Blurring the Line: The Art of Kāryn Taylor
Edward Hanfling

Here is a popular expression: 'the art work is open to interpretation'. It is a nice sentiment because it implies a certain freedom. The viewer decides what they want to make of the artist's work. On the other hand, this idea is simplistic. The viewer is cast as an active self-contained being, in control of the art work's meaning, and the work is construed as a passive self-contained entity, waiting to be made meaningful. There is no such autonomy, of person or object. And 'meaning', or 'interpretation', underplays the all-encompassing power, singularity and fullness of experience (the experience of anything at all, that is, artistic or otherwise). Art is an abstraction of experience; a language, or a bunch of languages, forms and concepts, purporting to describe an experience, or a bunch of experiences. But those languages also, in part, produce experiences, shaping both an artist's making and a viewer's perception of an art work, bringing some dimensions of the work into focus more than others.

Art works that are deemed 'abstract' (on account of not seeming to be concerned with depicting things) do tend to look 'open to interpretation'. The American curator and art historian Kirk Varnedoe wrote that modernist art exhibited 'a purifying impulse that leads to a new expansiveness'. He had in mind the new work of the late 1950s and early 1960s, not just minimal abstraction, such as the paintings of Frank Stella, but also pop art, such as Andy Warhol's repetitive copies of packaging designs. In each case, the objects themselves look almost stupidly reductive, but, over time, they have accrued a multitude of ideas and associations—complex interpretations to rival those that swirl around such puzzle pictures as Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) or Edouard Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882). No doubt there are stupidly reductive interpretations of the latter too. So it is pointless to call an art work simple or complex, regardless of whether you call it abstract or representational.

Kāryn Taylor makes cast acrylic panels with coloured lines glowing from within—self-illuminating light boxes that look somewhat like paintings in shape and form. She also sets up sculptural arrangements of rods of steel and cedar and animated linear projections, marking out geometric shapes and volumes in tandem with the floor and walls of the gallery and the sightlines of viewers. The interpretation offered here is that these works articulate, bring into being, or make us acutely aware of, a blurring of boundaries between things typically construed as being in opposition—physical and metaphysical, reality and illusion, logic and feeling, object and subject, image and object, object and space, simplicity and complexity. This might be merely an interpretation, a linguistic abstraction of a much less fathomable experience with light, line, colour and space, but, if you happen to read this, perhaps it might do something as you experience the work, become bound up in that experience, add to its complexity, reduce it to an existing body of knowledge, or both. The reality is that the experience will always be in excess of that which can be said about it, for it is a matter of flux and time—simply, an evolving, involving and open reality, not just object and interpretation.

JHANA MILLERS
WHARE TOI
TE WHANGANUI-
A-TARA

Candyfloss pink is a recurring colour—a recurring sensation, even. It is in the squares within squares of *Fuzzy Logic* (2018), for example. The title of that work says plenty about Taylor's effulgent geometries, scrupulous and logical and graspable, but soft and misty. Abstract art, historically, has often been divided into 'logical' and 'fuzzy', geometric or gestural (or expressive), clean edges as against painterly splatter; Michael Auping, for example, makes this binary classification in his 1989 book, Abstraction Geometry Painting: Selected Geometric Abstract Painting in America Since 1945. Think of the well-known exponents of modernist abstraction: Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky, Barnett Newman and Jackson Pollock, Ellsworth Kelly and Gerhard Richter.

The classifications never quite work. Mondrian's paintings were intended not just to be austere physical forms but to access the metaphysical realm, spiritual harmony. Richter's attitude to the painterly mark can seem cold and calculating. Perhaps art is always a matter of, in Richard Shiff's words, *'feelings that feel like thoughts or thoughts that feel like feelings'*. But for some, no doubt complex and deep-seated, reason, human beings have turned hard-edged geometry and frayed or frenetic mark-making into conventional signs of, respectively, impassivity and expression. It is almost de rigueur to weep in the presence of the fuzzy forms of Mark Rothko, even though they are vaguely 'logical', that is, rectangular. And over the years, here in New Zealand, critics have deemed geometric and colour field abstraction, such as that of Milan Mrkusich, to be, often to its detriment, a product of the 'head', not the 'heart'. When Mrkusich, Geoff Thornley and Petar Vuletic published a passionate defence of an exhibition of American modernist art at the Auckland Art Gallery in 1974, which had been disparagingly described in a review by Hamish Keith as 'cool and clean' (the title of the piece was 'Lofty, Constipated Heights'), they said: *'The phenomenon here is materials plus emotion'*.

