites around Australia to collect material for his installation *Earth Colours and Paintings*, 1978–79, at the National Gallery of Australia. That work memorably features 168 mounds of different coloured earth. Lang had also given him ochre from Parachilna, a sacred ochre site in the Flinders Ranges. Gunter didn't paint with this—he had too much respect for its spiritual power. In the last weeks of his life, he sometimes had a spot of it rubbed on his forehead, echoing indigenous use. This unusual ochre is both pink and silvery. A metallic sheen becomes apparent when it is rubbed on the skin. This sort of thing had to be approached with ceremony. As with much else, it was ceremony of his own invention.

In 1973 his studio was in the Grunewald Forest on the western edge of Berlin. There was a pond nearby, to which he'd return on later visits. It was often painted. He called it his 'Billabong Increase Centre'. He played the didgeridoo there on a trip in 1989. He had described that trip as 'Back to the Source'. He played on the Wall and had to run when the Stasi came through a door into the west. Paintings from this trip were shown in Australia later that year, just weeks before the Wall fell. It was the last time he went back. Though he thought of himself as an Aussie, not German, he was a Berliner Aussie. For a child born in Berlin in 1936, those early years weren't something that could be escaped.



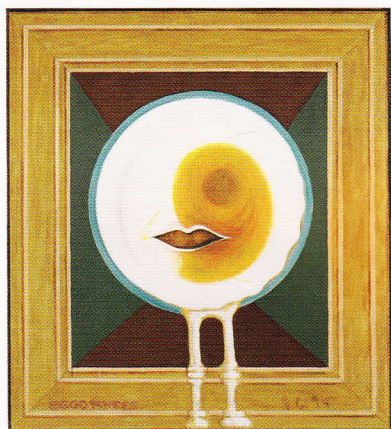
Travel OZKAR 2004
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
128 × 100cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Gunter Christmann
and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne



C Change 1993 [Also titled *Now and Here*]
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
168 × 151 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Gunter Christmann
and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

In 1969 it was possible to be confident about the idea of an avant-garde making limited and specific moves in an observant discourse about painting itself. By the 1980s the opposite was true—the discourse was all about introducing themes and practices from outside the canon. The freedom and the confusion of this ‘anything goes’ moment characterises Gunter’s work from the period. Although he didn’t comprehend appropriation, the touchstones of the era (‘memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth’)¹² held true for all of Gunter’s later work.

At the end of the 1980s Jenny began to make a kind of Dada collage invariably featuring self-portraits in unlikely settings. She’d had to stop work because of rheumatoid arthritis and was increasingly confined to her home. In the 1970s she had made knitted books and movies, now mostly held in the NGA and NGV collections. But when she took it up again she made collages with the things to hand—box tops, ice cream sticks, cigarette packets and figures cut from the magazines and books that she read. She was unsentimental with the scissors. She saw it as part of a conversation with friends and gave most of her output away.¹³



Eggoknees 1994
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
168 × 151 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Gunter Christmann
and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

This Dada aesthetic was at odds with Gunter’s formalism but her abrupt, darkly comical approach began to influence his paintings. He was the assistant on much of what she made, drawing things that she needed, making up boards for her or just doing the photocopying. The large painting *Eggoknees*, 1994, was a transcription of a smaller frame onto which he had stuck the skim from the top of a can of oil paint. As that paint ran then cracked a hopeless, goofy figure emerged. Typically, Gunter introduces a grandeur and bathos into his over-scaled painted reproduction.

By the 1990s Gunter was reworking his back catalogue of painterly devices. Figurative work, loosely painted from photographic projection, dry box arrangements and even thrown paint could now occupy the same frame.

Interaction of Colour

‘Composition, structure, drawing, all serve to place colour.
Expression, mood and feeling cannot be achieved without.’

In the works of his last years, colour was again the preoccupation, served by simple, even slight, content. A palette, a bottle cap or a leaf might provide shapes. Lines were borrowed from the twists of discarded cable ties and wire coat hangers. Gunter worked these paintings over and over. While the composition didn’t alter, the background might be divided and elaborated. He photographed the stages, the progressions of colour and tone. Looking at some of

these developments in sequence, it's clear that what he was mostly after in these shifts was light—a light that seemed to emanate from within the painting. The final painting in each of these sequences is also the one best lit by its colour. He said 'Colour is my magic'. The magic was a trick of light.

The source of the transparent or overlaid colour in these paintings can be found in Josef Albers and Ralph Balson. Balson was one of the few Australian artists Gunter admired. The other two were John Peter Russell and John Power. He remembered some of Balson's work that had been stored after his death in a corner of Aspden's studio. And he remembered the Albers prints from the exhibition *Interaction of Colour*, shown in the early years of Central Street Gallery. A kind of transparent colour overlay is a feature of many of those prints. This suite might also have influenced some of Gunter's water-tank works—Albers in some instances had juxtaposed non-objective and natural forms, such as leaves and rectangles. For Gunter Albers was important. He was overjoyed when the NGV hung his *Red/Green Cross*, 1966, beside a similarly-sized Albers painting.

