





Above and opposite:
Wafer, Jeremy (b.1953)
Red Ovals 2003
Fibre reinforced resin and pigment, 50 x 30 x 20 cm (each)



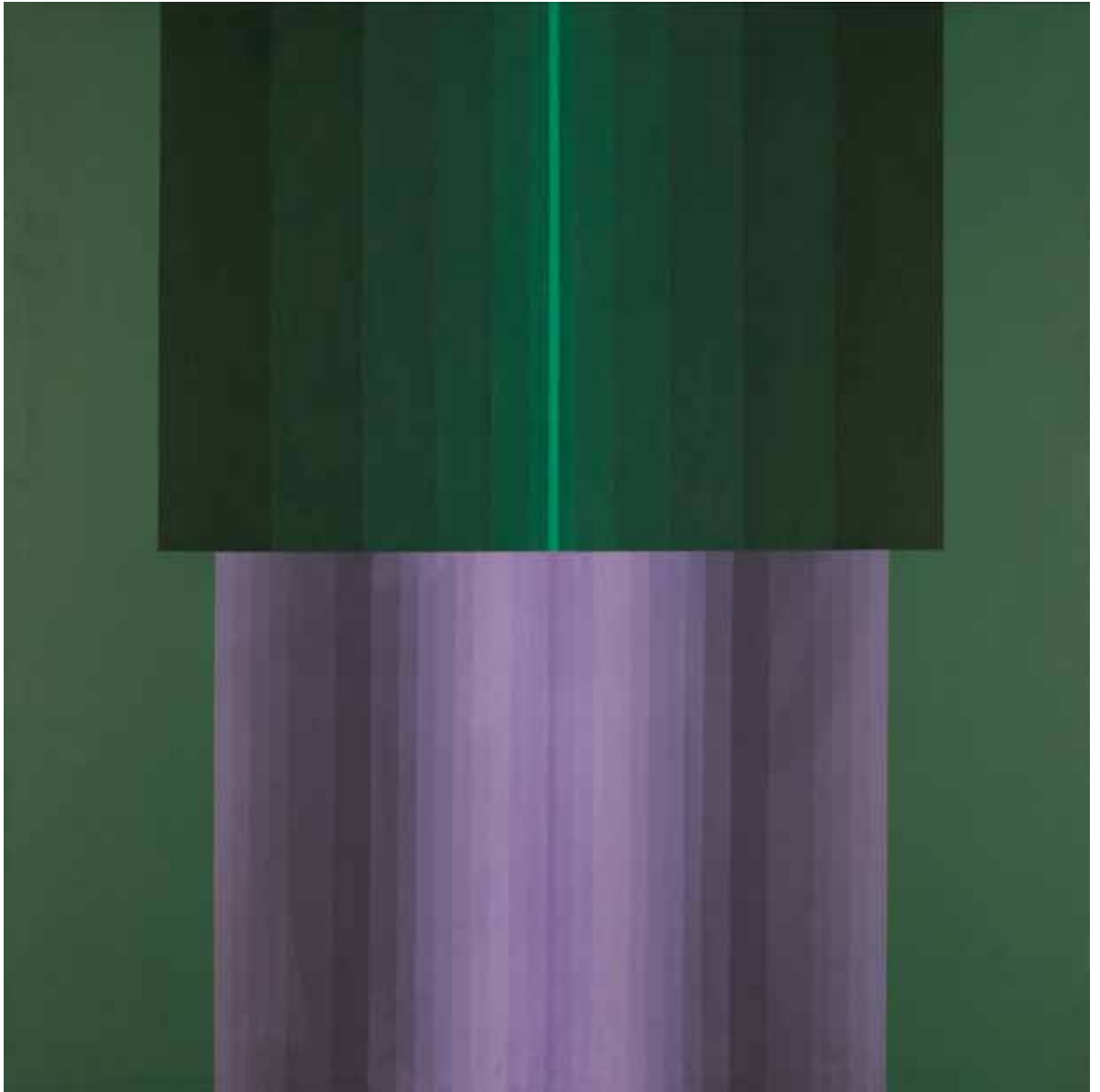
The non-representational realm

Although abstracted patterns and forms have been part of the visual vocabulary of the earliest indigenous peoples living in southern Africa long before the arrival of European settlers, their first appearance in South African fine art circles took place during the late 1930s, just before the outbreak of World War II.

A year before the founding of the New Group in 1938, Walter Battiss was approached to organise an exhibition of South African art. The exhibition was held in the Supper Room of the Pretoria City Hall in October 1937 and comprised 132 works by 49 artists. Battiss wrote the preface to the catalogue.¹ Battiss produced four abstract paintings which were submitted to the selection committee under the pseudonym Gregi Nolu, giving a fictitious address. The committee was impressed with the quality of the works and they were hung in the best position in the venue. The works, being too sophisticated and non-figurative in nature, were unsold. They were later hung in the staff room of Pretoria Boys High School, where Battiss was the art master, but have now been lost.² These four paintings were some of the very first abstract, non-figurative paintings to be exhibited in South Africa.

The establishment of the International Art Club of South Africa in 1948 provided the perfect platform for the first examples of abstract or non-figurative art to be exhibited in group form. The first exhibitions were held in Turin and Rome and included works by Walter Battiss, John Dronsfield, Maurice van Essche, Cecil Higgs, Lippy Lipshitz and Alexis Preller. The International Art Club was founded just after World War II and had its headquarters in Rome. Its members included Le Corbusier, Fernand Léger, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Enrico Prampolini. Its aim was to unite progressive artists of various nationalities who felt the need for closer collaboration. It gave young South African artists the first opportunity to engage directly with the foremost international contemporary art movements. The first South African exhibition catalogue published by the International Art Club was in 1954 and coincided with an exhibition held at the South African Association of Arts Gallery in Cape Town.³ This exhibition included a number of abstract works by Bettie Cilliers-Barnard, Paul du Toit and Edoardo Villa. Works by Walter Battiss, Cecil Higgs, Eugene Labuschagne and Douglas Portway, although figurative in subject, also formed part of the exhibition. These works were all influenced by aspects of abstraction.

