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### Formal Abstraction:

#### From Art to Architecture in the Work of John Dalton

This paper will trace architect John Dalton's involvement with members of the Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch, to reveal how this involvement contributed to a mindfulness of the distinctly Queensland condition and how this in turn come to inform a body of work.

The Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch (CAS) was formed in 1961, well after Contemporary Art Societies were established in southern states, by a group of young artists and intellectuals concerned to promote and disseminate contemporary art practices. The preoccupations and activities of this group during the 1950s and -60s helped shape the intellectual and social life of Brisbane in the following decades and, from the outset, outcomes had a distinctly Queensland flavour.

John Dalton's arrival in Brisbane coincided with a rising awareness of art as a serious pursuit. Dalton understood that art was intrinsic to the practice of modern architecture even before becoming a student of architecture. Already enmeshed socially with Brisbane's alternative art groups, he became an inaugural member of the CAS, where he was soon joined by other architects Graham de Gruchy and Bill Carr, and later by Patrick Moroney and Paul Memmott. All were also associated with the School of Architecture at the University of Queensland. This paper will examine the relationship between Dalton's activities as a member of Brisbane's alternative art group and his nascent architecture practice through analysis of his painting to ascertain how and to what extent these activities cross-illuminated each other.

## Introduction

Harry Seidler's article "Painting Toward Architecture", published in *Architecture* in 1949, drew local attention to the potential of art for modern architecture, albeit by re-presenting ideas critical to the Modern Movement.<sup>1</sup> Seidler's article also coincided with an upswing in interest in modern art and architecture in Australia. However, acceptance of modernism is quite different from the wholesale adoption of theories linking art and architecture. The possibility of an intersection of art and architecture would always be qualified by the circumstances of local practice. By 1950 contemporary art in Australia had developed an interest in specifically Australian narratives and was enjoying a period of intense development. Whilst modern architecture was gaining acceptance in Australia, it is not generally attributed to theories linking art and architecture. Historical accounts maintain that Queensland architects worked with the language of modernism by filtering it through principles of climatic design.<sup>2</sup> Austrian émigré, Dr Karl Langer was an early promoter of such a stance in *Sub-tropical Housing* (1944) which privileged the scientific and the "objective" over aesthetic considerations.<sup>3</sup> *Sub-tropical Housing* also presented a most effective critique of the Queensland vernacular house, discrediting it as a model for an appropriate architecture.<sup>4</sup> Whilst there are documented instances of the integration of contemporary art into contemporary architecture - James Birrell's incorporation of the work of Melbourne artist James Meldrum in the Wickham Terrace Car Park (1958-61), the incorporation of a mosaic mural by Lindsay Edward into extensions by Department of Public Works to the old Queensland State Library (1959) or Robin Gibson's incorporation of a stained glass window by Neville Matthews into Mayne Hall (1972) are examples<sup>5</sup> - there is little evidence of art intersecting with architecture in the manner predicated by Seidler in his article "Painting Toward Architecture".

This paper is interested in correspondences between John Dalton's painting and his architecture. Haig Beck and Jackie Cooper have described Dalton as "an abstract expressionist who used his

