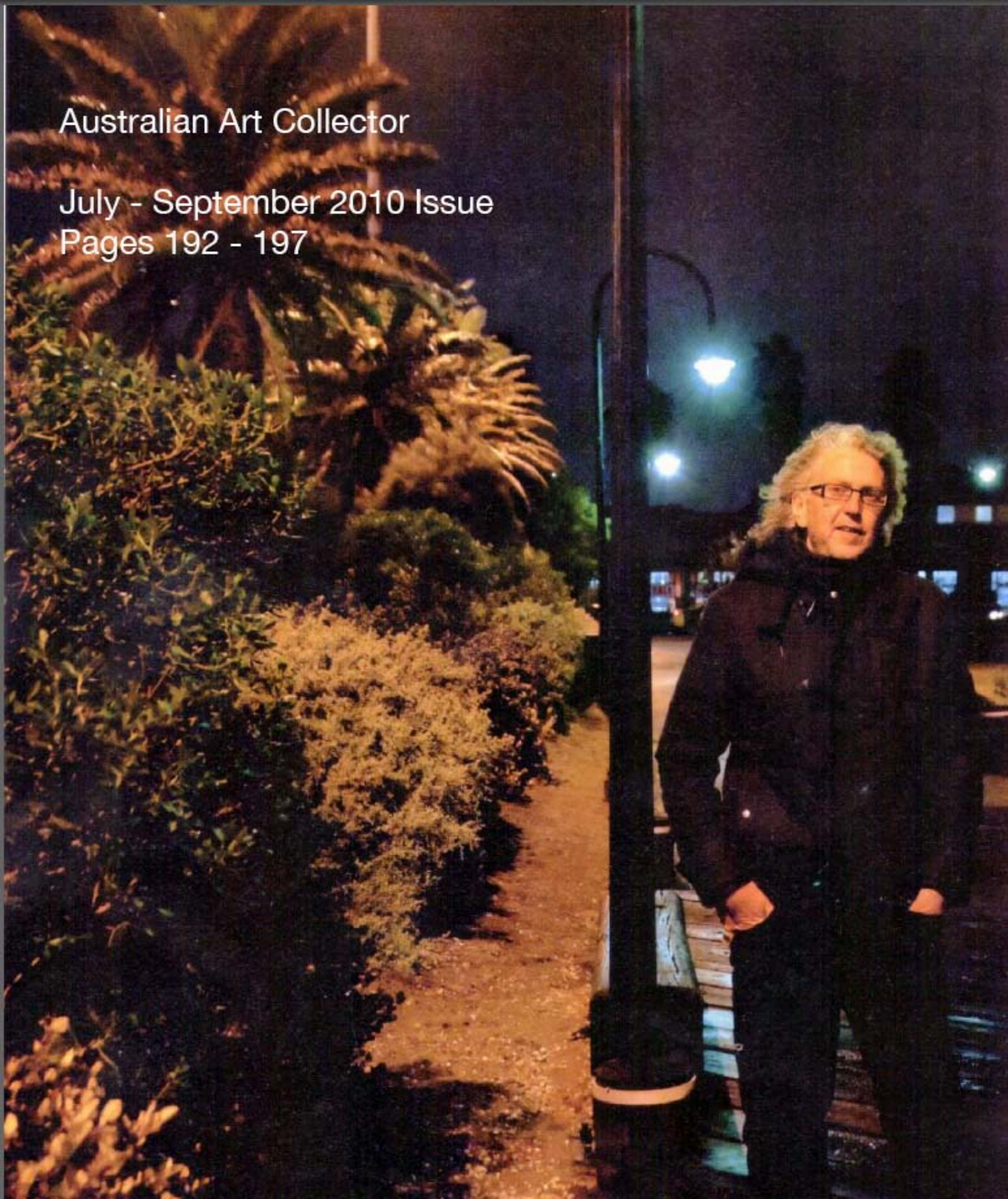


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TESTING RORSCHACH

LIKE RORSCHACH BLOTS, BILL SAMPSON'S LARGE-SCALE WORKS FEEL OUT THE VERY BOUNDARIES OF OUR IMAGINATION WRITES **EDWARD COLLESS**. PORTRAIT BY **KIRSTIN GOLLINGS**

