

“...the painting might be ‘thought’ as a site where a series of ostensibly antagonistic and/or oppositional states play out within the compressed proximity of the canvas. Following this, the *mise-en-scène* of R.F. — *of his painting* — frames and makes visible the canvas as an impossibly flawed container, whose employment attempts delimitation, but in that same breath resists delimitation by suggesting all that is uncontainable and in excess of that same canvas. These are things that can’t possibly be depicted or accurately mapped but are never-the-less dragged into propinquity. For R.F. the painting becomes a site of potential capacity and a locus for gravitational forces, a site that draws things in and holds them in an elliptical trajectory around that void...”ⁱ

– Anthony Cribb, *Black Holes, Paintings, and Other Catastrophes*

A black hole is created when a star collapses in on itself due to the force of its own gravity. Once you cross over the edge of a black hole, the event horizon, there is no way back. They devour matter into its smallest subatomic components and compress it into a singularity – an infinitely dense point where space, time and the laws of physics no longer apply. They remain mysterious, yet we know they are at the centre of almost every large galaxy, including our own. Because black holes are invisible, they are observed through their impacts on nearby matter. Beyond warping space and time, supermassive black holes can also produce quasars, jets of particles which are emitted from them. Black holes were largely unknown until the early Twentieth Century, in partial parallel with the emergence of abstraction in Modern Art.

Writer Anthony Cribb appears to liken artist Robbie Fraser’s paintings to black holes, drawing concepts, references and associations towards them and holding them in orbit. In contrast or contradiction, perhaps Cribb’s metaphor also frames Fraser’s paintings as orbiting the voids of singular prescriptive meaning or total meaninglessness, yet avoids being swallowed up by either.

Fraser (Ngati Porou ki Hauraki) is immersed in a focused and at times feverish exploration of the poetic and conceptual potential of hard-edged geometric abstraction. He energises this artistic legacy with contemporary flair, unusual use of colour, meticulous attention to craft, and offbeat, playful titles. According to Fraser, recurrent themes in his practice include: things that look and sound like other things, painting as object, colour and its extracurricular activities, the accidentally-on-purpose, repetition and recidivism, and the relationship between attitude, rectitude and exactitude.

Fraser references the visual structures of geometric abstraction, but is not necessarily concerned with ideals of Minimalism or thoughts on Modernity.ⁱⁱ He asserts that “geometry suggests stability to us, a concrete idea that cannot be subverted. Angles and lines keep each other in check...”ⁱⁱⁱ Yet his forms also shapeshift optically, hovering between two and three dimensions in an interplay which evokes associations as diverse as 1960’s Op Art, Futurist aesthetics and Te Ao Māori, but Fraser chooses not to foreground any main influence, preferring a more even-handed approach. After all, things have the habit of looking like other things. While Fraser retains a visual similarity to certain previous modes of abstract art, his work operates in a parallel space perhaps best described by what it is not. Visually accessible yet conceptually oblique, his paintings revel in their associative potential.

Fraser’s titles often suggest relationships with the visual language of each painting, yet complicate and open up their potential interpretations and problematise any claim to ‘pure’ abstraction. His apparent adherence to a certain strain of Modernist aesthetics – and the

divergent ideologies these have been put to – is unraveled through titles which reference things in the world. He notes: “...irony can be perceived...in the use of titles as a device to throw the audience off the scent”.^{iv} Interpreting the work though the connotations of the title becomes a kind of game in which the viewer’s attempts to ‘pin it down’ are consistently thwarted by an object which remains elusive, allusive and illusive.

Focus Fever takes its name from a painting in the show, the artist’s first solo exhibition with Two Rooms. Other titles in the exhibition include *Solar Allergy*, *Premonition (Heaven’s Blades)*, *Failing Containment* and *Charm of the Manipulator*. Here the artist can be considered as playing an unreliable narrator – a charming manipulator indeed. If Fraser’s canvases and their names can be seen as black (w)holes, what does it mean to be sucked in?

In these contexts, Fraser’s title *Failing Containment* (2023) may allude to a contemporary condition which Cribb speaks to: perhaps paintings can only ever gesture towards the uncontainable and unfolding expanse of the universe which always exceeds the canvas, that “impossibly flawed container”. Here painting points towards its own limits while paradoxically attempting to venture beyond them.

Painting across space-time, Fraser’s work navigates the poetics and pitfalls of making meaning through abstraction, alongside converse attempts to avoid it. Yet his explorations skirt the event horizon, appearing to maintain a safe distance from the black holes of didacticism, meaninglessness and the end-games of Zombie Formalism. According to Cribb, Fraser can be seen as a “practitioner of practiced distance, a glacial remoteness held in extreme proximity, an awareness of the game but a reluctance to participate.”^v In keeping, Fraser’s contribution to histories of geometric abstraction in Aotearoa is, in part, to gamify them – rewriting ‘rules’ and playing with these legacies on his own terms.

– Emil McAvoy, October 2023

Robbie Fraser graduated with a Master of Visual Arts degree (First Class Honours) from Auckland University of Technology in 2013, and was a founding member of FERARI, an artist run space in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland (2012-14). His recent exhibition highlights include *Selected Works* at Northart (2023), *SNO 146* at Sydney Non Objective (2018), *Rematerialised* (curated by Noel Ivanoff) at DEMO (2017), *Painting: A Transitive Space* (curated by Simon McIntyre) at St Paul Street Gallery (2016), and *A Standard of Measurement* (with Hugo Koha Lindsay) at Papakura Art Gallery (2016). Fraser appeared in Two Rooms’ recent group exhibition *Core Sample* (2023). *Focus Fever* is the artist’s first solo exhibition with the gallery.

ⁱ Anthony Cribb, “Black Holes, Paintings, and Other Catastrophes,” published in association with Robbie Fraser’s exhibition *A Fridge Full of Condiments* (Auckland: RM Gallery and Project Space, 2014), 7.

ⁱⁱ Robbie Fraser, “Blank Expression: An Exploration of Transitory Values in Painting” (Master of Art and Design dissertation, Auckland University of Technology, 2012), 14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fraser, “Blank Expression,” 16.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Cribb, 3. Cribb cites Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).