

THE ARTS

SPACE VISUAL ART

VISUAL ARTS ROBERT NELSON

Geometric progression

JENNIFER GOODMAN

Ocular spectra at John Buckley Gallery, 8 Albert Street, Richmond, until November 6

MICHAEL JAEGER

The desire to be elsewhere, Project Space, RMIT University, 23-27 Cardigan Street, Carlton, until November 11

I WAS attracted by the title, *The desire to be elsewhere*. It suggested to me the great seductive power of image-making and film, which is to propose that you could be somewhere more desirable than where you are. Art has a long history of such attractive invitations, from visions of Olympus to Watteau's *Voyage to Cythera* or Matisse's *Luxury, calm and voluptuousness*. So I went to Project Space in the sway of a wishful fantasy, expecting a glimpse of some adorable reality beyond our own.

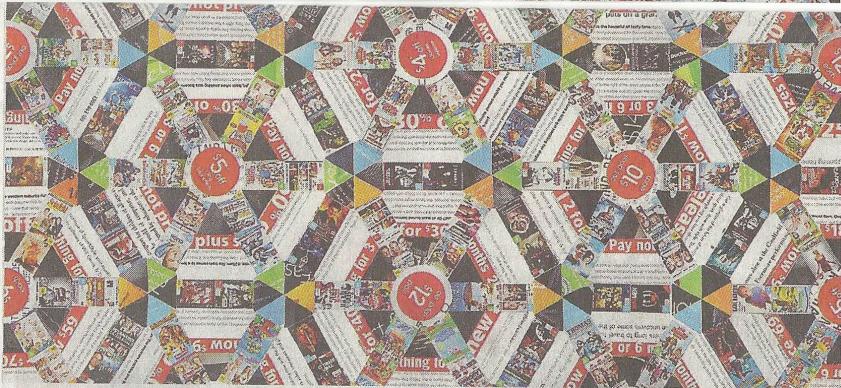
The problem with a brilliant title is that it sets up expectations that are bound to be denied. The disappointment on entering the gallery is guaranteed. Large paintings with an incoherent mixture of

ELIZABETH GOWER

Savings, Sutton Gallery, 254 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, until November 6

horizontal geometric bars and freehand zones in arbitrary colours are painted directly onto the wall as a kind of frame for a smaller work — also incoherent — painted on the reverse side of a small sheet of glass.

We could argue about whether or not the works are really ugly; but the disconnect between the title and the works seems to go beyond the subjective. The works are neither about a desire nor about being elsewhere, even if we adopt the new spelling of "else where". They could conceivably be about painting itself but not as a vehicle for



One of the intricate pieces in Elizabeth Gower's *Savings*.

another condition that might be coveted by the spectator.

Feeling the dismal grip of confusion, I turned to a catalogue essay written by Julia Powles and Peter Westwood. It is full of sentences like these: "There are difficulties in thinking about Jaeger's work in any one particular way. In order to be rendered comprehensible, to be able to fit within a definition we can make sense of, Jaeger's paintings are in part contained within parameters we understand."

The text makes an effort to explain how the project links an autonomous work with the gallery wall that supports it. Between them, there's an intermediate painted zone that is also, in a sense, the painting. So there's a question of where the edge is, where the paint sits and where it's heading. At the end of the essay, the authors declare that painting is about questions of what painting can be; and they menacingly add: "Painting can and must be this."

Other arts can be about other things, but painting, it seems, is constrained to be about its own mechanics of display. So even if the invitation is to talk about an "elsewhere", there can be none on offer: painting is always stuck where it began.

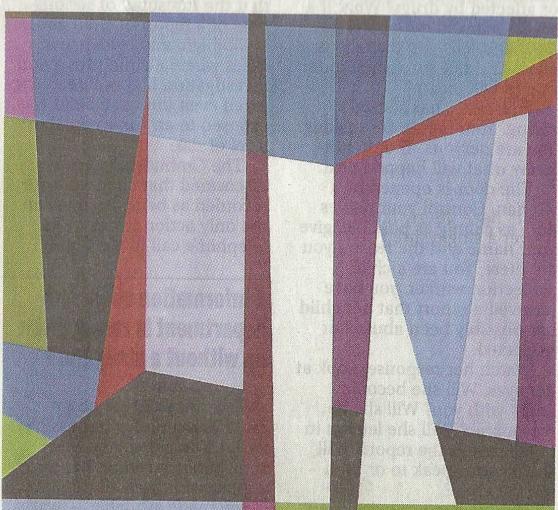
Fortunately, there are other geometric abstract works around that reveal how painting can be something else, if not somewhere else. The abstractions of Jennifer Goodman are conceived as "points of respite" for a pressured and competitive world that blunts sensibility. Called *Ocular spectra*, Goodman's exhibition at John Buckley Gallery comes with a useful essay by Julie Karabenick which draws upon the language of chemistry: the paintings seek an equilibrium by means of titrating colours; and the outcome favours slow looking and encourages contemplation.

Further along these lines, the geometric works of

Elizabeth Gower at Sutton Gallery are deliberately about the pressures of the outside world. With the title of *Savings*, the large fields of decorative pattern are made up of thousands of clippings from advertising. Collaged together in tiles, the myriad fragments lose their shrill claim on our attention and resolve themselves as delicate patterns of great decorative appeal.

In translating the clamorous language of advertising into the majestic language of ornament, Gower suggests that the pace of the world can be controlled by the person who contemplates it. Like Goodman, she aims to settle us, but in the process, Gower also creates a critique of advertising, subverting those duplicitous commercial incantations that tell us to save but encourage us to spend. Gower proves that art can be about itself and still concern important problems in the world around us.

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Jennifer Goodman's *Virginia* (2010).