

Simon Degroot  
**CONSTRUCTIVE**

Caboolture Regional Art Gallery  
22 February - 2 May 2020



Simon Degroot, *Cove Dupont* 2014.  
Oil on canvas. 189 x 260cm.  
Moreton Bay Regional Council  
Collection

## Simon Degroot: The Aesthetics of Translation

Hamish Sawyer

The Australian artist Ian Burn was living in New York in 1968 when he made *Systematically altered photographs* <sup>(1)</sup>. The work comprises a series of government promotional images of Australian life, contrasted against the same images, repeatedly photocopied to the point of deterioration, leaving only a matrix of dots. By removing the images from their original context and altering them through a process of mechanical reproduction, Burn demonstrated how meaning is both contingent and changeable.

Burn's deconstructive approach to image-making is useful in considering the practice of Simon Degroot. The Brisbane-based artist's abstract forms are similarly taken from other contexts, and subjected to a process of translation, whereby they are changed but still retain enough qualities of the original to be familiar. The altered shapes are afforded new agency in Degroot's paintings, collages and sculptural works.

One work in particular, *Flat Monuments Context Inventory* (2019), acknowledges Burn's legacy as well as the architectural forms that are an important source material for Degroot. The work is a composite made

by photocopying images of architectural forms on top of one another to the point of obliteration, effectively a reversal of *Systematically altered photographs'* image degradation.

Although modest in scale and a relative outlier in Degroot's practice, *Flat Monuments Context Inventory* provides a valuable insight into the artist's approach to image making. It also contextualises more typical works, such as *Cove Dupont* (2014), a painting made up of geometric shapes overlaid on one another against a white background. Some of the painted forms are opaque, while others allow for the silhouettes of the shapes beneath them to be visible.

*Cove Dupont* represents one outcome of the artist's process-driven practice, which also encompasses collage, sculpture and large-scale murals. The starting point for Degroot is always his notebooks, in which he draws shapes observed from the built environment and visual culture. These shapes are then converted into digital files and manipulated using imaging software. The resulting compositions of colour and form are further translated into paintings on canvas or paper collages, sometimes both.

Degroot's translation of shapes from one context to another creates new meaning:

"I am interested in painted flat shapes that are decontextualised from their source in a process of abstraction. I am interested in how these shapes are represented in contemporary visual environments and how they have been used and reused in art history."<sup>(2)</sup>

In paintings such as *White and Blue Flat Lay* (2017), Degroot emphasises his modified forms by spacing them out and using a restricted colour palette. Aesthetically, the work recalls the celebrated cut-outs of Henri Matisse, in which the French artist would cut out and paste down pieces of paper painted with gouache to create lively compositions of figures and shapes. These late, experimental works by Matisse are icons of modernist art and a conscious reference for Degroot. The artists' shared visual language is so recognisable in part due to the circulation of images within contemporary visual culture, facilitated by the internet.

In addition to painting and collage, Degroot has previously fabricated his coloured shapes in acrylic to create objects that extend his exploration of forms into three dimensions. A new sculptural work, produced in clear acrylic, echoes the composition of *White and Blue Flat Lay*. Displayed on a low plinth, *Clear Typologies* (2020), establishes a dialogue between different iterations of Degroot's project. In spite of their formal similarities, the artist is interested in the slippages that occur when translating his forms from one media to another:

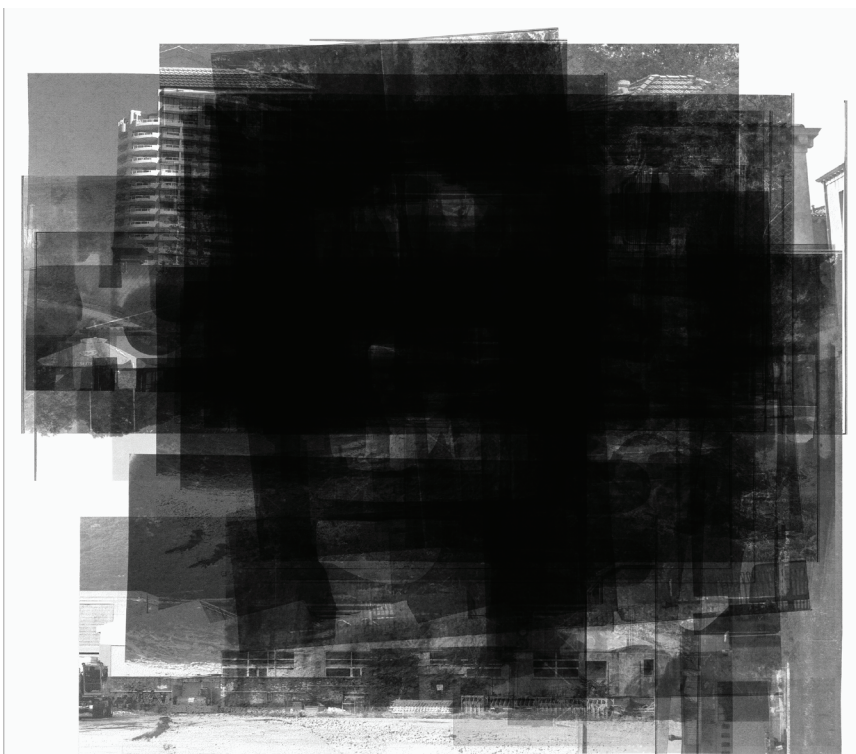
"The abstract shapes in my work undergo a material or physical change, as they are adapted for different types of interactions; for example, between

