

## INTERFERENCE PAINT

Dii Moffat

### INTRODUCTION

I am a painter, a colourist and a maker of lyrical and semi-mathematical shapes on flat surfaces. Currently, my work is painstaking. It is through my chosen processes that I convey a certain lightness of expression, which I realise is paradoxical, but that's how it works for me. The most important thing I learned at school is the importance of hard work and slogging on. There are so many times when making work that you wonder why the hell you ever thought you could be an artist, but things either resolve themselves and/or you learn from your attempts.

### THE WORK – PRACTICAL ASPECTS

My work is conducted by gluing crumpled aluminium foil onto a canvas, 'embossing' lines into the foil with blunt tools of various types and then painting on the foil.

I use a wide variety of acrylic paints, some of which are new products which produce effects that go beyond a 'flat' effect. Some of these paints have become available only in recent times (such as aluminium-based, interference and beaded-medium paints), although similar effects could be obtained using expensive foils and metallic glazes. These materials allow a type of optical dimensionality to be expressed, in my case in a series of paintings with a determinedly flat effect on a textured base. I work using these 'new' paints. Their properties include transparency, reflection and refraction. Learning how to utilise the new media within my developing practice has been both challenging and invigorating, requiring fresh judgements as to their suitability and how they fit in with my personal taste.

Painters use different materials and layers to express depth of surface and shadows and perspectival devices to show depth of field. The new materials I use achieve these effects in a different way. Differential colouring allowed our ancestors to distinguish between possible foods and poisons. Colours enrich our understanding of the lived-in landscape in ways that simply keep us alive and also add a level of appreciation which we understand as beauty.



Figure 1. Dii Moffat in studio.

### Other paints and effects

My paintings have to do with layering. With ordinary paint, there is a limit to how far from the physical canvas dimensionality be expressed, unless the artist does something clever with optical illusions or constructs three-dimensional bases. While I am using textured canvases as a base, I want to be able to bring that 'something more' to the painterliness of the surfaces.

The first new material I tried was aluminium paint. At first I chose to use it because of the intensity of colour. You can buy the base and tint it to obtain a better range of colours than are commercially available. It needs to be well sealed to avoid oxidation over time. Aluminium paint adds a dimensionality to paintings without the need to be illustrative.

Glass-bead textured gel gives a similar dimensional effect on a different scale. Originally used to produce glow-in-the-dark effects for road signs, this product is commercially available. This substance requires specific lighting conditions to be seen to full effect, but adds a slight glimmer even in low lighting. The beads are transparent, bringing tiny colour areas forward.

### Interference paint

While interference paints can be mixed with coloured acrylics, I choose to use them as a wash. There was a need to conduct experiments with these products, as the effect of these paints is strikingly different over different painted surfaces. They add their own story to flat paint colours and pull the surface toward the viewer. Interference paints change in their colour effect depending on the viewing angle, especially on a textured surface. The effect is the result of the use of pulverised mica with thin layers of various metals. Golden Paints also use iron oxide.

According to the Golden Paint Company, "The property at work in the Interference Colors is known as light interference, most commonly seen in the rainbow effect created by a thin layer of oil on the surface of water. Thomas Young identified this phenomenon in 1801 in a series of investigations that were eventually instrumental in advancing the theory for the wave-like nature of light. Whenever light strikes a boundary between two materials of different densities, the light will either be reflected or refracted. If the refracted light encounters yet another boundary between materials of different densities, this light will again either be reflected or refracted. This process continues every time a new phase is encountered."<sup>1</sup>