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- 1 Harry Seidler, "Painting Toward Architecture," in *Architecture: Journal of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects* 37. 4 (Oct 1949): 119-24. Philip Goad in *Modernism & Australia: documents on art, design and architecture 1917-1967*, ed. Stephen Ann, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad. (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press/Melbourne University Publishing, 2006), 604. Seidler had been introduced to art theories by Sigfried Giedion and Walter Gropius at Harvard Graduate School of Design and Josef Albers at Black Mountain College, North Carolina.
  - 2 John Maxwell Freeland, *Architecture in Australia: A History* (Ringwood Victoria: Penguin 1968), 277; Jennifer Taylor, *Australian Architecture since 1960* (Canberra: Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 1990), 116; Stuart King, "A Climate of Confusion: The Significance of Climatic Adaptation in 19th Century Queensland Architecture" in *Panorama to Paradise: Proceedings of the 24th Annual Conference of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand* ed. (Adelaide: SAHANZ, 2007), 3; Philip Goad, "Homes in the Sun: Climate and the modern Australian House 1945-1965," in *Celebration: Proceedings of the XXII Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand*, ed. Andrew Leach and Gill Matthews (Napier, New Zealand: SAHANZ 2005).
  - 3 Douglas Neale, "The 'Essentials' of the Sub-tropical house: an exegesis of the 'Modernistic' Town Planning Principles," in *Limits: Proceedings from the 21st annual conference of the Society of Architectural Historians of Australia and New Zealand*, ed. Hélène Frichot and Harriet Edquist (Melbourne: SAHANZ, 2004), vol. 2, 346-52.
  - 4 Douglas Neale, "The 'Essentials' of the Sub-tropical house," 349.
  - 5 Andrew Wilson and John Macarthur, Birrell : *work from the office of James Birrell* (Melbourne Vic.: NMBW Publications, 1997), 42; *Brisbane: A map guide to the architecture of the city* (RAIA Queensland Chapter 1983), paginated; "UQ Remembers" Neville Matthews obituary accessed 24 January 2014. <http://www.uq.edu.au/uqcontact/uq-remembers>

paintings to explore the qualities of Australian light.”<sup>6</sup> By “seeing things through artists’ eyes” Dalton perceived new formal possibilities for Queensland architecture.<sup>7</sup> Specifically they claim that through painting Dalton recovered vernacular forms. In their essay for *Place Makers* (2008), “The contemporary Queenslander” Beck and Cooper juxtapose an image of the Schmidt Farmhouse, Worongary against the Hughes House, Brookfield (1966) to demonstrate the origin of Dalton’s “crippled gable” roof form. In earlier commentary to accompany Dalton’s description of Kelvin Grove Halls of Residence, Haig Beck draws attention to the relationship between Dalton’s paintings, in particular his ‘veranda series’, and the formal language of his ‘Australian’ houses.<sup>8</sup> More cautiously, Jennifer Taylor writes that through his sketches and writings Dalton became the “principal voice for the neglected merits of the Queensland environment.”<sup>9</sup> This paper investigates paintings which were completed during the 1950s on either side of his formal architecture studies, to identify the nature and significance of links between Dalton’s art and his architecture.

## Background

The publication of Seidler’s article narrowly predates John Dalton’s arrival in Australia in 1950. With a Diploma in Building from Leeds, Dalton quickly found work in the office of the Brisbane City Council City Architect, under the direction of Frank Gibson Costello (1903–89).<sup>10</sup> Costello was Brisbane City Architect between 1941 and 1952 and is credited with fostering a culture of restrained modernism within the Council. He had trained at the Department of Architecture and Building at the Sydney Technical College and was the recipient of a Special Training Scholarship allowing him to travel to the UK in 1928 where he worked in offices, studied Town Planning and Civic Design at London University<sup>11</sup> and travelled extensively in Europe, much of it in the company of Sydney Anchor.<sup>12</sup> There was little building activity in Brisbane in the years during and immediately after WWII, but work completed in the Office of the City Architect, although low-budget, was informed by a strong ‘civic sense’ most evident in the manipulation of scale and proportion.<sup>13</sup> Comparisons have been made with the work of Willem Dudok (1884–1974).<sup>14</sup>

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6 Haig Beck and Jackie Cooper, “The contemporary Queenslander,” in *Place Makers: Contemporary Queensland Architects*, ed. Miranda Wallace and Sarah Stutchbury. (South Brisbane, Qld.: Queensland Art Gallery, 2008), 25.

7 Beck and Cooper, “The contemporary Queenslander,” in *Place Makers*, 25.

8 Haig Beck, “Detailing, National Identity, and a sense of place in Australian Architecture,” in *UIA International Architect 4* (1984): 52.

9 Jennifer Taylor, *Australian architecture since 1960* (Sydney: Law Book, 1986), 130.

10 Scott Chaseling, “Frank Costello: City Architect 1941–1952; City Planner 1946–1952 (Honours Thesis, The University of Queensland, 1997), 18.

