

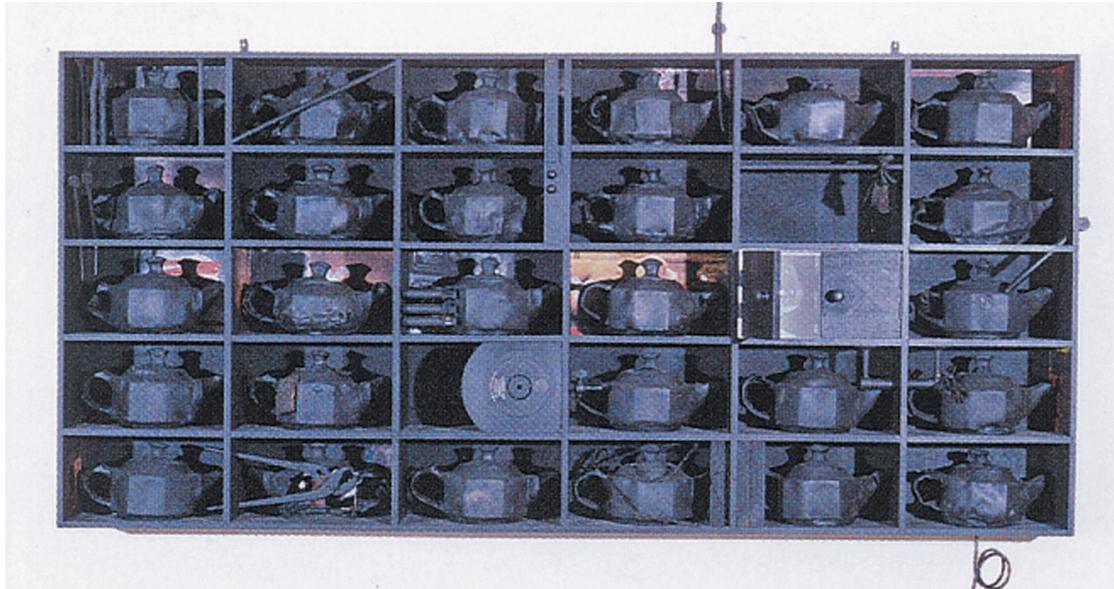
Abstraction, in any of its multitudinous forms continues to perplex those who anticipate seeing something that they recognise in an artwork, particularly in those artworks traditionally described as a painting or a drawing. Paradoxically, if abstraction is indeed art about *nothing recognisable*, how is it that many artists have succeeded so brilliantly in using abstraction to actually say *something* that transcends both figuration & the world of the real? For example, Robert Motherwell (one of Teschendorff's admired artists), pursued an enduring engagement with tragedy in our time in his series of images *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*. Beginning in 1945 & continuing into the 1990s this amazing series passionately interrogated the artist's interest in pictorial language, in symbolist literature, particularly Spanish literature & poetry, in music & in modernism as an intellectual/philosophic construct. American academic & author, Jack Flam (1) talks about the nexus between the complexity of the images and the application of a 'relatively fixed vocabulary of what [...] remain relatively simple, basic forms'

'The Elegy paintings, though not necessarily concerned directly with the Spanish Republic, are nonetheless always elegiac in tone & tragic in feeling, and convey what [the artist] has often characterised as a particularly 'Spanish' range of emotion, the tragic sense of pride & passion suggested in *cante jondo*, in the spectacle of the *corrida* and in the notion of *duende*. [...] they also involve a complex system of allusions...they refer, in a very evocative way to numerous forms in the real world, and they also make powerful, though indirect, literary allusions'. (2)

Flam's use of '*allusion*' in the interpretation of the Motherwell paintings eloquently describes the way an artist evokes a personal series of emotional associations. In 1949, whilst deeply immersed in the works of Federico Garcia Lorca, Motherwell painted '*At five in the Afternoon*' (the title is a refrain from Lorca's poem *Llanto por Ignacio Sanchez Mejia*). 'The painting was meant neither as an illustration of the Lorca poem, nor as a visual equivalent to it. But by referring to the poem in the title of the painting [he] has evoked a whole network of allusions that enrich our viewing of the painting – by connecting specifically to the emotional tissue of the poem and by bringing to the fore specific qualities inherent in the painting. [...] it is possible to *decode* this painting in ways that go beyond the conscious way that the forms of the painting were originally *encoded*. And in fact, by giving the painting such an allusive title [he] has to some degree begun the process of *decoding* himself. Any system of allusions is, among other things, an aid to decoding, or the indication of a direction in which the decoding can proceed.' (3)

