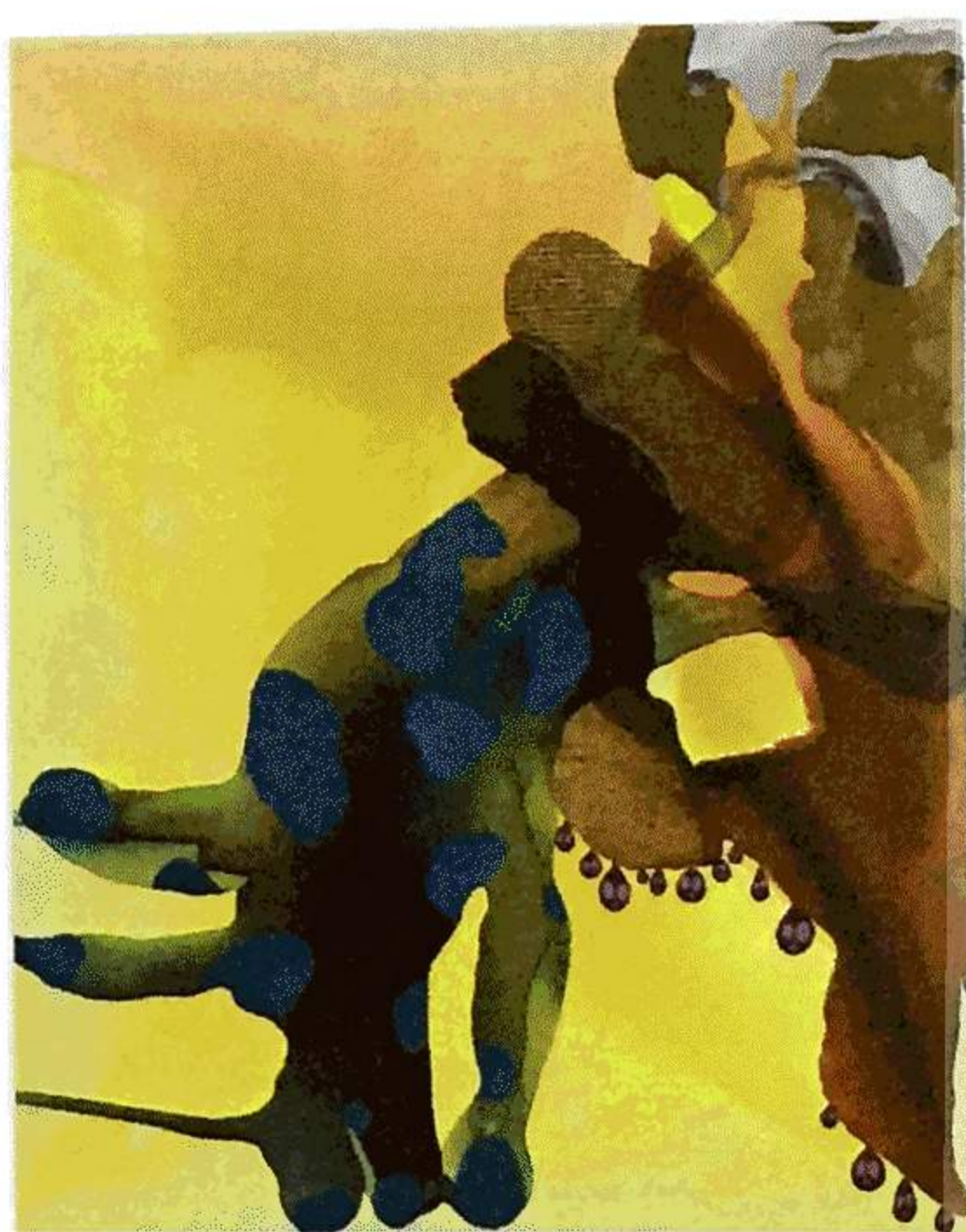