11 Chasling, “Frank Costello,” 19.

12 Chasling, “Frank Costello,” 18.

13 Chasling, “Frank Costello,” 199.

14 Chasling, “Frank Cosello,” 23.

Dalton's National Diploma in Building issued by The Institute of Builders in conjunction with The Ministry of Education on 7 February 1947, indicates a rigorous program of study focussed entirely on the technical. Working in the Office of the City Architect he would have been conscious of the distinction between building as a technical problem and architecture as an art. He is known to have discussed the art of architecture with fellow worker and then architecture student, Eric Buchanan.<sup>15</sup> Whilst at the BCC Dalton was encouraged by Buchanan to study architecture.<sup>16</sup> He enrolled in 1952 at the Brisbane Central Technical College (BCTC), transferring to the University of Queensland from where he graduated in 1956.

## Art in Brisbane Town

Whilst working in the Office of the City Architect, Dalton was introduced to a bushwalking group that included Brian and Betty Kelly, Ian and June Cameron and Sheila Harvey (later Dalton).<sup>17</sup> Brian and Betty Kelly were also jazz enthusiasts and Dalton, who was more inclined to jazz than bushwalking, soon found himself in the company of Brisbane's 'bohemian set'. This set included a number of young artists who were drawn together by a shared concern for being modern,<sup>18</sup> and their activities during the 1950s were crucial to an 'awakening' in Brisbane of a sensitivity towards the "modern aesthetic".<sup>19</sup> This awakening took a form best described by Humphrey McQueen in relation to the emergence of modernism in Australia, as arising "from and through identifiably local conditions".<sup>20</sup> As this group's numbers swelled with an influx of artists and academics during the 1950s, the need for a forum to promote the modern eventually led to the formation of the Queensland Branch of the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) in 1961.<sup>21</sup> The CAS deliberately framed its activities in opposition to "Art Establishment" associations such as the Brisbane Central Technical College art school and the Royal Queensland Art Society (RQAS).

Betty Churcher recalls Brisbane at the beginning of the 1950s as "hot and boring" but not exactly "a cultural desert".<sup>22</sup> Artistic expression was evident in a rich literary life (the precursor to

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15 Noel Robinson, "Dalton Houses 1956-1975: an exemplar for Brisbane's domestic architects?" (Honours Diss. The University of Queensland, 1976), 6, 9.

16 Interview with Sue Dalton at 29 Herbert Street, Allora on 2 May 2014.

17 Interview with Sheila Dalton at Brighton Health Campus, Sandgate on 1 April 2014. Interview with Sue Dalton at 29 Herbert Street, Allora on 2 May 2014.

18 D. Helen Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch, 1961-1973: A Study of the Post-War Emergence and Dissemination of Aesthetic Modernism in Brisbane" (MA diss., University of Queensland, 1989), 14. Quoting Ann Thomson in a taped interview, 16 December 1987. Fridemanis describes this group, which included Ann Thomson, Richard Werner, Neville Matthews, Shirley Knight (Miller), Pam Watkins (Wilson), Robyn Mountcastle, Bronwyn Yeates (Thomas) as "people of like mind who were drawn together by something that was hardly there at all ... wanting something different but not knowing what it was."

19 Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch," i and 3. "It is therefore the 1950s that must be considered as laying the foundation for modernism to emerge in Brisbane."

20 Humphrey McQueen, cited by Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch," 4.

21 Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch," ii. An attempt to form a Queensland Branch in 1957 had floundered.

22 Betty Churcher *Molvig: The Lost Antipodean* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books Australia, 1984), 1.