That sugary pink dances round the square, so to speak, in Taylor's *Lotus* (2022) and balloons forth from *Oblate Spheroid* (2022). It is caught up in games the mind can play—figuring out, for example, that where it floats down from above, in *Oblate Spheroid*, it is part of a shape that is not, it can be surmised, 'oblate', or flattened, in the way that the ellipse below it is. And it does something to activate objects that are somehow, all at once, serene, sumptuous, aseptic, delectable, seductive, mysterious and taut. These are all subjective and approximate words, of course. But the point is that these acrylic panels (not quite either painting or sculpture, 'specific objects', the American artist Don Judd might have called them) are things in the world that radiate feeling and intelligence in equal or unknowable measure.

At least we know the unknowable lies at the heart of Taylor's project. Her 'field notations', such as *Open Cube* (2021) and *Impossible Logic* (2020), involve a sculptural marking-out of both defined and amorphous space, illusions of control or containment, voids and surfaces for the viewer to 'fill'. Again, it is easy to slip into facile oppositions between the physical, or what we know, and the metaphysical, or what is beyond knowledge—or between science and spirituality. Taylor is interested in quantum physics, especially the revelation that light behaves in seemingly contradictory ways—both like a particle and like a wave. It depends which way you look at it, or do not look at it, since, as demonstrated by the double slit experiment first undertaken in 1801 by Thomas Young, the act of observing or measuring the electrons is what determines their status as particles; light acts more like a wave when not placed under analysis. The reality, then, is that light can be said to behave both like a particle and like a wave at the same time—though it cannot be said to be either a particle or wave as such, because these are merely approximations of its behaviour. Complicated stuff. Insofar as the wave-particle duality hinges on the presence or absence of a conscious observer, quantum mechanics might be said to be as much about the metaphysical, or that which transcends ordinary human experience, as the physical.

Karen Barad, author of the book Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning (2007), uses the term 'intra-action' to describe the way what we might ordinarily call interactions and interpretations bring things, or reality, into being, constantly and performatively. In other words, a person does not encounter a pre-existing object, then interpret it, and an object is not interpreted by a pre-existing person. Rather than interactions between stable subjects and objects, intra-actions are collisions that produce or perform fleeting, ever-shifting agents (human and non-human). Central to Barad's theory are the notions of indeterminacy and diffraction, referring to the impossibility and blurriness of boundaries between phenomena, including people and objects, or indeed interpretations and objects. Taylor's fascination with 'fuzzy logic', the hazy glows and spatial ambiguities that form her visual language, suggest that she, like Barad, is interested in questioning the presence of 'separate entities (and separate sets of concerns) with sharp edges', upsetting expectations with 'diffraction patterns illuminating the indefinite nature of boundaries'.

Taylor's most recent work is an installation at the Suter Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū, Nelson, called *'Future Philosophies'*—an immersive and ambitious, technical and conceptual, apotheosis. Here, most clearly, we see both an extraordinarily single-minded focus (perhaps emblematised here by the pervasive use of orange) and the basis of Taylor's work in movement or flux. The viewer becomes one more agential force in a pulsing force field of line and light, colour and space. While Mrkusich simplified things somewhat, by characterising his abstract paintings in terms of 'the material quality of colour and the unmaterial quality of its effects on the viewer', Taylor talks about 'looking at how one might experience some of both at the same time', staging a complex, even overwhelming, experience of form and meaning, particle and wave, presence and potential.

Written on account of Kāryn Taylor's exhibition Future Philosophies at the
Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū, Nelson in June 2023