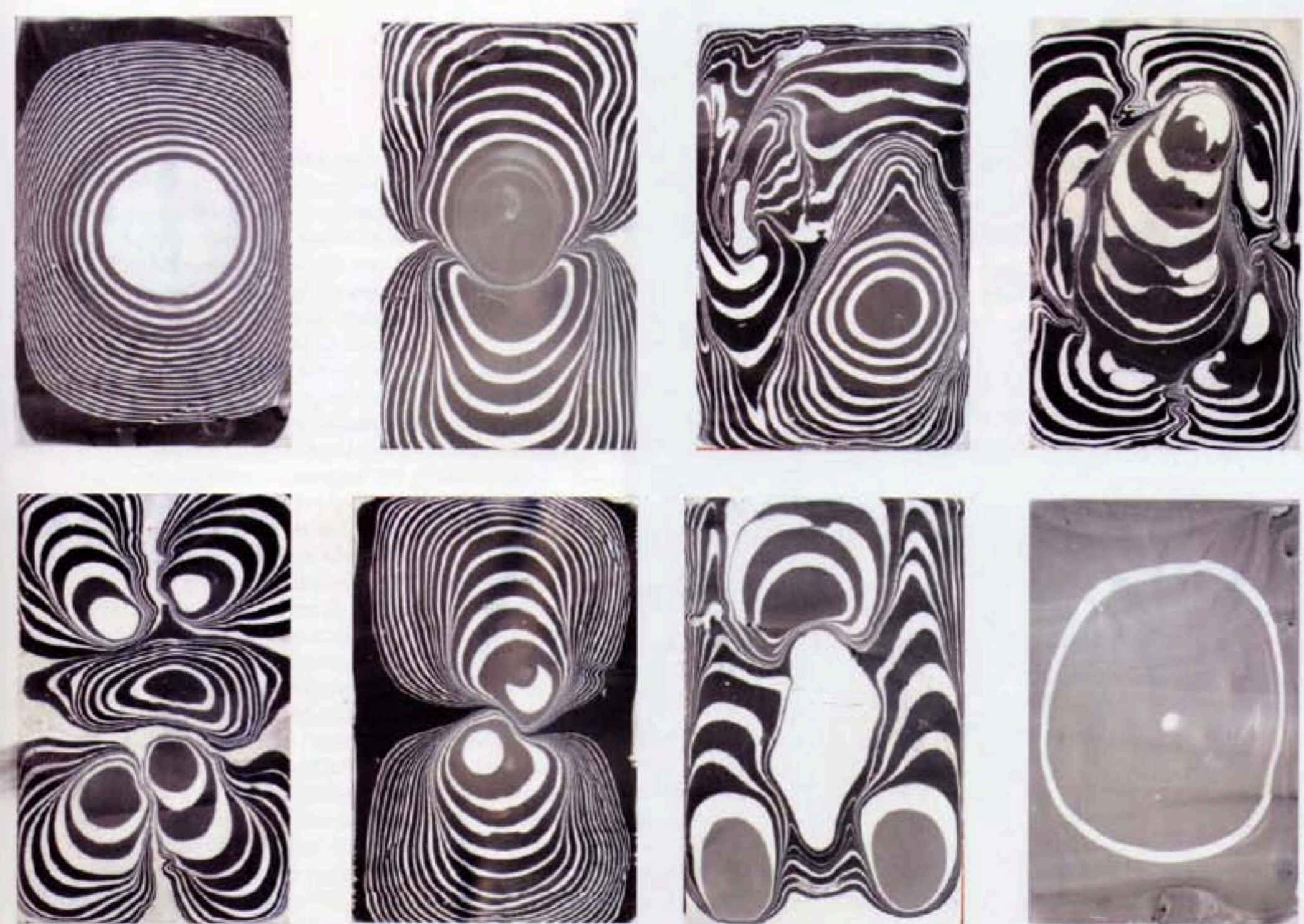


Rorschach blots – those symmetrical butterfly silhouettes of black ink on white card – are used in psychotherapy as prompts for a patient to talk unwittingly about their anxieties, secret wishes or guilt. And what do we see? Usually something we don't care to admit to. **Leonardo da Vinci** provided a similar trigger, not for neurotic confession but to jump-start a stalled artistic imagination, when he advised staring at a stain on a wall for inspiration. In both cases it's crucial that the mark you're looking at is manufactured randomly, so that while it might mean anything – it can also appear, perhaps miraculously or malevolently – to have a hidden meaning revealed exclusively to yourself.

To some extent, **Bill Sampson's** swirling blobs, eddies, whorls, bubbles and gaseous blooms of ink and paint have the same semantic ambiguity as the splodges of **Rorschach** or da Vinci, although judging from his latest paintings Sampson's creativity hardly needs therapeutic nudging. This work is lush, manic, urgent, febrile and in equal parts comic and sinister. And compared to the discrete insinuations or promptings of a crack in a wall that only gradually begins to resemble a mouth or an eye, Sampson's abstractions are so maniacally suggestive and unforced they seem unstoppably garrulous and joyfully arrogant with the hallucinatory charge of optical aberration and even psychedelic auras. But like clouds resembling animals, Sampson's imagery also seems to come out of thin air; at least, it manifests as emanations and waves of some indecipherable energy field, simultaneously spectral and tidal.