*Meanjin* and *Barjai* was first published in Brisbane in 1943);<sup>23</sup> but the visual arts were considered "moribund"<sup>24</sup> with painting "as predictable as lamingtons: a tame art which recorded a comfortable and complacent world".<sup>25</sup> Paradoxically she also notes that "the very isolation encouraged an idiosyncratic inventiveness and curiosity" and that Brisbane society's "rigid, colonial gentility" was balanced by its "endless tolerance for extreme behaviour".<sup>26</sup> It was this mix that proved attractive to nationally recognised artists who chose to work in Brisbane at this, time amongst them Ian Fairweather (1891-1974), Ray Crooke (1922- ), Charles Blackman (1928- ), Margaret Olley (1923-2011), Jon Molvig (1923-70), Andrew Sibley (1933- ), Sam Fullbrook ( 1922-2004 ) and Mervyn Moriarty (1937- ).<sup>27</sup> Some of these artists ran or participated in studios at the Arts School, Ann Street, and later at St Mary's Church Hall, Kangaroo Point.

A growing interest in the arts in Brisbane during the 1950s manifested itself in a number of different ways. The Queensland Art Gallery Society "Friends of the Gallery" was established in 1951 and its members immediately began agitating for a new gallery. The 1953 exhibition "French Painting Today" was followed by exhibitions of work by Walter Sickert and Jacob Epstein in 1954 and "Italian Art of the Twentieth Century" in 1956.<sup>28</sup> Dr Gertrude Langer, advocate for modern art, began writing her column for the Brisbane Courier Mail in 1953 and QAG Director Robert Haines introduced his Friday evening radio programme "Notes from the Gallery" in 1955.<sup>29</sup> The Johnstone Gallery, which had initially operated out of the rear of a shop in Spring Hill, opened in the Brisbane Arcade in 1951 before moving to Bowen Hills in 1958.<sup>30</sup>

After its formation in 1961, the CAS Queensland Branch maintained its activism by running art events, drawing classes, life classes, balls, and regular exhibitions. Its membership was not exclusively limited to artists and extended to philosophers, writers and academics. John Dalton was a financial member and remained active in the CAS until its demise in 1971, holding positions on the Executive. Catalogues indicate he exhibited in the CAS Autumn Exhibition 1965 alongside architects Graham de Gruchy, Barbara Van den Broek and Gareth Jones Roberts (who is listed in the catalogue as a member of the Victorian Branch of the CAS). He also entered art work in regional art competitions including the Queensland Centenary Eisteddfod Art Competition 1959 ("Immediacy at Fingal" and "Portrait of an Architect"); the 1959 H.C. Richards and L.C. Harvey Memorial Competitions where his

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23 Michele Elizabeth Anderson, "Barjai, Miya Studio and young Brisbane Artists of the 1940s: Towards a radical practice" (B.Arts Honours Diss. The University of Queensland, 1987), 11.

24 Barrett Reid and Lawrence Collinson had been significant figures in *Barjai* in 1940s but had deserted Brisbane for Heide, Melbourne when this group folded in 1945.

25 Churcher, *Molvig: The Lost Antipodean*, 1.

26 Churcher, *Molvig: The Lost Antipodean*, 43.

27 Louise Martin-Chew, "Like Topsy: The Johnstone Gallery 1950-1972" (Master of Creative Arts Diss. Townsville: James Cook University, 2001), 33.

28 Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch," 9.

29 Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch," 8.

30 Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch," 10. Also Glenn R. Cooke, *A Time Remembered: Art in Brisbane 1950 to 1975* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1995), 48.

entry "County Stanley, Parish of Indooroopilly" is singled out by art critic Melville Haysom alongside work by Roy Churcher as being "outstanding in the abstract division"<sup>31</sup>; and the Warana-Caltex Art Prize. Dalton's entry to the Warana-Caltex Prize, "Gympie", with the addition of a spiralling sun in the manner of Jon Molvig, appeared on the front cover of the July 1960 edition of *The Australian Journal of Architecture and Arts*. In 1961, a work by Dalton was selected for the CAS (New South Wales) 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Interstate Exhibition at the Blaxland Gallery along with works by John Aland, Maryke Degeus, Roy Churcher, Judy Cuppiadge, and Andrew Sibley.<sup>32</sup> As editor of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Queensland Chapter news Centreline Dalton profiled artist Neville Matthews:

"This is the first artist shown on the cover of Centre Line, which is the first of a series on Queensland artists who have experience with Architects. This is an endeavour to incorporate suitable art works, sculpture, etc. in the buildings which are mushrooming within the city."<sup>33</sup>

Support for Lily Hitch in setting up the *Design Arts Centre: Permanent Exhibition of Arts and Crafts* at 167 Elizabeth Street, Brisbane and defence of the inclusion of architecture as "one of the design arts" is further evidence of his belief in the integration of art, design and architecture. A period of activism during the 1960s is preceded by a period of painting that proved significant for Dalton.

