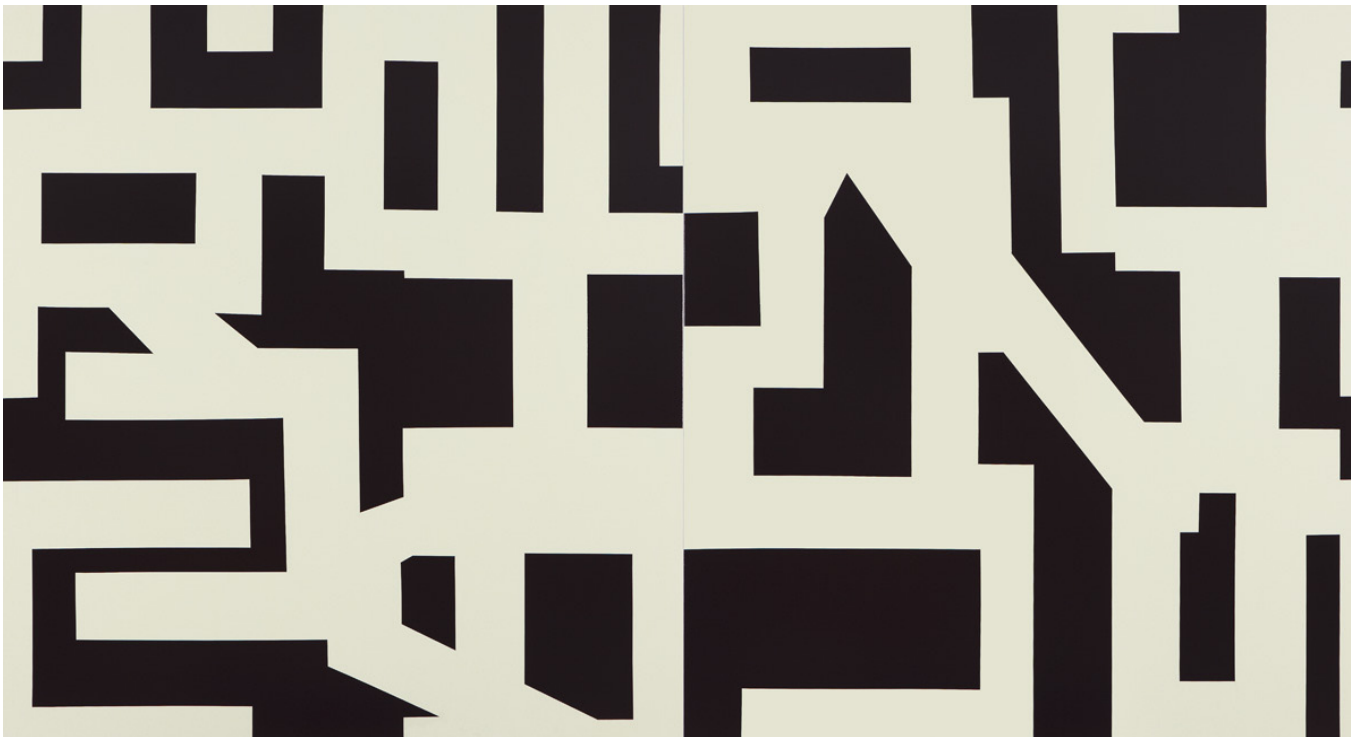
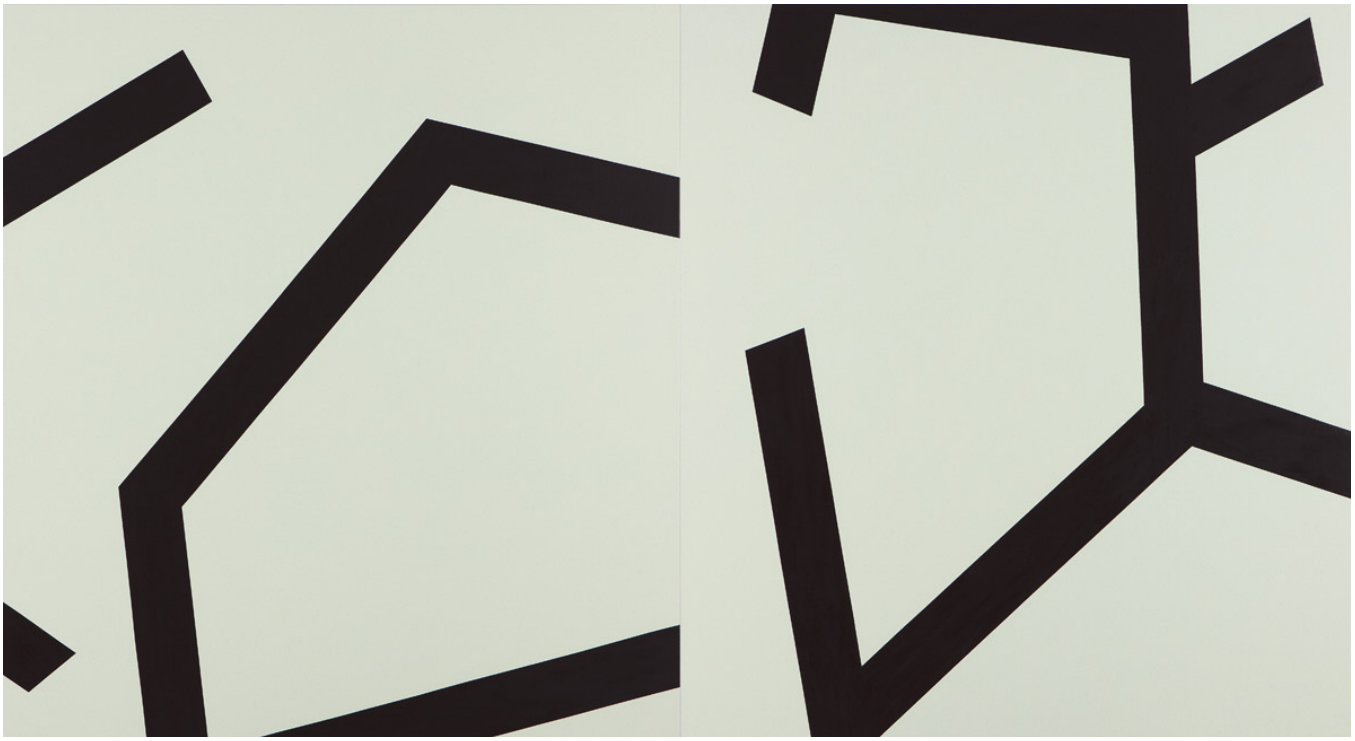