In fact, Sampson pulls these images out of a marbling bath, although it's a bath on the scale of a pool and his technique requires breakneck pace and muscularity rather than the delicate dipping associated with marbling as a craft of decoration. Magnifying the dimensions and devices of traditional marbling, he turns the decorative into an indecorous clamour. But there's skilled invention as well as distortion to his technique: concentric radiating bands, for instance, that can flutter nervously or vibrate with sensuous expectation, and that can solidify like geological deposits or a cross-section of tree rings. Yet even when they settle into sediments these striations seem still to be on the move: dribbling and trickling through hairline cleavages, wrinkling and undulating with seismic tremors or migrating and subsiding like the contour lines of sand dunes in a dust storm so that they resemble embryonic cell walls fluctuating and subdividing.

Because these globules and currents are formed on or just below the surface of the marbling bath, their horizon line is laid out flat across the entire skin of the image. It's the perspective of viewing a wafer-thin slice of something liquid, squeezed out or smeared transparently across a microscope slide but at a macroscopic magnitude. Keep in mind too that these images are a sort of monoprint – momentary and indexical transcriptions at a one-to-one scale of something we cannot actually see: the pool's point of view of the corpuscles dancing in its blood stream, or more accurately and technically the flotsam that churns around on its surface. It's the pond's-eye view of its own rippling reflective waves, and of the pond scum occluding its view. Directly stained by these flurries and



currents, these images then are like thumbprints of a primordial soup, swampy and gelatinous and brimming with the stuff that can make life crawl out of it.

And what does emerge from the goop? These elusive and sexually allusive biomorphic shapes jiggle, pout, slide, ripple and shimmy with an animal or insect agility in loony, extravagant gesticulations – feelers prodding, wagging mandibles, phallic stingers and puckering orifices receptively opening, cyclopean eyes blinking on the end of penile stalks or on frenetic spermatozoa. It's as if Sampson has turned the oversized marbling bath into a lens or mystically charged photographed plate on which we are seeing an otherwise invisible storm of mischievous sprites and spooks leaving their impressions. Just when you thought it was safe to go in the water.

Bill Sampson's next solo exhibition, *Little Deaths*, will be staged at Melbourne Art Rooms in Port Melbourne from 3 to 29 August 2010.

ALISON INGLIS

SENIOR LECTURER, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

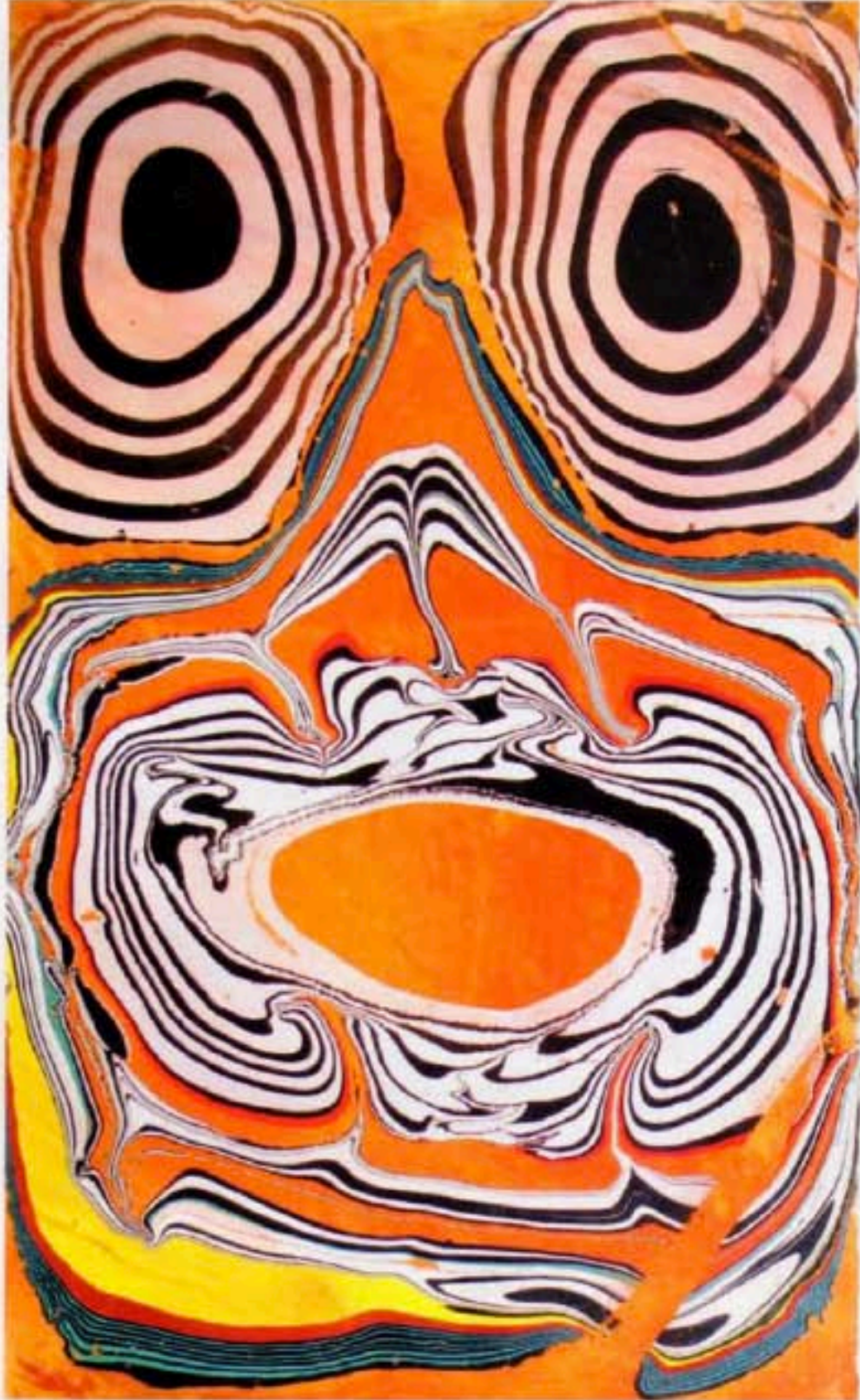
"He's such an original voice in the contemporary art scene," says Alison Inglis recalling 19th century marbled book endpapers while discussing Sampson's paint surfaces. The art historian first sighted