## Two Paintings

Two works painted seven years apart provide a window onto Dalton's preoccupations at two different points in time during the 1950s. The first painting titled "sea-nymph and a sailor" is signed and dated 1952 and depicts two figures embracing. The painting was completed whilst Dalton was in his first year of architecture study. It is highly reminiscent of the collage work of Jean Arp, in particular collages completed during the 1920s, and a small publication in Dalton's library, although published in 1959, testifies to his interest in the work of this artist who gained popularity in the years following WWII.<sup>34</sup> The pencil outline of additional lozenges suggests Dalton's dissatisfaction with his original composition.

The second piece, "Immediacy at Fingal" is one of a series of six paintings that Dalton commenced in 1956 after completing his architecture studies and which formed the basis for his "Verandah" article in *Architecture in Australia* in March 1964. It was entered in the Queensland Centenary Eisteddfod Art Competition 1959 and exhibited at the Queensland National Art Gallery along with work by Margaret Olley, Jon Molvig, Andrew Sibley and Bronwyn Yeates, Betty Cameron (Churcher) and Roy Churcher, John Rigby, and Joy and Kenneth Roggenkamp.<sup>35</sup> Col Munro was the only other architect exhibited

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31 Melville Haysom, "Only few Shine at art show," *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 8 December 1959.

32 Cooke, *A Time Remembered*, 74.

33 Dalton, *Centre Line* (1967).

34 Jean Cathelin, *Jean Arp* (Evergreen Gallery Book, 1959), 10. Arp visited New York City in 1949 for a solo exhibition at the Buchholz Gallery. In 1950, he was invited to execute a relief for the Harvard University Graduate Centre in Cambridge, Massachusetts and would also be commissioned to do a mural at the UNESCO building in Paris.

35 Queensland Centenary Eisteddfod: Art Competition 1959 Exhibition Catalogue (Fryer Library).

as part of the Centenary Art Competition. Dalton also submitted an entry "A Brisbane Architect", in the portrait section, which was won by Betty Cameron (Churcher) with a portrait of "Dr J.V. Duhig". Between these two works, "sea-nymph and a sailor" and "Immediacy at Fingal", there is a narrowing of the artist's focus.

### "Sea-Nymph and a Sailor"

"Sea-nymph and a sailor" (fig. 1) may have been completed as part of a studio session; either at the Arts School where studios were run by Richard Rodier Rivron, or at St Mary's Church Hall at Kangaroo Point where Margaret Cilento conducted an "'open studio' abstract class".<sup>36</sup>



Fig. 1. John Dalton: "sea-nymph and a sailor", 1952.

"Sea-nymph and a sailor" comprises two forms embracing in their own fluid bubble of space and, as previously noted, its similarity to Arp's collages is uncanny. The key elements identified by French art critic Jean Cathelin, author of Dalton's own small text on Arp, as being constituent of Arp's work are all present in primary colours: "humanoid ovoids", "gestative shapes", Arp's "navel."<sup>37</sup> Forms are fitted closely yet separated from each other by the white space of the page. This has the effect as Cathelin notes in relation to the work of Arp, of creating a sense of movement in repose.<sup>38</sup> Even the subject of Dalton's painting evokes Arp's bronze sculpture, "The Mermaid" (1942).

Dalton's piece is an exercise in composition in the manner of Arp only. It is not an exercise in techniques known to be integral to Arp's work, involving the almost wanton destruction of formal elements and their seemingly random reconstitution.<sup>39</sup> Arp's peripatetic technique was directed at uncovering new motifs, which by virtue of their interaction with the sub-conscious acquire a heightened meaning. Dalton's composition is by comparison self-conscious, directed and

36 Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch," 19. Fridemanis recalls that those who participated in Cilento's studio sessions were "assured of a sound philosophical basis for any artistic exercise or debate."