Herculaneum, 2012, acrylic on linen, 2 panels, 198 x 183 cm each

Wilma Tabacco
Gilt Edge

Langford120, 120 Langford St., North Melbourne

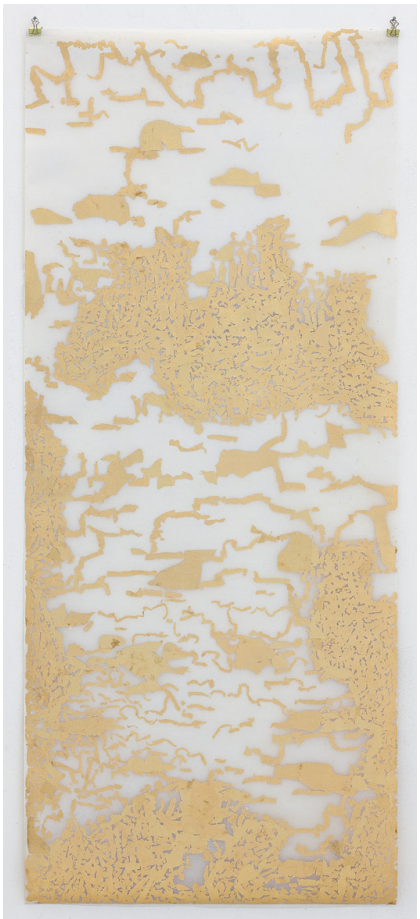
June 1 - June 30, 2013, Opening Saturday June 1st 2 - 4 pm



Entry/Exit, 2012, oil on linen, 2 panels, 198 x 183 cm each

Eugenia's Pleasure, 2012
metal leaf and oil on linen, 183 x 137 cm

On the Nile, 2012
metal leaf and oil on linen, 153 x 153 cm



Dreamscape 1, 2013,
metal leaf and pigment on polycarbonate and paper, 144 x 60 cm

Dreamscape 2, 2013,
metal leaf and pigment on polycarbonate and paper, 144 x 60 cm

Dreamscape 3, 2013,
metal leaf and pigment on polycarbonate and paper, 144 x 60 cm

Gilt Edge

Aurum invenitur in nostro orbe "Gold is to be found in our world"
(Pliny, Natural History Ch 21.4)

For the ancient Western world, the world of the Roman Empire at its furthest extent under Trajan, gold represented the most desirable of all precious substances, the true quintessence of materiality in its untarnishable refulgence. From the development of technologies for embellishing glass by embedding gold leaf in luxury vessels derived the practice of using gold sandwiched in glass tesserae for the mosaics which were the crowning achievement of the visual and iconographic enrichment of Imperial churches from the 6th century. The use of a gold ground became standard practice for both icon painting and mosaic in Byzantine art. The mosaic surfaces emitted a soft glow from the slightly irregular surfaces, bathing worshippers in the atmosphere of a world withdrawn from the exigencies of the daily struggle, a world of gilded splendor which could be provisionally entered. As in mosaics, so in icons; the use of a gold background provided a denaturalized setting against which the holy figures float, already more at home in an heavenly rather than an earthly realm.

