

**AGNETA EKHOLM**  
**UNFOLD, FLINDERS LANE GALLERY by Andrew Gaynor, 2015**

As **non-objective** abstraction celebrates its centenary, its offspring have become the ultimate shape-shifters embracing everything from the purity of all-white canvases through to vast webs of gestural paint, with many patterns and grids in between. It has been at the forefront of Modernist theory (courtesy of Greenberg, Donald Judd **and** Rosalind Krauss), the boot-boy for the cynical ironies of Post-Modernism, and now –full circle – finds itself at the core of Metamodernism. It was also the herald chosen to launch the new building of the National Gallery of Victoria almost fifty years ago. Yet in spite of this rich history, abstraction's reception in Australia has always been more grudging than the otherwise easy consumption of illusionary realism. Luckily, such hindrance is of little consequence to its creators and devotees.

One of these is Agneta Ekholm. Her training encompasses the rigour of the Finnish art school system (which had core electives in stretcher building and the making of watercolours) before further research as a student in Melbourne. What this **alludes to** is that **materiality and structure in** a painting are as crucial for Ekholm as is the final resolution. And here, it should be pointed out that even though her paintings have their roots in post-war Modernism, they are more accurately informed by the tenets of Formalism. 'In the classic modernist trajectory abstract work was meant to work through to a final essence or truth and *expire*.'<sup>1</sup> (my italics) This is the nihilist contradiction that lurks within the argument for if the end is reached, what is left but mere replication? Formalism, by comparison, analyses and compares form and style – the way objects are made and their purely visual aspects. It emphasises compositional elements such as color, line, shape, texture. In Ekholm's work, we find faint echoes of artists such as Pierre Soulages, Morris Louis or Helen Frankenthaler but we also find the emphatic presence of Ekholm herself, her mastery of tone, her distinctive application of paint, her celebration of colour and her innate understanding of form.

Bearing meditative titles such as *Slipstream*, *Winter Reflections* and *Reveal*, Ekholm's current paintings comprise subdued blues and greens augmented by muted oxide yellow. Patches of bare canvas are also left revealed and it is visual punctuations like these that signal her technical prowess. For any canvas to be left raw at the painting's conclusion, it must be left raw for the *whole* journey of creation. This is a delicate balancing act yet Ekholm uses no preparatory drawing as an armature to guide her strokes, the process being entirely intuitive instead. Such is her control after two decades of dedicated painting that Ekholm knows instinctively when the canvas should remain bare. She eschews brushes for sharp edged sponges and applies solid paint before she removes it again. Thus, it is reductive painting rather than accumulative. It allows for the retention of crisp edges whilst supporting muted, even distressed, surfaces as the paint is stripped back to reveal the linen's weft and weave. Such precise technique is not gauche trickery nor simply an artist's schtick, for the visual tension that such a strategy of absence creates within a painterly field is just as riveting as any overwrought gestural slab of pigment.

Ekholm's paintings in *Unfold* are composed, resolute and masterly. They demonstrate a steady progression from her last exhibition at Flinders Lane Gallery in 2013 and, above all, reveal an artist at the top of her game.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Lumby, 'Abstraction from the '60s to the '80s and back again', *West* magazine, vol. 3, no. 2, 1991, p.8.