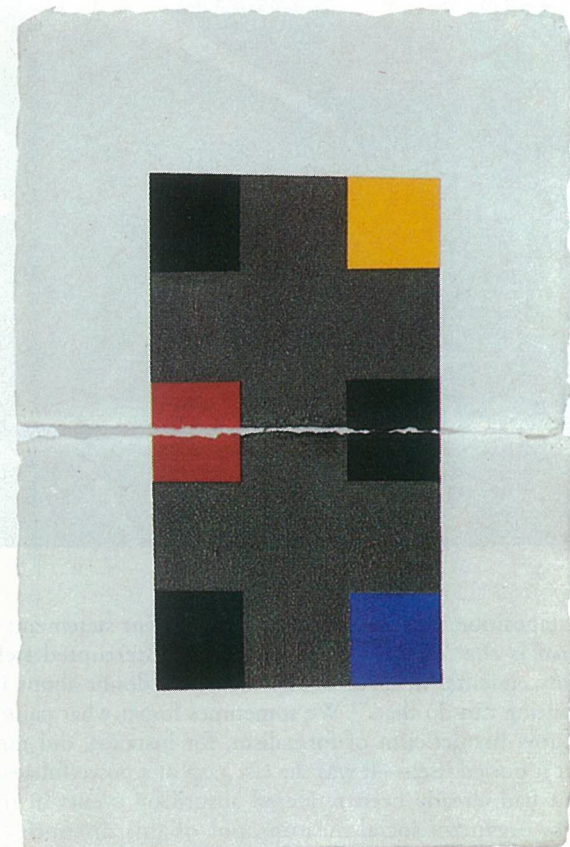


Untitled, 1989. Mixed media on paper.
All photographs courtesy Passages/Centre D'Art
Contemporain, Troyes, France.



Untitled, 1989. Mixed media on paper.

Bambury

CROSS

BY EWEN McDONALD

For Stephen Bambury, the cities Auckland, Melbourne and Sydney form a natural triangle: each has exhibited his paintings. Works take on different meanings in different contexts, so exhibiting in other places is informative. Each time the work is shown in a new setting, the artist learns more about it and there is the possibility of (in)forming a new audience. Exhibiting in New Zealand is a loaded situation for Bambury. The viewer there is able to place the work historically both within overall trends and within the artist's own oeuvre, and thereby develop notions of evolution. Bambury feels that this historical urge is false—of course, the work may develop from preceding efforts, but it may be neither necessary nor appropriate nor accurate for the viewer during this first experience. Bambury has decided to play with and challenge the fictions that accompany viewing. For Bambury, proof of this fiction has been in the challenge presented by exhibiting in unfamiliar places. Work that has roots in Auckland and resonates with New Zealand contemporary art is able to override these connections when exhibited in Melbourne and Sydney.

What is it about Bambury's painting that makes it chameleonlike? Each series presents new elements for consideration. Often, these are the results of being subjected to foreign influences while living and working outside one's home base. This was surely the case when Bambury was

artist-in-residence at Melbourne's Pahrn Art School, and also when he left to work in France last year as New Zealand's inaugural Moët and Chandon Fellow.

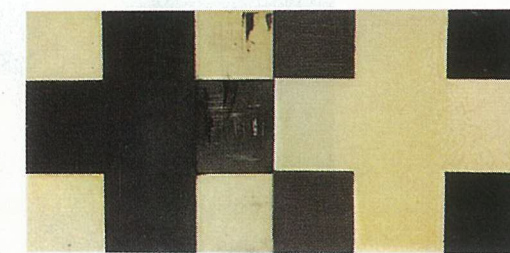
Bambury's paintings are not definitive statements. They are organic; they are about process—particularly, the artist's working method coupled with the idea of setting materials into malleable and changing relationships. Painting is about surrogation or deputization. For example, in the series *Reconsidering and Repositioning Mondrian* (exhibited at Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney, in 1989), Bambury alludes to the "handiwork" as much as the readily perceived formality of a Mondrian painting. Seeing Mondrian's work "in the flesh" was, for Bambury, a revelation, for what appears in reproduction to be machinelike and perfect turns out to be essentially "hand done" and gestural, in the guise of formalism. It is this interest in points of imbalance, the pivot, that overrides any formalist tendency in Bambury's painting. He does not believe in painting as "an autonomous object." Instead, it is through acts of painting, of gesture, and surrogation that forms of dialogue are put into play. As a position, the "this or that" dichotomy is rendered less polarized through postmodernism. States that draw closer together alleviate the necessity of absolute choice. Through Bambury's concern for the presentation of material, one learns about paradoxical and/or illusory states of substances. In the Mondrian paintings, the surface grid appears from a distance to be placed in front and on top of a swirling metallic pool. Yet up close, the realization is that the grid and bars are gouged into the silvery paint, thereby "imprisoned" rather than being suggestive of barriers to vision. This concave/convex paradox illustrates how Bambury's painting is able to be elusive, illusive, and allusive simultaneously.

Although not subscribing to the anathema of "Truth in Painting" or "Truth to Material," Bambury's works do draw upon those myths.

The predominance of silver, with tiny squares and lines of either primary colors and/or black, represents a retreat from color (and from more formalist concerns that characterized works from the early eighties, such as the *Area, Blocks, and Sites* series) and a deflection into light. The touch of color that reemerges now highlights and suggests the quasi-Mondrian reference. The use of the tondo and of smaller off-square aluminium plates recalls Cubist compositions. These dislocations are deliberately set up in the work. The paintings look like Bambury's work, in that they qualify as the shaped canvases that are his vocabulary, yet they recall something else as well. There is displacement within the exhibition, too, a further play by the artist to constantly challenge and disorient the viewer. By exhibiting disparate works together, Bambury is able to question notions of "central theme" and of easily identifiable authorship. Thus the exercise of showing remains essentially open but also demanding, for it requires effort from its viewers. Having exhibited for over ten years means that Bambury is able to play with his own history, and as his tondo series shows, he has come full circle. The artist is now ringmaster and, in the central "pivot position," is able to draw in from the circumference whatever has been previously scribed. Earlier concerns of duality are overlain

with a new dimensionality. He shows things coming together in a more haphazard, yet still contemplative, manner. This, suggests Stephen Bambury, comes from having been exposed to different places and different methods of working. Natural and cultural forces, the organic and the mechanical, are constantly set into play. Sometimes these are unlikely partners within the confines of a restrictive geometry, but it is this discomfort that creates the challenge between artist, viewer, and work.

Ewen McDonald is an artist and writer living in Sydney, Australia.



Elaborated from Two Fundamental Principles (diptych), 1989. Mixed media on aluminum, 17 x 34 cm (7 x 13 inches).