

Gretchen Albrecht

b.1943

Bachelor of Fine Arts: Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

Raw cotton canvas cut from a roll and laid on the studio floor. The white rectangle marking a space for action: like a dance floor or a boxing ring. At the ready, buckets of pigment in saturated solution. The artist leans forward, arm poised over whiteness.

Action. Paint in motion – poured, arcing through air, flowing across whiteness. Pigment seeping, staining the canvas weave. The first colour emblazoned on the whiteness of the canvas, a call demanding response. Another wash timed to meet the edge of the first while it is still wet.

Building colour chords. A deeper tone overlapping the last, but not fully. Some areas fill almost to black against white slits of untouched canvas. And so on, until these transparent traces of the painter's decisions accumulate in an image. An image which is somehow abstract and representational at the same time.

When Albrecht painted *Summer Landscape* in 1973, her practice combined an abstract painting method with a desire to evoke the natural world, in feeling if not description. Rather than depict what she saw, she wanted to express her response: in particular to the dramatic skies observed from Auckland's West Coast beaches.

But Albrecht also had an eye on New York. Her formal approach at this time was a personal take on the 'staining' technique that had been developed by the American Colour Field painters, such as Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler. In their work colour was foregrounded as painting's most optical and intrinsic quality. Following Jackson Pollock's radical example of the 1940s and '50s, the Colour Field painters not only worked on wall-sized canvases, they applied colour by spilling, pouring and dripping liquid paint. By working on unstretched canvas on the floor and by interrupting the age-old messages of hand, brush and surface, Pollock had found a way of working that offered new freedoms. "On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be 'in' the painting".¹

It was this freedom to be in the painting, as well as Albrecht's uncanny skill with 'flowing' colour on a large scale, that made her work from the 1970s so exciting and make it appear so fresh today. These are the works that established her reputation as a colourist.

Sensuous colour held in tension by formal rigour has been the hallmark of Albrecht's art for more than three decades. In the high-risk 'flowing' works from the 1970s (high-risk because the watercolour-like transparency of the paint meant she couldn't paint over the bits she didn't like, so every mark counted), when all the artist's intuitive moves come off – like a dancer's or boxer's – the resulting image can give you a kind of soaring feeling. That's what it means to say that Albrecht is a colourist.

Gerald Barnett

¹ There are some famous black and white photographs taken by Hans Namuth of Jackson Pollock paintings that demonstrate exactly what is being said here. You will find them in most books on Jackson Pollock or Abstract Expressionism.

Artist website:

www.gretchenalbrecht.com

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.papergraphica.co.nz

www.suecrockford.com

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Books:

Brownson, R. (2002). *Gretchen Albrecht Illuminations*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki/Godwit Press.

YouTube search:

Jackson Pollock painting

Web search:

Helen Frankenthaler

Morris Louis

Hans Namuth

Jackson Pollock



Gretchen Albrecht | *Summer Landscape* | 1973 | Acrylic on canvas | 880x1825mm