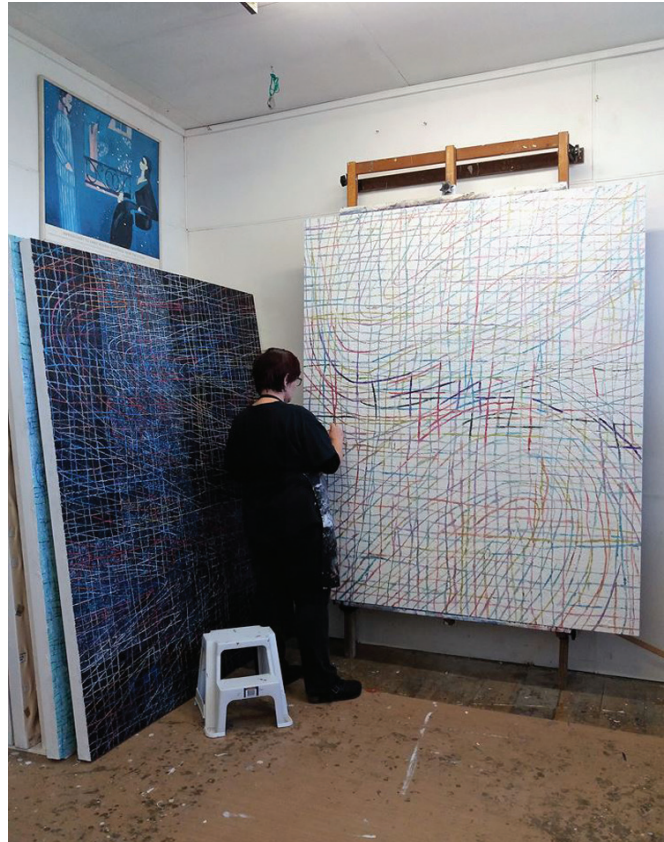


Figure 2. Dii Moffat in studio.

## Metal paints

Many companies make paints with a metal look. Gold and silver leaf, where the precious metals are beaten to form an extremely fine layer, have been used in paintings for centuries and were, of course, extremely expensive. Modern paint manufacturers such as Golden Paints use varieties of mica and metallic flakes ground to a variety of sizes in their products. Pearlised paints are in the same family, but have a different appearance. Many companies make pearlised paint, but they all look different, so experimentation is needed in order to get the desired result.

## THE WORK – PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS

The work I create interrogates the various aspects of what Timothy Morton calls “hyperobjects” – “objects which have a vitality to them, but you can’t touch them, like race or class, or climate change.”<sup>2</sup> Natural forces such as tectonic movement may also be seen as hyperobjects.

My paintings use a sort of grid. The grid as an element embodying direction and movement is implicit in my work, in a way that the use of an alternative term such as net, nexus or matrix might illustrate better: “The grid announces modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse – the grid declares the *modernity of modern art*.” (Rosalind Krauss)<sup>3</sup>

The grid fits well in many painters’ consciousness as a framework for thinking, generating differing expressions and understandings of the device. It can take a multiplicity of forms and individual expressions, especially when colour is involved – or, conversely, not involved – as a reflection of the individual’s thoughts and feelings.

I aspire to make grids that do not turn their backs on nature, as nature is an important theme in much of my work in this time of climate change. Grids exist in nature, but are *acted on* by any number of forces and disruptions. Krauss’s grids are mathematical abstractions, but grids are found throughout nature and human endeavour. While one can choose to ignore one or the other; to do so is to make an artificial distinction. At base, everything is mathematical including nature.

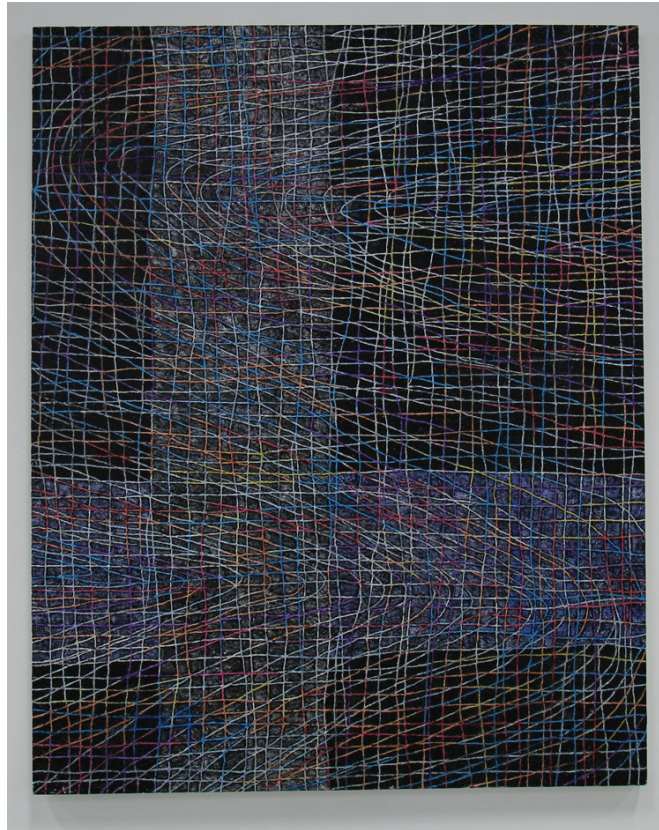


Figure 3. Dii Moffat, *Night Time in the City in the time of the Hyperobject*.  
Nexus Exhibition 2019.