Understanding something of the way Flam defines how allusions and codes operate is useful when approaching Teschendorff's involvement with his *History of Ideas*, for as an artist he is known for a singular aversion to talking about his work & its meanings. In 1983, thirty years after Motherwell painted '*At five in the Afternoon*', a world apart, and still seventeen years before the *History of Ideas Series I*, Teschendorff exhibited *Elegy for a Suburban Mother I* (1981/82) in Melbourne. Using serried rows of black

domestic objects he alludes to darker personal spaces, to tragedy real & imagined, hidden beneath the familiar & essentially self-satisfied veneers of suburban tranquillity at that time.



Elegy for a Suburban Mother I Melbourne 1982 82 x 170 x 13.5 cm
Wood Porcelain Found Objects Collage Oil Acrylic & Enamel
Art Gallery of Western Australia

‘The *Elegy* series was important for me, both in the time that it was made (the early 1980’s) and in the things that were spoken about, things associated with the past, and, as with my suburban stuff, it always emerged as grey/black. I often thought that the dark space of the thing defined itself before I actually knew what was going to be in it...*Elegy I* was a considered attempt by a male artist to describe the condition of the suburban mother. [...] I have always hoped that there were enough clues in the title and in the work itself, to enable interested viewers to *read* a story of their own making’ (4)

Whilst Teschendorff’s *Elegy* series and the associated *Still Life* series are now recognised as an important part of a defining moment in the development of contemporary Australian ceramics (5), the technical & structural requirements of assemblage became problematic for him, & were eventually rejected in 1985 in favour of working more directly with surface, with drawing & with paint. (6)

‘It is interesting to see that these first drawings (*Tales of Life & Death* 1991-1994) were all grey/black...I also began the first *History of Ideas* in 1992, also black. There is increasingly less of the symbolical/identifiable (figurative) use of the domestic object in the *History*, but in many ways the works are as redolent with the matter of the domestic as before. In fact, the abstracted image & surface talks more eloquently of this hidden/heroic space than the earlier narratives that were concerned more with the allegorical realities within the space, and of the space itself’ (7)

In late 2002 Teschendorff made the first drawings for his *History of Ideas Series III*. Whilst the increasingly fundamentalist political tensions between east & west, & their associated atrocities during the first few years of the new millennium made real Susan Sontag's observation that *one can no longer talk about war without talking about the presentation of war* (8) Teschendorff set about describing the matter of conflict, the presentation of war, without the visual specificities, without the essential real time images of conflict or atrocity. Allowing the viewer to *decode* an allusive image without the necessity to engage what Canadian academic Sharon Sliwinski describes as a '*psychic dilemma* [where] the spectator as a witness, as in psychic crisis, and as defending against traumatic perception – may allow for an important reconsideration of the relationship between ethics & aesthetics. One might say that regarding atrocity photographs entails a crisis of witnessing made from the very reception of the traumatic information presented in the image. Each new image demands a fresh mourning for the lost ideals of humanity. (9)



A Darkness at Noon with Four Red Boxes (another job for Daniel Libeskind) Fremantle 2003
Charcoal Graphite Chalk Acrylic & Wax on Arches Paper Two panels 107 x 216 cm overall
Private Collection Melbourne

An early work from the third series, *A Darkness at Noon* (2003) began as a reflection on Arthur Koestler's 1940 political novel. The four red boxes in the title (and in the drawing) refer to Rubashov's confessional discourse on the political themes of totalitarianism, socialism, communism & individualism. But observing the frenzied aftermath to the 9/11 attacks, Teschendorff was compelled to rework the drawing to attempt to contextualise the enormity of what had then become *the* media/political/religious event of the decade. The Koestler setting remained, & was joined by the dark cavernous spaces of Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, the subtitle alluding to further work for this ubiquitous artist/architect at the now mythologised ground zero. Apart from an oblique reference to two towers (one standing one not) in the lower right, the work is darkly abstract, darkly allegorical. Does Teschendorff believe, as Motherwell & others before him, that for many western artists, black is death & white is life? If so, it is possible to be overwhelmed by the dramatic weight

of Libeskind's presence, with the laboured darkness of holocaust, balanced in some strange way by the calculated humiliations of September 11. But, spend time with this drawing & the darkness slowly retreats, the luminosity of the human spirit begins to reassert itself; perhaps to leave behind, at least until the next time, that noxious amalgam of government, religion & media, the site of fundamentalist rhetoric & of imperialist agendas.