Opposite:
Atkinson, Kevin (b.1939)
Composition c.1965
Acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 152.5 cm





Above:
Du Toit, Paul (1922-1986)
On Course 1976
 Acrylic on canvas, 105 x 140.5 cm

Opposite:
Sumner, Maud Eyston (1902-1985)
The Eagle and the Sun 1960
 Oil on canvas, 59.5 x 81.5 cm

The first abstract paintings by South African artists I saw formed part of a distinguished private collection from Cape Town that was put up for sale and sold at Stephan Welz and Co/Sotheby's in Johannesburg in November 1989.⁴ Outstanding works in that collection were a very fine painting by Douglas Portway, simply titled *Red Painting* (1961) and *Abstract Form in Red* (1960) by Guiseppe Cattaneo. Both artists were at the forefront of early abstraction in South Africa. Although these were the finest examples of abstract and non-figurative expression, the works have never sold for very high prices. The South African art-buying public remains conservative to new trends and developments in fine art practice. Most auction buyers are cautious and only pay high prices for works that are figurative in style and content. South African artists producing abstraction and non-figurative works have always worked as individuals and never as part of a school, which has, in turn, made it difficult for the public to understand and appreciate these artists' works.





Left:
Vorster, **Gordon Frank** (1924-1988)
Impala, near Munung Undated
Watercolour on paper, 67 x 96 cm

Right:
Cilliers-Barnard, **Bettie** (b.1914)
Generations of the Universe 1974
Oil on canvas, 121.5 x 122 cm

Opposite:
Scully, **Lawrence Vincent (Larry)** (1922-2002)
Cityscape 1974
Oil on canvas, 59.5 x 60 cm

The South African Reserve Bank Art Collection has a number of outstanding examples of abstract and non-figurative art. Kevin Atkinson's *Composition* (c.1965, p.149) is a large-scale study of rectangles and squares influenced by British painter Robyn Denny. In 1966 Atkinson won the gold medal at the South African Breweries Biennale with a similar composition of exactly the same scale, titled *Laser I*, which is now in the collection of the South African National Gallery in Cape Town.⁵

Paul du Toit's *On Course* (1976) is another exceptional abstract painting. Historically, Du Toit holds an important place as one of the first Cape artists to exhibit abstract compositions. Larry Scully's *Cityscape* (1974), although abstract in quality, alludes to the grid formation that dominates the experience of Johannesburg's city centre, where he studied and taught. Similarly, although abstract in form, all the works of Gordon Vorster and Bettie Cilliers-Barnard retain aspects of figurative content and are therefore not as pure in their abstract expression as the paintings by Atkinson and Du Toit.

An excellent example of minimalist expression is a set of works by Johannesburg-based artist Jeremy Wafer, titled *Red Ovals* (2003, pp.146 and 147). These works have no figurative quality and rely on the simple but powerful progression of repeated circular and linear three-dimensional shapes which decorate each oval form. Although contemporary in composition and execution, these designs and forms are influenced by the *amasumpa*, which were developed centuries ago by Zulu potters. These *amasumpa* were not only designed to decorate ceremonial clay pots, but would act as grips to prevent a heavy pot from slipping out of one's hands on a hot day. Here again we find that the origin of much contemporary innovation and thinking in the fine art world is located in the traditional and spiritual art created by the earliest inhabitants of southern Africa centuries ago. **Warren Siebrits**





Left:
Coetzee, Johannes Cornelius (Neels) (b.1940)
Study for 1986 Monument for the Tormented I 1987
Ink wash on paper, 26.5 x 36.5 cm

Right:
Coetzee, Johannes Cornelius (Neels) (b.1940)
1986 Monument for the Tormented 1989
Bronze, 60 x 50 x 45 cm

Opposite:
Payne, Malcolm John (b.1946)
Penumbra 1986
Silkscreen print on paper 69/100, 73.3 x 54.3 cm



The politics of collecting

The abstract rendering of ink brushstrokes in Neels Coetzee's *Study for 1986 Monument for the Tormented I* (1987), in comparison to the final bronze sculpture produced two years later, is a good example of the ways in which an artistic process can move from an abstract concept to concrete reality. The finished form of *1986 Monument for the Tormented* (1989), while certainly not as direct and contextual as documentary photographs of the time, is nonetheless more obvious than the preparatory drawing in its reference to imprisonment and freedom. The reference to the political violence of the mid-1980s is equally secluded in Malcolm Payne's *Penumbra* (1986), a collage-like accumulation of chains, gravestones and skeletons, all partially obscured shadows in half light. Payne's commentary is symbolic rather than narrative, and characteristic of a distinct period of artistic production in South Africa. Sue Williamson's seminal book, *Resistance Art in South Africa* (1989), highlights the extent to which some of South Africa's most important contemporary artists critically engaged social and political realities during the 1980s. However, during that period it was difficult for institutions associated with the state to collect art that was cognisant of or directly engaged in these social and political realities. Not surprisingly, holdings from this period are often consciously nostalgic meditations on land, sea and their respective bounty. The South African Reserve Bank's acquisition of the above works by Coetzee and Payne, in the immediate period following democratic elections in 1994, is an excellent example of the ways in which a collection might bravely address itself to the past for the sake of the future. **Rory Bester**