In the practice of Italo-Byzantine painters, and in the making of illuminated manuscripts, employing gold leaf was a painstaking process, but one guided by established workshop procedures and networks of supply for the components of bole, glue, and the gold, reduced to leaf by prolonged hand work. Yet even familiarity with the techniques was no guarantee of trouble-free application. The costly leaf, beaten into sheets so fine that they may become transparent – strange paradox in a dense metal! – are so delicate that their handling becomes a ballet of controlled movements. Ambient temperature, humidity, air movement – indeed, the breath of the worker – minutely affect the transfer of the gold to its resting place in the work.

The 21st century artist who essays to explore this material, lacking the guidance of an inherited tradition, must painstakingly accrue the necessary facility in handling the application. Synthetic versions of gold leaf present their own problems, with the gains of greater robustness and less cost balanced against unpredictable discolouration.

The complex, sharply angled forms created by the metallic foils in Wilma Tabacco's work leave a residue of fragments, rough edged, light as feathers. Like the clouds of ash, softer than snow, which arise from volcanic activity these *disiecta membra* appear to have drifted down on to the surfaces of the *Dreamscapes*, where they are gripped and held.

The glow of gold grounds, modulated by underlying colour, and the lively coruscation of gold surface enrichments in painting emphasize the reassuring incorruptibility of the metal. We would perhaps prefer to ignore the fact that most ancient gold objects which we contemplate in museums – as well as elemental particles of metal recycled in current usage – have been found in burials. The excitement stimulated by "finds" of gold in archaeological investigations is counterpointed by the poignancy of the preservation of the metal in the context of death and decay.

The sites of the Roman towns of Pompeii, Stabiae and Herculaneum, overwhelmed in the 79CE eruption of Vesuvius, offer unparalleled access to a sense of life interrupted; the ring still on the finger, the bracelet on the wrist, the food on the table, and paintings fresh on the wall – an intense, vivid evocation of Roman society. For us, living in a time when these sites have been extensively excavated, documented and displayed, it can be hard to imagine that for centuries they remained buried, both literally and in oblivion from human memory. Now, the very names of these once bustling, culturally hybrid towns, and the volcano which continues to dominate the landscape, are freighted with complex associations.

Proust chose to organize the first tranche of *À la recherché du temps perdu* in two sections – the first given a place name, Combray, while the second may be rendered in English as "Place Names: The Place". In using the names of places significant in cultural memory as the basis for a composition Wilma Tabacco does not merely employ an aleatory route to establishing form. Fragmented, carved into straight-sided shapes, the pieces of the name become forms which resemble maps, dwellings, labyrinths – sometimes troughs or ruts across the surface. In these aliquots of a linguistic whole, meaning retains a ghostly presence in the angles and implied planes of their construction on the canvas.

In reflecting on the space of representation and the representation of space Ernst van Alphen traces distinctions between landscape painting, in which the viewer is solicited to merge into the space, and architectural painting, in which "….the implicit presence of the subject takes the form of a struggle: the painting keeps setting up obstacles that make the viewer more and more eager to look behind them". This relationship involves a reflexivity which troubles the more straightforward mediaeval emphasis on the materiality of the surface: here, the clinging skin of gold both reveals and conceals the flow of the medium.

While the processes of modern archaeology demand a careful and delicate removal of layers, moving through stratification – ideally undisturbed – to reveal older material, the reverse process operates where, in these works, underlying membranes of intense colour are partly revealed, partly concealed, by a field of gold. But what, exactly, lies beneath? Excavation is frustrated, baffling all attempts to resolve figure ground relationships in a traditional fashion. The viewer is simultaneously allured by the richness of what is visible, and repulsed by the futility of trying to achieve either a comfortable perspectival viewpoint or an entry into a fictitious space of representation.