37 Cathelin, *Jean Arp*, 61.

38 Cathelin, *Jean Arp*, 52.

39 Cathelin, *Jean Arp*, 49-50. Described as "'ollowing the laws of chance".



removed from any interest in architecture, unlike Seidler's interest in Arp which is purposeful and underpinned by a search for "universal principles".

In "Painting Toward Architecture" Seidler argues that it is "just this kind of fusion or interdependence" of art and architecture "that is lacking today and yet which is so imperative if our new visual world is to reach maturity."<sup>40</sup> Seidler's abstraction of architectural principles relies on a particular reception of work. A cropped image of one of Arp's free form sculptures is juxtaposed with the "curvilinear architectural forms of Niemeyer's church at Pampulha", built in 1943.<sup>41</sup> Arp's sensuous forms are emptied of any symbolic content, humour and emotion,<sup>42</sup> to become a template for the handling of forms and their representation, as evidenced in Seidler's architecture in the Rose Seidler House mural (1949) and later in the Williamson ['Igloo'] House, Mosman (1951).<sup>43</sup> Dalton's architect's eye is not yet turned to this new visual language. His interest in Arp is not revealing of any intersection between art and architecture.

### "Immediacy at Fingal"

A focusing of Dalton's interest is evident in "Immediacy at Fingal", a detailed study of the ordering of structure and material fabric at the edge of a traditional veranda, together with the space of the landscape beyond (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. John Dalton: "Immediacy at Fingal," c.1956

Timber blind, lattice, post and rail are rendered as shadowy horizontal and vertical elements to be read against a landscape of sky, sea and sand dunes. The painting is carefully composed, with form and space organised as a series of flat planes parallel to the picture surface, in the manner of Purism.<sup>44</sup> Yet its subject matter is local and architectural and is purposefully explored; its title confirming specificity. The close investigation of material detail reveals the phenomenon associated with the vernacular form. Furthermore this investigation of vernacular form is located in a specific coastal landscape setting, that of the Tweed Coast in Northern New South Wales.

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40 Seidler, "Painting Toward Architecture," 122.

41 Seidler, "Painting Toward Architecture," 122.

42 Cathelin, *Jean Arp*, 14, 49 and 56. "Sensual and sensitive, but never sentimental, Arp's sculptures evoke every aspect of the flesh, and of love, its natural flowering. From the marble Torsos which evoke the very essence of womanhood - tender, ardent, voluptuous - his whole art conjures up gestation, birth, maturity and death."

43 Helen O'Neill, *A Singular Vision: Harry Seidler* (Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), 114.

44 Elizabeth Musgrave and Douglas Neale, "Architectural image and idiom: making local" in *Mosaic: a journal for the interdisciplinary study of literature* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 2004): 255-73.

At the time of this painting Dalton was completing his study of architecture. There is nothing in Dalton's student project work to suggest an interest in vernacular detail. Dalton's early houses are functionalist in their modernism. A contemporaneous article featuring four houses designed by John Dalton and Peter Heathwood in which Dalton advocated "the end of craft building methods and the advent of industrialised building techniques", is illustrated with Dalton's Head (1956) and Spink (1956) Houses.<sup>45</sup>

Whilst the study of architecture may have directed Dalton's attention to architectural subject matters, other influences have informed his artist's eye and manner. At the end of the 1950s Brisbane's alternative art scene was dominated by two figures, Jon Molvig and Roy Churcher (1933- ). Molvig, who conducted classes at St Mary's Church Hall from 1955 to December 1957,<sup>46</sup> is described by Betty Churcher as an expressionist for whom content "continued to be a most urgent priority". When "much of Australian painting was conforming to an international style of first abstract expressionism and then hard-edged abstractionism", Molvig "work[ed] from direct experience and personal identification".<sup>47</sup> Molvig was a conflicted soul and in his "fearlessly honest" and often confronting work "...the movement of paint on the surface of the picture ... became the visible trace of the artist's responses and decisions at the time of painting".<sup>48</sup> Dalton's working of paint on hardboard in "Immediacy in Fingal" echoes Molvig's preferred medium and technique but not his preference for provocative subject matter.