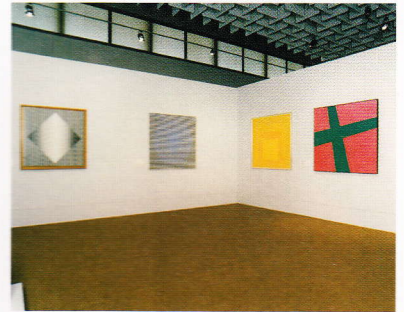
Gunter always said his influences were from European modernism. Around 2010 he started looking again at Juan Gris. He could well be a reference for some of the loosely-gridded background shapes that occasionally overlay objects and shapes in the foreground.

The Streets of Darlo II

'All I have to say is visible in my work'. Gunter felt that almost everything written about his work got it 'WRONG'. He became reluctant to explain it. He thought a painting needed to be experienced, not explained. Most themes were worked through in series. What varied was not the image or the meaning but the method of handling, the line and the colour. Gunter read Nietzsche closely and Nietzsche's life affirming aesthetics placed emphasis on the medium itself, not the narrative detail.

Gunter was happy with what he had achieved, though not with how it had been received. He left it as late as possible to get a diagnosis of inoperable cancer. He had toughed it out until the pain was unbearable. This left him just a matter of weeks to sort and make decisions about his work and his belongings. He lived on his own for eight years after Jenny died and his two-bedroom flat gradually morphed into a workshop or shed. The place was a dump. The only work the landlord was quick with was calculating a rent increase. Except when the rain poured in, Gunter had eyes only for the paintings he had hung on every available nail.

Many writers have noted the mood in the studio of the recently deceased artist. Something powerful is stilled, and particularly in the lair of the old painter, this feeling is said to be palpable. Photographs



Installation view, Gunter Christmann's *Red/Green Cross*, 1966, hanging next to Joseph Albers's *Homage to the Square: Autumn Echo*, 1966, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, c.1992

Photographer unknown
Courtesy of the Estate of Gunter Christmann
and Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

are taken, the position and placement of the smallest object, moved by the artist's hand a final time, is regarded with awe.

Gunter left a room that was more like Shakespeare's blasted heath. As a studio it seemed to have limped to its conclusion, no longer a chamber in which our sentiment might lodge but the setting for a final act in which all is lost. Presented here for the observant visitor was everything that no longer mattered, that had long since seemed to matter.

Here then the means of the master—in this case, a few threadbare brushes, tubs of water, sponges and takeaway containers. For paint, mostly bits of ochre and pigment that could be ground and mixed as it was used. Then the tale told by the corners and the dead space under things. Under planks, under stacked milk crates, behind tea chests and shelves. It was here things were stilled, left to lie where they'd been placed long before, locked under the dust of years. Sediment but not sentiment. Simple insignificance.

When the last paintings were taken out of the flat, the beauty left with them.

NOTES

- 1 Conversation with Gunter Christmann. I talked about art with Gunter over a thirty-year period. Much of what he said, he repeated, and his story was consistent. Some of the points he made appear in articles and interviews. Quotes in this essay are from these conversations, unless otherwise noted.
- 2 Gunter Christmann, 'Terra Subpede', 1980.
- 3 Gunter Christmann in interview with James Gleeson, Sydney, 19 April 1979, for National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Terry Smith, 'The Painting of Gunter Christmann', *Art International*, vol. 15, no. 3, March 1971, p. 23.
- 6 See Terry Smith, 'Colour-Form Painting: Sydney 1965–70', *Other Voices*, vol. 1, no. 1, June – July 1970.

- 7 Gunter Christmann in interview with James Gleeson.
- 8 Terry Smith, 'The Painting of Gunter Christmann', p. 25.
- 9 Gunter Christmann, archive note, private collection, Sydney. Gunter later preferred the term 'float tank'.
- 10 Terry Smith, 'The Painting of Gunter Christmann', p. 25.
- 11 James Mollison in conversation with the author, 2 January 2014.
- 12 Sue Cramer, Introduction, *The Field Now*, exh. cat., Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 1984, p. 9 (Citing Royston Harpur in *The Field* catalogue, citing Barnett Newman).
- 13 Simon Barney, Gunter Christmann entry for *Act XIII: New Works on Paper*, exh. cat., Victorian Arts Centre, 2003, p. 15.



The studio at 102 Burton Street,
Darlinghurst, Sydney, 2012
Photograph: Jim Nuttall