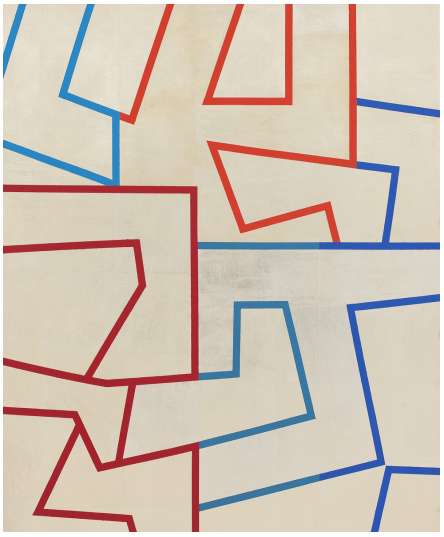
Accustomed as we are to envisage a stable ground in which words – or maps – are undergirded by meanings, for which we can find a place to stand, the picture plane, the object placed upright over against us, implicitly refuses us a ground outside itself. Moreover, at certain angles the gold surfaces reflect ambient colour, and shadowy reflections of the viewer and the viewer's environment, but these in turn, inverting the mirror's tain with its suggestion of depth, refuse illusory access.

Archaeological digs are often perceived as rescuing "dead civilizations", restoring cultures to life in compensation for disturbing the bones of the dead. The revelation, the "rescue" of artifactual material is, however, directly countered by its physical disintegration – disturbingly apparent at Pompeii - and its fragmentation by distribution across sites and collections, even in the present where in situ preservation is considered optimal. These processes seem to encapsulate Whitney Davis' characterization of artifacts (replications, as he terms them) as emergent, or "formalizations" of an extended disruptive process, continually undermining the projected wholeness of objects assiduously assembled for study and critique. This disruption and shattering is suggestive of the phenomena, both natural and caused by human agency, which rend apart strata, landscapes and buildings.

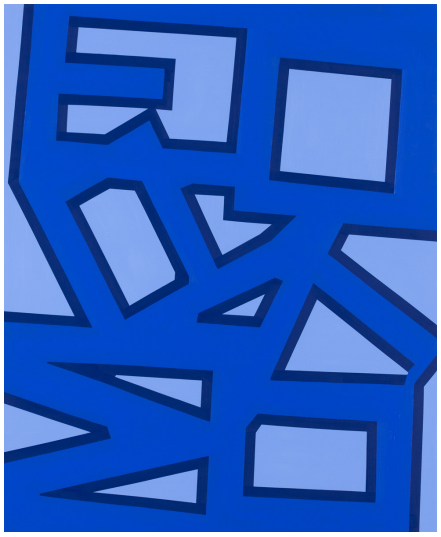
Art making unites, as Davis aptly observes, physics – the materiality of making – and psychics – the cognitive interventions of the maker which are both embedded in, and constitutive of, the chain of making. Unlike the temporal layerings and unlayerings which are the foci of archaeology the artwork exists in a temporal horizon in which it is available to us purely in the here and now, in which past and present are subsumed, not enumerated or reiterated.

Sophia Errey, April 2013

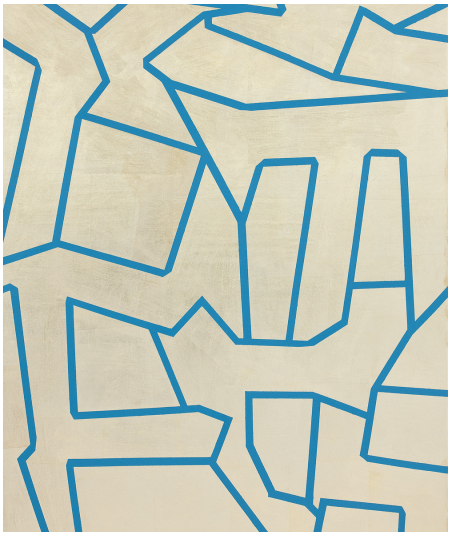
i Ernst van Alphen 2005 *Art in Mind. How Contemporary Images Shape Thought*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London. p 72.
ii Whitney Davis with the editorial assistance of Richard W. Quinn 1996 *Replications. Archaeology Art History Psychoanalysis*. The Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, Pennsylvania. p 21.
iii ibid Introduction passim.



Villa of the Coloured Capitols, 2012,
metal leaf and oil on linen, 91.5 x 76.5 cm



Pompeii, 2012,
oil on linen, 91.5 x 76.5 cm



Goldfield, 2013,
metal leaf and oil on linen, 91.5 x 76.5 cm

Gilt Edge, 2013
metal leaf and oil on linen, 183 x 153 cm

Photography: *Mark Ashkanasy*

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