the optics of the computer screen and the tactility of paint"<sup>(3)</sup>

While studying at art school, Degroot worked for a commercial offset printing company, where he learnt about the mechanical process of image reproduction, as well as mixing ink and colour matching. These practical skills have informed Degroot's interest in the relationship between technology and painting. *Picture Building* (2016) is a painting about the printing process. Translucent layers of coloured paint build up towards a black foreground, mimicking the CMYK printing method. *Picture Building* also resonates with art historical precedents such as the stain paintings of American artist Morris Louis, underlining the self-reflexive nature of contemporary abstraction.

*Picture Building's* atmospheric and layered brushwork represents the other main trajectory of Degroot's painting practice over the past seven years, alongside the flatly painted forms of works such as *Cove Dupont*. There is one notable exception to these consistent, parallel approaches. In a series of small figurative paintings from 2017, Degroot adopts iconography that simultaneously resonates with art history and contemporary life. *Daisies Decorate* (2017) for example, riffs on Andy Warhol's flower silkscreens, but Degroot's simple, naïve rendering makes it accessible to a general audience. Art historian Jess Berry has noted that these works illustrate the role of technology in disseminating and understanding images:

"...how an image or symbol can start off in one context and find its way into the minds of millions through the translation of digital culture"<sup>(4)</sup>



Simon Degroot. *Flat Monuments Context Inventory*, 2019. Overprinted photocopy, ed 1/5. 33.5 x 28.5cm. Courtesy of the artist and Jan Manton Art, Brisbane.

In spite of their aesthetic difference, these works can be read as part of Degroot's oeuvre through their translation of legible forms from a variety of contexts. They also reflect Degroot's interest in the 'messiness of painting' <sup>(5)</sup>; the medium's adaptability and openness to external forces, such as the advent of digital technology. Another work from the series, *Doodad Smile* (2017) is dominated by the smiley face emoji, so ubiquitous on social media that it now regularly appears in fashion, advertising and indeed, art.

Given his expanded concept of painting, it is unsurprising that Degroot has completed a significant number of large-scale mural works. While sharing a similar approach to his studio-based practice, these works are also determined to an extent by their site-specific context. Of particular note is *After Image*, a mural commissioned for the foyer of Brisbane's Hilton Hotel in 2014. Degroot was invited to complete the mural following the discovery of architect Harry Seidler's original plans for the foyer, including a black and white photocopy thought to be of an unrealised design. Degroot discovered through his research that the photocopy was in fact of *Le Lagon* (The Lagoon), a paper cut-out by Henri Matisse, reproduced in a 1947 artist's book, *Jazz*.

Degroot replaced Matisse's blue and green ground with a violent red and painted the cut-out forms as half-tone dots, referencing the photocopy from Seidler's plans. In this way, Degroot's mural embodies the multiple layers of translation involved in its realisation. The mediated nature of Degroot's images however should not be equated with a lack of agency on the artist's part. In her 2012 book, *Painting beyond Itself - The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, theorist Isabelle Graw posits that:

"... attempts to eliminate the subjectivity of the artist from the painting usually lead to a re-entering of subjectivity into painting. And the more negation there is

of handwriting, the more this negation will be considered to be the handwriting of the artist." <sup>(6)</sup>

That is, Degroot's translation of forms from other sources into his own work is a defining condition of contemporary painting. Just as Ian Burn did with *Systematically Altered Photographs*, Degroot's practice challenges traditional ideas of authorship and originality. Through his sustained engagement with the boundaries of painting, Degroot also reminds viewers of the medium's enduring role in an increasingly networked contemporary image economy.

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#### Notes:

1. Stephen, Ann *On Looking at Looking: The Art and Politics of Ian Burn*, 2006, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, p.73

2. Degroot, Simon *Familiar beyond Recognition: Translation in Contemporary Abstraction*, PhD thesis, Griffith University 2017, p.46, accessed 30/11/19. [https://researchrepository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/368013/Degroot\\_2017\\_01Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://researchrepository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/368013/Degroot_2017_01Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

3. Degroot, Simon *Familiar beyond Recognition: Translation in Contemporary Abstraction*, PhD thesis, Griffith University 2017, p.52, accessed 30/11/19. [https://researchrepository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/368013/Degroot\\_2017\\_01Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllviewed=y](https://researchrepository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/368013/Degroot_2017_01Thesis.pdf?sequence=1&isAllviewed=y)

4. Berry, Jess *Decoration As Discourse: The Language Of Pattern In The Paintings Of Simon Degroot*, 2017, accessed 1/12/19 <http://www.simondegroot.com/index.php?categoryid=4>

5. Interview with the artist, 5/11/19.

6. Graw, Isabelle *Painting beyond Itself - The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, 2012, Sternberg Press, Berlin, p. 51.

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#### Front image:

Simon Degroot, *White and Blue Flat Lay*, 2017 Oil on canvas. 198 x 137cm. Courtesy of the artist and Jan Manton Art, Brisbane.

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