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**ANDREW RUCKLIDGE** received his MA in Fine Art at Chelsea College of Arts in London in 2003. He has shown internationally at The New Contemporaries (London), Store Gallery (London), John Connelly Presents (New York), Frieze Art Fair (New York), Zoo Art Fair (London), The Armoury (New York), NADA Miami (Miami), VOLTA (Basel), Art Chicago (Chicago), Berliner Liste (Berlin), Art Cologne (Cologne), DC Dusseldorf (Dusseldorf), as well as the SCOPE art fairs and TIAF in Toronto. In 2013, he received both the K.M. Hunter Visual Artist Award and the Laura Ciruls Painting Award. His work is in collections such as UBS (London), Zabudowicz 176 Collection (London), Kunstmuseum (Gotland), Soho House (London and Toronto), Google, Bank of Montreal, and Scotiabank. Rucklidge currently lives and works in Toronto where he also teaches in the Department of Painting and Drawing at OCADU.

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THE LANGUAGE OF  
ABSTRACTION:  
ANDREW RUCKLIDGE'S  
^YOU AND I ARE SHIFTERS^

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**BY TERENCE DICK**

Once upon a time, in an era of drips, zips, and chapels, abstraction was the route to truth in painting. There are those surviving adherents and latter-day ascetics who still hold faith in and pursue the Platonic ideal—pushing each canvas to its essence, apart from any earthly or sensual concern—but at some point in the last half century (you might want to trace it back to Robert Rauschenberg's *Factum I* and *Factum II* from 1957) there was the equivalent of the linguistic turn in philosophy, which left the expectation of transcendence behind to consider the multiplicity of meanings generated in what have since become the conventions of abstraction. This new wave of colour, line, shape, and surface turned the game of interpretation away from a hermeneutics of sacred truth seeking into a secular exercise concerned with patterns and likelihoods that, when things are cooking, offer metaphors for thinking, being, and doing. In this case, all abstraction is representational but it still endeavours to something more (though let's not get too wrapped up in that excess lest we revert to an adherence to capital-f Forms), which is fine and good and even in some sense necessary (because without that aspiration all we'd end up with is some crazy wallpaper), but the (intellectual and imaginative as much as hand-on-brush) labour of making that helps us decide on the value of the made is bound to the artist's wrestling match against the gravity of meaninglessness (where we risk manufacturing wallpaper) and the lure of cliché (the ever-growing void that tempts and discourages us in equal measure as time goes on). The present day abstract painting lies amidst a no longer accessible perfection, a convenient insignificance, a short but domineering history of influence, and the hard to pin down needs, intentions, and intuition of the artist (manifest, if we're at all lucky, in some semblance of a distinct personal style-slash-brand).

Andrew Rucklidge takes up the cause and, through a combination of medium-specific knowhow rooted in traditions that wend their way through a history of art that still thought pictures of things were the bee's

knees and an intellectual strain that wavers in a bemused fashion between the rigor of early Wittgenstein and the relinquishing of control in his later thought, churns out work chock full of the grammar of painting turned in on itself in generative combinations. The critics in the audience will recognize his habit of reversing perspective, inverting figure and ground, and turning depth into projection as a means of investigating—on the artist and the painting's part (as well as eliciting an investigation on the viewer's part)—our now standard readings of all those formally charged brushstrokes (and washes and drags and assorted extended techniques). Further, non-contiguous combinations of those means of plying paint result in fractures that link his practice to a recent strain in painting I like to call post-Photoshop. Paintings that fall into this convention demonstrate a jarring—though also non-jarring since we've become habituated to it—manner not unlike digital sampling in pre-Auto-Tune sample-based music where keys, reverb settings, and other aspects of the material condition of sound are taken from a variety of different sources (what with the whole library of recorded sound as palette) and layered on one another to create an impossible virtual space containing disparate and incompatible categories of sounds—or in this case paint. Elements of each individual work are then processed independently of the others to make the internal logic even more confounding and discordant. They lack the traditional values of unity, harmony, and balance, but, as any hip-hop head will tell you, that's not where it's at.

Which brings us to language and the trick it plays on us every time we try to articulate a sensible observation about articulating sensible observations. The slippage between expression and reflection is one of the conundrums of consciousness. It's the gap that philosophers continue to wrestle with as they forge ahead as far as they can along the asymptote of truth. Some eventually realized that the task is not to reach zero but make sense of a world where sense-making accepted, acknowledged, and worked with that gap. This is the truth of language and this irresolution is translated into the world

of the visual in Rucklidge's paintings such that they are never what they seem. They defy the picture plane, resisting flatness to float freely in space (or, at least, that's how we read them). Often bounded by a ground that lacks substance—glowing like illuminated aether, fading from one colour to the next as if made of light and smoke—his central figures appear as planes of coloured glass. Obscuring as much as revealing, they are both looked at and through. Even the seemingly simple shapes that fulfill our expectations of surface fail to play by the rules and never entirely identify themselves.

Paintings are never organic in Rucklidge's work because that would imply completion. His common tropes are crystal and other geological forms. Minerals are always fragments. He also relies on physical (as in physics) manoeuvres in the movement within individual paintings. Imperfect mirroring and mapping link, far more than any biological reference, to a natural (once again in the Platonic sense of an underlying harmony) order that inevitably fails when it is instantiated in material form. In this sense, every painting is a failure that must inevitably fall short of the ideal, but since Rucklidge accepts this limit, each new painting is just another variation on the never-ending search for meaning (which is, in a sense, what all art is about). As Samuel Beckett put it: "Try again. Fail Again. Fail better."

Which once again brings us back to (the) language (of painting) and its place as our sole recourse to representing the unrepresentable (which is, in a sense, what all abstraction is about). The lack of resolution in Rucklidge's geometrical figures leaves open the possibility that they depict objects beyond the scope of our vision. As in his previous work, they might either be microscopic views or galactic in scale. At these infinitesimally small and inconceivably large planes, the laws of physics reveal themselves. At human scale, we can only approximate what is objectively—not in a metaphysical, but in a quantum physical way—there. Here lies another gap that Rucklidge (now as scientist) crosses with Sisyphean alacrity: the world as it is known is in no

way how we imagine it. We must resort to the types of metaphors that pepper science textbooks. But an atom doesn't look like an assortment of billiard balls, a galaxy doesn't look like a cloud of dust, and these paintings don't look like what they represent. They defer, or, in the artist's words, shift. You and I are left to catch up.