I choose to challenge the straightness of the line and the uniformity and mathematical precision of the grid. As much as we would like to convince ourselves of the mathematical perfection of our lines and our grids, there are always imperfections in their manufacture, as well as elements of the unexpected which are a part of the nature of reality. The Christchurch earthquakes taught me this. I don't think this is either a good or a bad thing – but I do think it is something that is overlooked in our desire to see things as perfect simulacra of our imagining.

Agnes Martin saw this point clearly: “The minimalists clear their minds of their personal problems ... they don't even leave *themselves* there! They prefer being absolutely pure, which is a very valid expression of involvement with reality. But I just can't. I rather regretted that I wasn't really a minimalist. It's possible to regret that you're not something else. You see, my paintings are not cool!”<sup>4</sup>

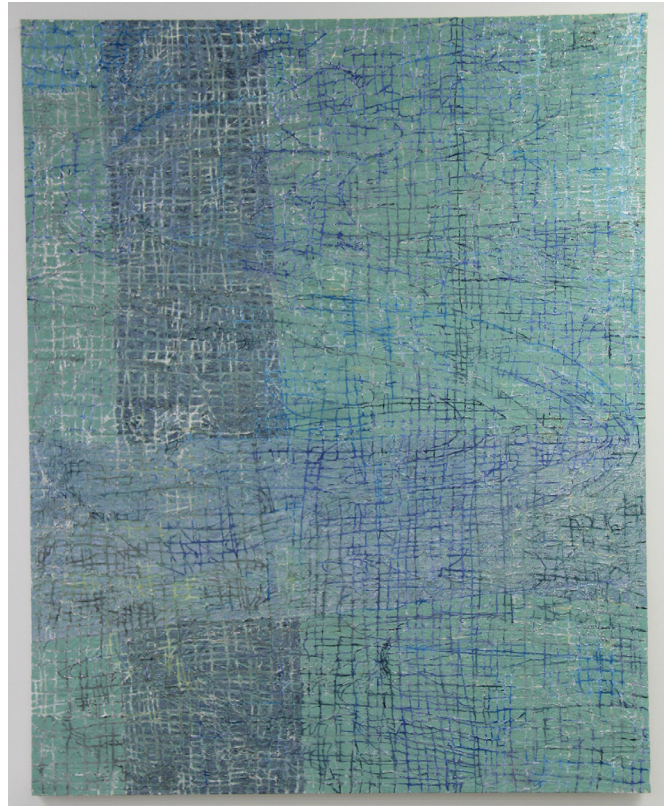


Figure 4. Dii Moffat, *Ocean Moves*. Nexus Exhibition 2019.

The grid can be an organising principle, but can also be a place from which to launch further thinking. It asks the question – what lies beyond the artist's way of seeing and thinking? Having a place to start from is good. Having a place to go to is better.

A mesh consists of links and of gaps between the links. These links and gaps are what enable causality to happen... The meshwork that each object demonstrates is common to less perforated sets of links and less regular ones too. It is precisely the gaps between and within things that enable entities to grip them, like the syncromesh in the manual transmission system of a car: *Mesh* means the threads and the holes between the threads.<sup>5</sup>

Woven fabric is usually composed of a (warp and weft) grid. The grid formed in fabric and other forms of work that feature fabric informs my work, both overtly and subconsciously. This has, over time and influenced by my reading, led to an understanding of the metaphorical power of the grid and complicating factors involving colour.

Assessing the elements of a painted work in terms of its constituent elements, American artist Jack Whitten spoke about an experimental method of creation. I am interested in his ideas about seeing a painting as the sum of its parts, in a way that also focusses on its individual elements as semi-atomic elements. He argues that the makeup

of an individual artwork is hugely nuanced – something worthy of more than a glancing interest. The spaces between the grid lines are a secondary focus which draws the viewer in and enriches the works, adding depth, colour and texture to the viewing process. As a mosaic, Whitten's grids utilise both the positive and negative spaces created as positive forces. Whitten's grid format has nothing to do with minimalism – if anything it is a sort of inclusive maximalism. He wants to express everything he can about his subjects and the spaces they inhabit.

Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama's work is based on similar principles: "Kusama's gestures are unpretentious and repetitive, without relinquishing their individuality; yet, collectively, they build and generate energy latent in the material paint and capture (remember, these are nets) light. *The Infinity Nets* shift from pictorialism, in which a painting suggests a vicarious experience, to a more direct perceptual experience. This process draws the infinite into the imminent."<sup>6</sup>

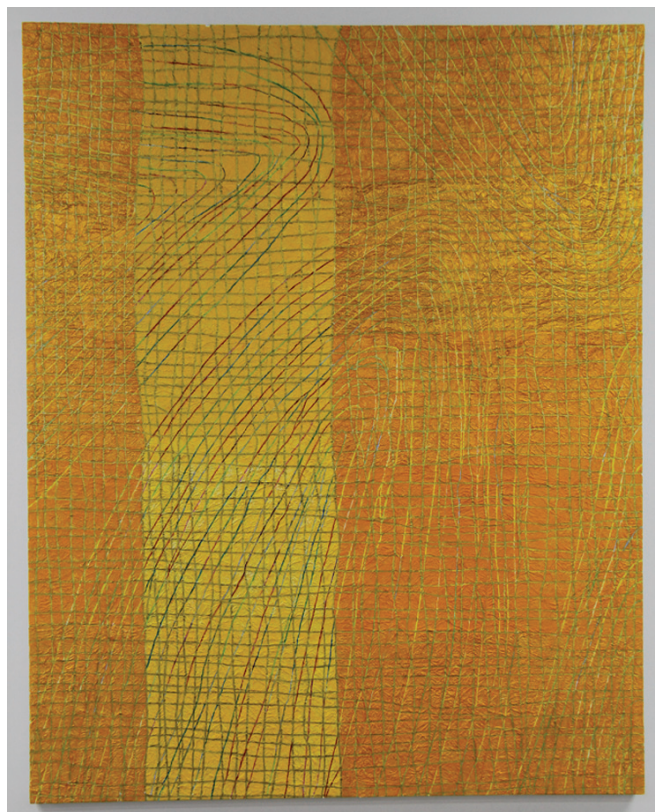


Figure 5. Dii Moffat, *Big Yellow*. Nexus Exhibition 2019.

The grid is just one of many possible structures within an artistic language, and colour further informs our understanding of what the artist is expressing within that structure. All grids are not created equal – if indeed the artist considers the form being utilised to be a grid. It may be a net, a mapping system, a mosaic or any number of forms that form a grid-like structure. Our works arise from our learnings and experiences. Although I initially adopted the grid from my experience of working with fabric, its use has expanded into a general frame of reference. As time goes on, the grid varies in form and now seems to be receding to some degree. What is happening with the colours within the lines becomes of increasing interest to me. The grid structure in my work is ambivalent and ambiguous – it can be used for any number of purposes.

The effects produced by colour and paint generate both emotive and dimensional meanings which go beyond purely categorical definitions. For Rosalind Krauss, the grid was impervious to change. A circle is impervious to change only in that it is always circular – but it can represent any number of different things, from a sunflower to an atom. The grid is part of an artist's vocabulary – it is the way it is used and manipulated that gives it a specific meaning. It is open to a multitude of interpretations, which makes it a useful structure on which to base a practice. The grid can always be undone and pushed in new directions. We live in a time of climatic uncertainty. My own experience of the Christchurch earthquakes has made me aware of the uncertainty of stability, as can be seen in the dialogue between movement and stability in my work. In this context, colour provides both dimensionality and emotion.

My paintings currently follow a sort of pattern which comprises the 'forces,' the 'grid' and the 'crossing bars.' As I continue, I push these elements around and add other structures. Some paintings are based on specific events or bodies of thought, while some are meditations on abstract concepts. I intend them all to have a level of complexity that will attract and to reward the viewer's continued attention. I have finally arrived at a place where I have discovered a form of painting which is allowing me to learn and grow and sustain an ongoing interest – and this is a great delight.



Figure 6. Dii Moffat, *Earth Moves Red*. Nexus Exhibition 2019.

**Dii Moffatt** recently obtained her Master in Fine Arts at the respectable age of 57, having first attended Dunedin School of Art in the 1980s. A great deal has changed in that time. There is a stronger focus on intellectual rigour, which I feel is a damn good thing.

(Photographs from 'Nexus' Exhibition, by Pam McKinlay)

- 1 Golden Artist Colors, *Product Information Sheet: Interference And Iridescent Acrylics*, [https://www.goldenpaints.com/technicalinfo\\_indint](https://www.goldenpaints.com/technicalinfo_indint) (accessed 16 October 2018).
- 2 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 130.
- 3 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, 9 (Summer 1979), 50-64.
- 4 John Gruen, "'What We Make, is What We Feel': Agnes Martin on her Meditative Practice, in 1976," *ARTnews*, 31 July 2015, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/07/31/what-we-make-is-what-we-feel-agnes-martin-on-her-meditative-practice-in-1976/> (accessed 18 June 2018).
- 5 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 83.
- 6 James Romaine, "Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Nets: Sublime or Spectacle?," *Comment*, 5 June 2009, <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/yayoi-kusamas-infinity-nets-sublime-or-spectacle/> (accessed 25 November 2018).