

# **SPECULATIVE REALMS**

Tricky Walsh

15 May to 1 August 2021



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Latrobe Regional Gallery

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Tricky Walsh was born just down the road from Victoria's Latrobe Regional Gallery—in Moe. The artist's work is currently on display in Morwell—in the exhibition *Speculative Realms* and at the Latrobe Regional Gallery—at a time when this town is looking at possible new directions to take us into the future. The circular forms, triangles and the unusual compositions comprised in high key colours suggest other worlds.

Walsh is interested in science and mathematics – particularly contemporary physics, which considers ideas of the 'fourth dimensions' first described by British mathematician and science fiction writer Charles Howard Hinton in 1880. Today Lisa Randall, a theoretical physicist specialising in particle physics and cosmology at Harvard University, suggests that humankind may be on the cusp of demonstrating the existence of dimensions other than the first, second and third dimensions that we know of today.<sup>1</sup>

Physicists have developed an understanding of the universe as being fundamentally fluid and chaotic. Walsh's artworks metaphorically explore these realms and ask what other models of the universe and possible realms can be imagined or proposed. If we can see the world – or the universe otherwise, then we can dream of change. Our world need not be as it is today.

In discussion of this artwork, Walsh discusses how minor changes in the systems of organisation can create the conditions and ultimately the necessity for change of organisational superstructures that our social, political (and perhaps physical) world is comprised. It is a view that is optimistic about personal power and individual actions.

The figure of the Shaman is a well-known trope deployed in Modernist art, such as in work by the Symbolists at the turn of the 20th century. For the Symbolists, the Shaman represented access to esoteric knowledge that was a means of exploring the scope of the mind and the 'quintessence' of (human) existence that lies beyond appearances. Symbolists proposed that art emanated from thought processes that access more profound levels of consciousness. Much later, in 1967, Bruce Nauman suggested that artists "reveals mystic truths."<sup>2</sup>







The notion of the Shaman relates to the occult and other alternative realms that are currently re-circulating within contemporary feminist tropes, evident in works by Suzanne Treister, Jesse Jones, Arshia Fatima Haq and Candice Lin, among others. Aspects of this otherworldly mysticism can be seen in the Latrobe Valley performance group, Owls of Nebraska. This recent interest in spirituality, magic and the occult is rooted in explorations of feminism, the anti-colonial and alternative power structures relating to gender, race and religion. 3

The art of Tricky Walsh challenges such norms through the creative deployment of mathematics and science. Walsh is interested in the occult and Ouija boards (artworks such as 'Space', 'Line', 'Point' for example), pinball machines - *Hey Nerd* 2011 is a literal example. Walsh also recognises that the abstract concepts of science and mathematics are rich terrains for creative play.

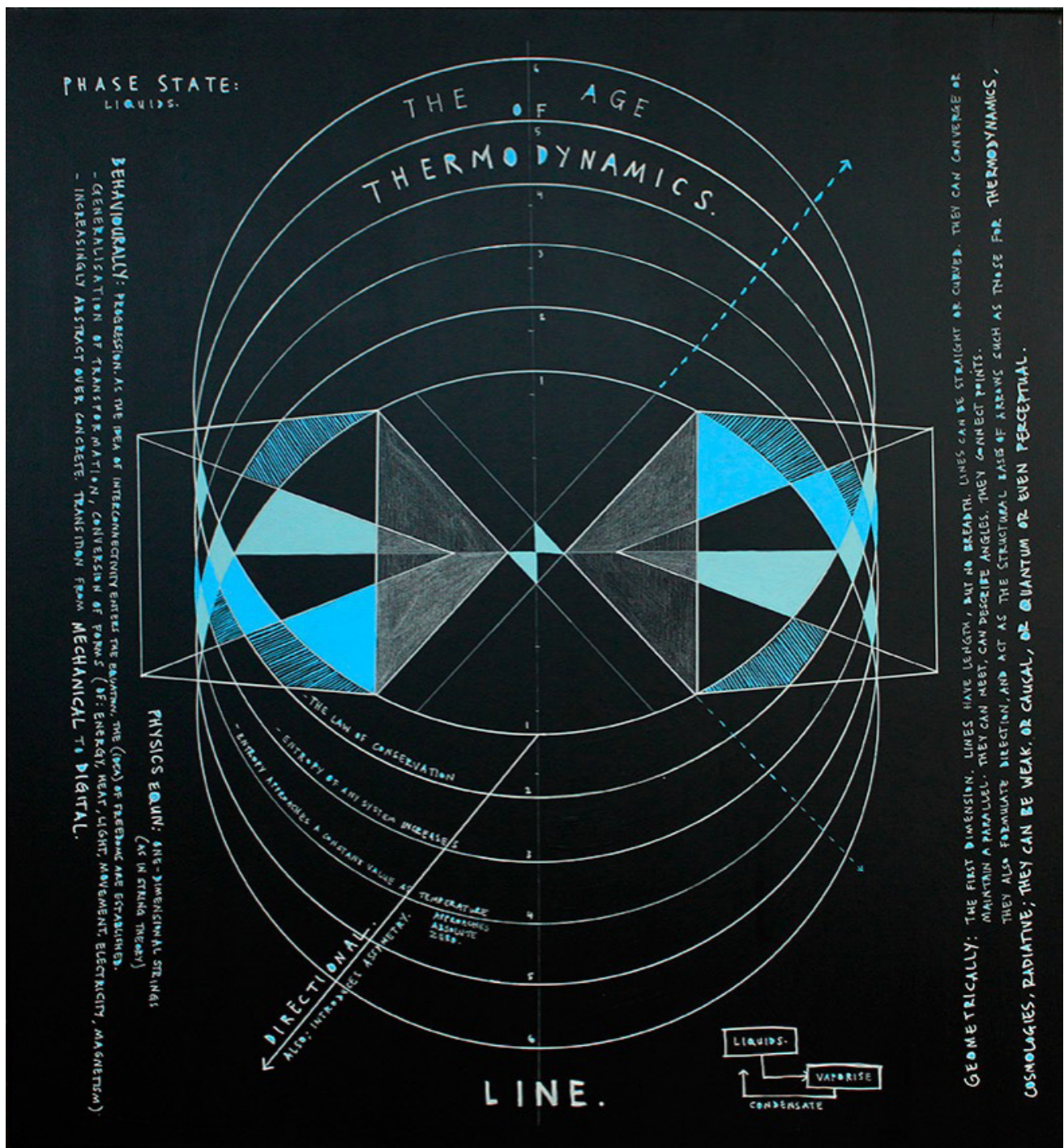
The concept of the interstitial, or the in-between, the sense that something is neither this nor that, is not new to visual art. Artists know such ambiguity is charged with possibilities that allow for new connections to be made. Audiences can see this in-between quality in the diagrammatic nature of Walsh's two-dimensional art as while they do not represent anything; they are not purely abstract either.