When Molvig departed Brisbane, Roy Churcher and Betty Cameron took over the lease of St Mary's Hall. Roy Churcher, who had a diploma from the Slade School of Fine Art, met Betty Cameron whilst she was in London from 1953 on a Younger Artists' Group Scholarship studying at the London Royal College of Art. Visiting Brisbane in 1957 the pair decided to stay.<sup>49</sup> Brisbane's strong colours and light appealed to Roy Churcher's fauvist sensibilities and there were aspects of Brisbane that reminded the young couple of Italy; "the light, the City Hall tower, the grapes in March, fresh coffee bought in the Valley and the wine".<sup>50</sup>

The Churchers brought mid-century British art perspectives to Brisbane. These perspectives would pervade Betty Churcher's much celebrated text *Understanding Art: The use of space, form and structure* (1973).<sup>51</sup> Fridemanis writes that the Churchers' mode of studio instruction was to allow each artist to find their own way. "Process" was important: "each person is a witness to the

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45 Dalton and Heathwood, "Four Houses," *The Australian Journal of Architecture and Arts* (September, 1959): 58.

46 Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch, 1961-1973," 17.

47 Churcher, *Molvig: The Last Antipodean*, 2.

48 Churcher, *Molvig: The Last Antipodean*, 7.

49 Betty Cameron travelled to London in 1953 to study at the Royal College of Art on the inaugural Younger Artists' Group Scholarship, a travelling scholarship. She and Roy Churcher met and married in London in and returned to Brisbane in 1957 to "meet the family". Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch, 1961-1973," 24.

50 Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch," 25.

51 Betty Churcher, *Understanding Art: The use of space, form and structure* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1973). Initially written as a school text *Understanding Art* was awarded senior award for an information book by the *The Times* in 1974.

world that they are in and the responsibility as a painter is to respond to this richness in some way".<sup>52</sup> In particular Roy Churcher promoted an abstracted expressionism in which colour structure communicated sensation and reality. The objective being in the words of English artist and Slade School lecturer, Andrew Forge: "That before a painting is an act of depiction it is an object made from a synthesis of line, colour and mass organised in such a way as to reflect the life of the senses and in the imagination".<sup>53</sup> Although it is unclear whether Dalton was attending studio, his work at this time is consistent with this emphasis on "taking hold" of the experience through observation and response, invention and constructive simplification.<sup>54</sup> In "Immediacy at Fingal", Dalton places the observer inside the building line and invites their identification with the artist's registration of the experience of light and shadow at the building's edge. Whilst attending to the particularities of material fabric at the edge of building form the real subject of Dalton's work becomes apparent - the play of light and shadow that building form gives rise to. Dalton's painting is transformative, bridging local conditions and modern sensibility.

In his 1964 article "the verandah", Dalton positions a black and white reproduction of "Immediacy at Fingal" with reproductions of five other paintings, a photograph of single room settler's cottage, and a short ode to the veranda (Fig. 3). Images and text are composed on the page in the manner of de Stijl.<sup>55</sup> On quick reading details conflate to produce a single impression of veranda experience. Dalton's accompanying text invokes memories of veranda experience to provide a manifesto in support of vernacular form.