his work in 2003. The paintings that were on exhibition also earned him the Keith & Elisabeth Murdoch Travelling Fellowship. Inglis noted the conceptual underpinnings of Sampson's practice to be innovative and rigorous and saw his work as culturally relevant. "Bill represents a radical camp in contemporary art, [he] believes in the expressive possibilities of art and its making."

Sampson's art involves chance, a removal of human control in the way the dadaists and the expressionists experimented with art. There is a spontaneity to the process, further articulated in exuberant titles – try *Smart, Modern, Swish: Australia has it all* and *You can't be serious for starters*. Inglis asks whether Sampson's works should be read "simply as a meditation on the nature of high camp, in which style triumphs over content and sensation?" then suggests such questions falter before the "sheer visual exuberance" of the work.

Sampson's challenging and dynamic abstractions have attracted the attention of notable collectors including Susie and Scott Livesey, National Australia Bank, Hallis and Dawson & McDonald, auguring well for longevity in the annals of art history. And how does Inglis see Sampson's work holding up in time? "I really don't know where he'll be but I think he's great. He is an enthusiastic, unmistakable voice in the contemporary scene so I'm excited to see how his practice unfolds."

Courtney Kidd



ANDY DINAN

DIRECTOR, MELBOURNE ART ROOMS

Melbourne Art Rooms director **Andy Dinan** has exhibited **Bill Sampson's** work since 2006 after seeing his paintings at the Victorian College of the Arts. The work, part of the artist's PhD submission, met the gallerist's criteria for MARS: "... extravagant, intellectual, thought provoking, magnificent and manic with movement". Dinan works on gut reaction to an artist, the strategy being that if she wants the work "desperately," her clients will too. She says she also "knew" Sampson's hypnotic works would look beautiful in the cavernous warehouse space.

Seven previous solo exhibitions had prepped the artist for his inaugural solo show with MARS, which resulted in 70 per cent sales including an Artbank purchase. In 2007 paintings approximately 150 by 200 centimetres were selling for just under \$8,000. At his 2009 show *RocoCozenism*, prices increased proportionally according to size and medium. Dinan expects Sampson's prices will increase by 20 per cent

(as has been the case with each of his exhibitions) when the artist's work next goes on exhibition in August 2010.

It would also appear that collectors hold onto his work as there are none appearing on the secondary market. Dinan believes there is too much evidence of his viewers becoming lost in the visual feast to not want to part with it. The MARS director is obviously enthusiastic about Sampson's talents. "He is important, is always evolving, never repetitive and not intent on giving what the market wants," she says. This gives Sampson's practice a rigour and integrity much admired by his ardent followers. So what can we expect in the forthcoming show? "A new type of tension ... like a time bomb ... ticking."

Courtney Kidd

From above left:
Both Bill Sampson, *I felt no warmth in reason*, 2010. Acrylic on paper, 50 x 64cm.
Bill Sampson, *Complete familiarity with the unplaceable*, 2010. Acrylic and ink on paper, 204 x 120cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND MARS, MELBOURNE