Such qualities are especially evident in Walsh's works titled "Line, Plane, Space", all dated 2019/20. They are paintings, but they are also diagrams. Diagrams are blueprints for a future build. Here, the artist's circuit board works - *The Cannon (Annie)* 2020, *Aspect of Colossus* 2018 are relevant. These works are about something to be performed and enacted. Or, as Tricky Walsh has written, "I have a bit of an obsession with electrical circuits. It is not only the complex architecture of their design ... but rather the exposing of resistance – where energetically things are held and captured; where they are funnelled for later use." 4

**Image credit:** Tricky Walsh, *Hey Nerd*, 2011, Timber, balsa, acrylic, glass beads, paint, 70 x 65 x 50 cm, Courtesy Private Collection, Melbourne



In being like and not like abstraction, Walsh's works such as *The Turquoise One 2020*, *The Pink One 2020*, and *The Orange One 2020* also operate in another conceptual framework relating to feminist art practices. Walsh's artworks serve to highlight the ideas of women in science, for example, in *The Hopper (Grace) 2020*, which is a reference to US scientist Grace Hopper (1906 – 1992), who with a PhD in mathematics was the first to devise the theory of machine independent programming languages. Her work ultimately led to COBOL, an early high-level programming language that is still in use. Another of Walsh's artworks – a balsa construction celebrates the astronomer Maria Mitchell (1818 – 1889).



**Image credit:** Tricky Walsh, *Line*, 2019/20220, Acrylic and pencil on linen, 91 x 86 cm unframed, Courtesy the artist and Mars Gallery, Melbourne





Like Tricky Walsh, contemporary Australian artists Elizabeth Newman and Angela Brennan (for instance) have used abstraction in their respective practices as feminist critiques of masculine superstructures. Artist, Elizabeth Gower deploys abstraction by reworking ideas drawn from the quilt using paper cut-outs of domestic items to create witty commentaries of the domestic realm. Walsh uses the pinball machine and scientific theory to play a creative game to upend and turn over models of thinking and making. These strategies build on another trope of visual art, the 'turnover'—the turning inside out and upside down of common values and ideas by inverting the way they are represented.

Using both the 'turnover' and the 'in-between' as techniques in feminist art is more than an expansion of visual language. They operate as both metaphor and forms of action that represent social and political change. Feminist theory, as it expanded throughout the 1980s, led to questioning of dominant norms. Out of this grew 'Queer theory', for instance.

Walsh's art uses maths and science in an appeal to keep open the possibilities of the world being other than the one that we think that we know. Tricky Walsh's art argues for pushing beyond and exploring the currently unknown.

David O'Halloran  
*Senior Curator*

**Image credit (previous page):** Tricky Walsh, *Hopper (Grace)*, 2020, Gouache on paper 123 x 53 x 5 cm, Courtesy the artist and Mars Gallery, Melbourne

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**Notes:**

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/18/opinion/dangling-particles.html>
2. Bruce Nauman, 'The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths (Window or wall sign)' 1967, 1/3' fluorescent tubes, MDF, 150 x 140 x 5 cm, in collection of National Gallery of Australia.
3. <https://qz.com/1739043/the-resurgence-of-the-witch-as-a-symbol-of-feminist-empowerment/>
4. Interview with the artist





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**Cover Image credit:** Tricky Walsh, *A Crack In The Membrane*, 2019, Gouache and watercolour on paper, 102 x 72, Courtesy of the artist.