Fig. 3. John Dalton : 'the verandah'

By this concentration on detail and form, a new respect is developed for the subject and the painter finds a new life in the autonomy of the veranda. The direct immediacy of the post and rail in dark

52 Fridemanis, "Contemporary Art Society Queensland Branch," 25.

53 Churcher, *Molvig: The Last Antipodean*, 8.

54 Churcher, *Molvig: The Last Antipodean*, 8.

55 Musgrave and Neale, "Architectural image and idiom: making local" in *Mosaic*, 257 and 272.

silhouette against the vast Australian landscape gives a startling juxtaposition of volumes. The cool enclosing volume of the veranda is never confining. It always succeeds in reassuring and adjusting the senses to the human scale and provides a gentle variation to the spaces beyond. The psychological comfort of the veranda space is the great certainty in Australian architecture and for this reason is loved and respected.<sup>56</sup>

Paintings and text are very revealing of Dalton's ambitions for his architecture. Dalton is less concerned with the discovery of new form than he is with authenticating vernacular form. Vernacular form is validated by invoking notions of psychological comfort arising from the experience of space, and not from any objective criteria addressing physiological and social need such as those identified by Karl Langer: "the avoidance of fatigue"; "the provision of light and avoidance of glare"; and "economy".<sup>57</sup>

Betty Churcher writes that "the priorities of artists can be found as readily in what they choose to paint as in how they choose to paint it".<sup>58</sup> Painting serves to remind Dalton the architect of the role that material detail plays in the experience of architectural form. It is after making these paintings that Dalton's declared motivation for making architecture shifts from an orthodox functionalist approach to a desire for capturing sunlight, shade and shadow. A 1961 article in *Architecture and Arts* and titled "Sun + Life + Useful Form = Architectural magic" quotes from an address given by Dalton to students of Architecture. In it Dalton confirms the role of the experiential in determining "useful" form.

"... for us, life in the sun is a reality, and we who build in the sunlight sense the joy of space and light. It is our delight. The magic of shade and shadow capture our senses and direct us towards our purpose, which is to dispense comfort and happiness through useful form ..."<sup>59</sup>

These words are reiterated by Dalton in Harry Sowden's *Towards a New Architecture* (1968)<sup>60</sup> and their essence is captured by Sowden in his iconic photograph of sunlight falling into the atrium space of the Wilson House (1964).<sup>61</sup> The incorporation of this thinking in a decidedly regional modern aesthetic is evident in the veranda treatment of subsequent houses such as the Smith (1966), Graham (1966), Rabaa (1967), Dunlop (1970) and Musgrave (1972) Houses and the Vice Chancellor's Residence (1972).

Dalton might have sought recognition as an artist but it is as an architect that his reputation was firmly established. Gallery director Ray Hughes maintains that Dalton was "too timid" about his art; that it was overly concerned with "decorative" values.<sup>62</sup> What then, was the purpose of his painting?

56 John Dalton, "the verandah" in *Architecture in Australia* (March, 1964): 99.

57 Karl Langer, *Sub-tropical Housing* (Brisbane: University of Queensland, 1944), 2, 6 and 8.

58 Churcher, *Molvig: The Last Antipodean*, 7. Churcher is writing about the work of Jon Molvig but the view is generally applicable to artists.

59 Extract from address to Queensland Architectural Students Association 1961 reproduced in *Architecture and Arts* (August 1961): 46.

60 Harry Sowden, ed. and photo. *Towards an Australian Architecture* (Sydney, London: Ure Smith, 1968), 76.

61 Sowden, *Towards an Australian Architecture*, 88.

62 Conversation with Ray Hughes on 5 December 2013.

It is clear that Dalton is drawn to the company of this artists group. He continued to enjoy painting and drawing, although after 1965 he chose not to exhibit. By this time he was well established in the minds of Brisbane's young professional elite as associated with Brisbane's intellectual and professional elite. This extended network provided an important client base leading to numerous commissions. Dalton's houses were particularly well suited to the display of contemporary art and published images frequently reveal interiors filled with contemporary works by artists represented by the Johnstone and Ray Hughes Galleries.

It has been observed that disciplinary segregation was typical in Australian art and architecture practice and criticism.<sup>63</sup> Yet Dalton's painting and architecture provide one instance of cross-illumination in which painting – not post, rail and blind but light and shadow revealing form – becomes a means of uncovering a motivation for architecture.

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63 Andrew McNamara and Ann Stephen, "The Story of the Sixties .... A Pile-Up on the Freeway of Advanced Art," in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 169.