A second large drawing from this series is exhibited in Remnants 2017. *From the New World* (2004) (Cat 8) uses a geometry evocative of Hagia Sophia & Glastonbury Cathedral as opposing elements in a problematic new world order. Whilst a more recent drawing, the 2014 triptych *Tonsberg Saga August 2001* (Cat 39) revisits the sorry Tampa incident interrogated by the artist in Series VI...now forever a mark of shame in recent Australian history. The placement of an immense steel wall rising from an ominous black sea off an alien shore may suggest an immovable xenophobic presence in our national psyche

The artist's resolve to remain in this difficult intellectual space is confirmed by the density of the larger images on canvas. Whilst there is a luminous material intensity in the depth of surface due to the way the artist builds layer upon layer of paint & wax, often concealing complex drawings, detail, colour & text, the potential to seduce the viewer is offset by an embedded lack of resolution; a paradox between making & meaning that encourages interpretive decoding of his essentially simple, repetitive symbols. For submerged beneath these seductive abstracted surfaces is an interrogation of conflict, war, religious bigotry, democratic process and guilt; even death, torture & terror. In this sense, his use of title is a beginning of the artist's need to constantly decode his own imagery, as well as offering the viewer a starting point somewhere outside reality.

'The ineffable quality of the truly effective symbol is a function of its complexity, in the sense of presenting virtually limitless possibilities for decoding – the symbol(s) must offer more possibilities for decoding than could possibly have been consciously encoded in it.(10)

The most recent works continue to show evidence of the artist's ability to explore intense & personal responses to contemporary events and spaces...intensity of engagement actually determines the resultant materiality of surface & image. The 2013 Barcelona residency begins in the murky black depths of a *Garden of Earthly Delights* (2013) (Cat 24) and ends with an uncharacteristically luminous attack of geometric abstraction in the *Barcelona Drawings* (2014) (Cat 27-30). The time spent in Skagastrond Northern Iceland remains in a darkly ethereal space, (Cat 31-38) no limitless sky and azure glacial brilliance here...rather the landscape is rendered static, dimmed by its histories of disaster & desolation. A belief that Iceland's future will be measured by the ability of its leaders to prevent the destruction of a unique landscape by controlling in some way the tourist hordes traveling north is reflected in the more optimistic *Reykjavik* series (Cat 47-50)

There is something in these later works that seeks to reclaim a measure of humanity from the calculated horror & depravity of twenty-first century conflict. They are timely; at once nervously self-seeking yet redolent with optimism, quietude and doubt. *Tiergarten Derive Berlin (have we been this way before?)* (2017) (Cat 51) is in this space of paradox, perhaps revealing the artist's belief in an eventual future, not now, perhaps not soon, but hopefully free from the singular & conjoint threat of self-righteous coalitions of the willing their avaricious commercial partners..

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Endnotes

- (1) Jack Flam *Motherwell* 1991 Phaidon Press Oxford p21
Flam, formerly Professor of Art History at Brooklyn College NY was a close friend of Motherwell, & became, (in 1979) co-editor of *Documents of Modern Art* a series begun by Motherwell in 1944.
- (2) Ibid p21
- (3) Ibid p22
- (4) Artist Interview #1 John Teschendorff in Annette Seeman *The Domestic Muse & the Unheroic Object* 2005 Unpublished MFA Thesis Graduate Research School UWA p63
See Bell (Australia) Lane (UK) Zamorano-Vivas (Spain) Anderson (Australia) Cochran (Australia) Pasco (Australia/Italy) Borrman (Germany) Hood (Australia/USA) Young (Australia) et al for more detail of Teschendorff's practice during 1970-1985
- (5) Artist Interview #1/Teschendorff in Annette Seeman p65
- (6) Ibid p65
- (7) See Susan Sontag *Regarding the Pain of Others* 2003 Farrar Straus & Giroux NY
- (8) Sharon Sliwinski *Camera War; Again* in Suhail Malik (Ed) *Journal of Visual Culture* Vol 5 Number 1 April 2006 Sage Publications London & New York p91
- (9) Jack Flam *Motherwell* 1991 Phaidon Press Oxford

An earlier version of this essay was first published in *John Teschendorff History of Ideas Series IV* Galerie Dusseldorf & CU School of Art (2007) ISBN 978 0 9803584 0 7