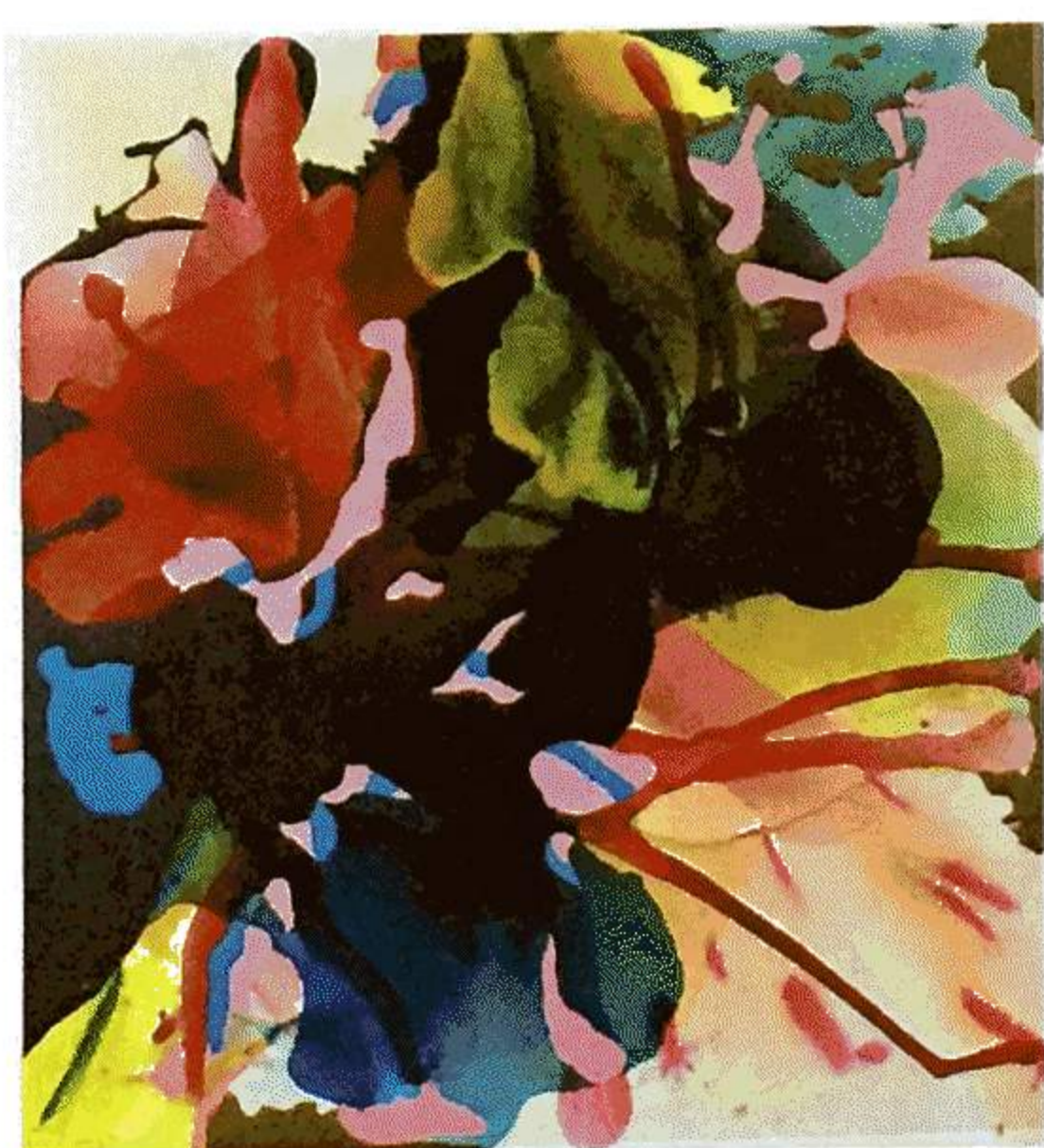


Romanticism and a Gothic sensibility

LOUISE MARTIN CHEW explores the foundations and trajectory of Lara Merrett's dazzling works.



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profile Lara Merrett

“Look at any inspired painting,” Philip Guston once told a reporter for *Time* magazine “It’s like a gong sounding, it puts you in a state of reverberation.” There is ambiguity and shades of a contemporary Gothic sensibility evident in Lara Merrett’s abstract canvases. These works draw on traditions of romanticism, but express a highly personal iconography reflective of Merrett’s life phase and its intensity.

In recent years, Merrett’s life has changed with the arrival of her two children (now three years and eighteen months old) and this experience has been channelled into the work. In this writer’s conversation with her, she suggested: “As I change — physically mentally and emotionally — the work becomes a living breathing thing. My relationship with it comes from an emotive place. I have to feed myself with it, in the same way that music uplifts you or takes you away from the everyday.” These upliftings also embrace happenstance, a lack of control that is an integral part of family life, the necessary layering of newness over experience. It is an imaginative journey which unfolds in a highly organic way.

Born in 1971, Merrett currently lives in Melbourne and paints in a studio separate from but adjacent to her house, behind a garden. She studied painting, starting a Bachelor of Fine Arts at Sydney’s College of Fine Arts in 1990, but left to study in Spain in 1991. At this time she embraced abstraction — influenced by the work of Spanish artists Joan Miró and Antoni Àpies and the first-hand experience of texture in painting that is an integral part of the European experience. She later lived and worked in New York (1994), working as a gallery assistant in Soho. Since then she has completed both the BFA and a Masters of Fine Art degree at COFA (University of New South Wales, 1997), and undertaken a residency in India in 2001.

Her working method is to develop concurrent paintings in ink over a period that may vary from one day to four months. On studio days she spends time in the morning reading, listening to the radio, and writing down ideas and thoughts, also contemplating the work so far. “One work will be flat on the ground and I’ll start to mix colours to different strengths. There is not a lot of control at this stage but I have to find this strange balance between pushing the work in a direction and letting go. If I try to rush things or have too clear an idea on outcome the work never succeeds. I want the work to take me to places I have never been, a kind of mental landscape. It’s this desire for a new place that can drive the work.”

At the same time, another painting leans against the studio wall and Merrett layers inks directly onto its canvas, developing texture and mood. Moving around the canvas she works into the paint, looking for points of balance, layering in an almost topographic fashion. She describes it as a meditative, repetitive process which is also random. “I find each work has its own time frame and rhythm. I don’t put works aside or stop and

start them. I really hope to be connected to the work from the very beginning.”

Merrett often returns to the studio to find work quite different to the way she left it, as though it has a life of its own. Mostly this relates simply to the drying character of the inks, but when a wind storm swept through her studio last year, and hundreds of seeds settled on a painting, she embraced with pleasure the resulting graininess.

Lisa Byrne, writing in a catalogue for the Karen Woodbury Gallery in 2007, compared Merrett’s work to the romantic painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, suggested: “Conceptually imagining these works is not unlike the manner in which many of the Romantic painters and engravers constructed their works. Leaving aside the obvious points of difference (representational and non-representational aesthetics), both imagine geographies of space, atmosphere and physicality ... For Merrett, it’s the inquiry into the picture plane and surface, balance of ink and acrylic, of depth and opacity, chaos with order and the reference to otherness through that which goes beyond the frame.” It is possible, too, to draw analogies between Merrett’s work and that of contemporary abstract painters like Dale Frank, even Stephen Bush whose figuration emerges out of an abstract landscape, with a touch of the darkness of Bill Henson’s urban photographs.

But what draws most attention in Merrett’s work is its contemporary Gothic sensibility, a current vein of darkness visible in our art, literature and music. The ambiguity evident in novels like John Ajvide Lindqvist’s novel *Let the Right One in* (which Merrett has also used as a title) indicates a changing fable for this century. No longer are we still reliving and revisiting the Christian fable (with the conclusion of the *Harry Potter* series aping that ancient text) but, perhaps due to a more pervasive pessimism about global financial and environmental issues, emerging is the possibility of surrender to darker forces outside our control.

Merrett’s work takes us on a journey in which we may glory in the ambiguities, explore her personal narrative that may become the viewer’s own, but also progress an abstract aesthetic into new territories. Her titles in recent years — for example, *Hanging in there*, *Too soon to tell* and *Going deep* — allude to the stoic physical and psychological states of being in this age of anxiety. *Hum*, from 2005, at some level strikes up a conversation with Guston’s ‘reverberation’. Yet also evident is an ongoing interest in the artist’s relationships with the world — personal, conceptual, technical and global. Lara Merrett is showing at Karen Woodbury Gallery in June 2010. **JAR**



Opposite page:
Top left: Lara Merrett, *The happy prince*, 2009, acrylic and ink on linen, 183 x 167cm
Top right: Lara Merrett, *Pull me closer*, 2009, acrylic and ink on linen, 153 x 122cm
Bottom left: Lara Merrett, *Make my day*, 2009, acrylic and ink on linen, 183 x 167cm
Bottom right: Lara Merrett, *Hanging in there*, 2009, acrylic and ink on linen, 153 x 122cm

This page:
Top: Lara Merrett, *You can't be everything at once*, 2009, acrylic and ink on linen, 183 x 167cm

Below: Lara Merrett, *The end will be beautiful*, 2009, acrylic and ink on linen, 183 x 167cm