



Fig 1. Installation view, *Thoughts and Non-Thoughts*, Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 2013, with *systematic*, oil and pencil on canvas, 2010.



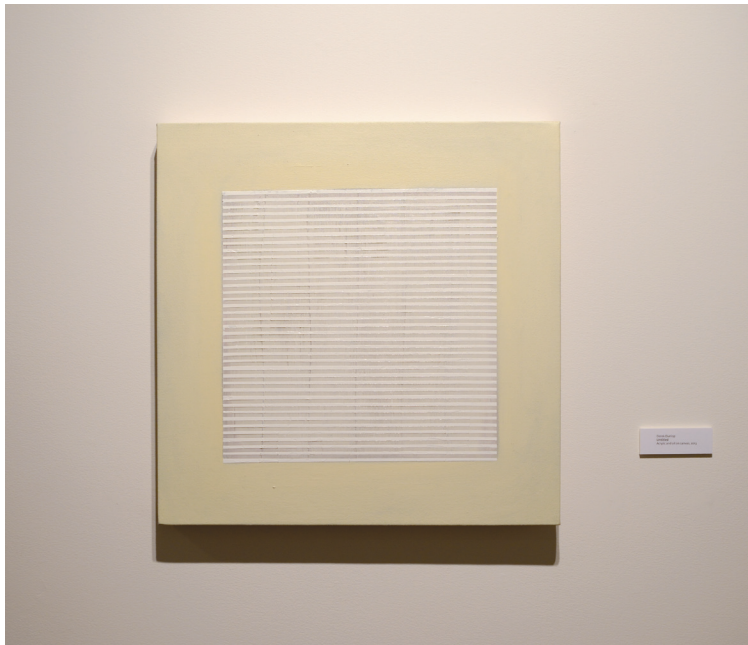
(detail) *Untitled*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 2013.

#### DEREK DUNLOP

Derek Dunlop was born and raised in Winnipeg. He received his BFA in Visual Arts from Simon Fraser University and his MFA in Visual Arts from the University of British Columbia. Since graduation, he has participated in group shows and conferences both nationally and internationally. He has a socially engaged studio art practice influenced by a variety of critical discourses including phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Over the past several years, he has increasingly committed to the materiality of paint, in which he sees a future for new and important aesthetic experience.



Fig. 3. Installation view, *Thoughts and Non-Thoughts*, with *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 2011.



*Untitled*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 2013.



Fig. 4. *Untitled*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 2013.



Fig. 2. *systematic II*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 2013, and *Untitled*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 2013.



*Untitled*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 2012.

## THOUGHTS AND NON-THOUGHTS DEREK DUNLOP

CURATED BY NATALIA LEBEDINSKAIA  
SEPTEMBER 26 – NOVEMBER 16, 2013

ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA  
710 ROSSER AVENUE, UNIT 2  
BRANDON, MANITOBA. R7A 0K9

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Derek Dunlop’s recent paintings in *Thoughts and Non-Thoughts* invite a particular commitment to close looking, while evading definitions or direct interpretation. Powerfully and piercingly difficult to talk about, they are participants in the construction of knowledge and awareness that exists slightly outside the limits of language. The visual vocabulary they create pulls together concerns about spiritual, social, and political being, while rendering these questions into a function of visual perception. They hold the viewer’s attention long enough, guiding the eye in a constant movement between the surface of the canvas and its depth, that a state of contemplative connection is formed with these (almost) nonrepresentational images. However, their strong tie to the material world also induces a slight wavering recognition, as the patterns begin to seem familiar. This sense of opaque familiarity is both disorienting and comforting, leading to a search for meaning that must rest within the image, which in turn holds specific references to the outside world. The paintings assure us of their presence as images that are, but not quite, imitations of an outside reality.

Dunlop’s interest in abstract painting is strongly connected to its history, from Kazmir Malevich’s square paintings to Agnes Martin’s grids. His work develops ideas by these predecessors, further exploring concerns about utopia, difference, and perception. To paraphrase Maria Lind in her introductory essay to *Abstract Art*, the history of abstraction is a movement between “ideal and matter, transcendentalism and structuralism....”.<sup>i</sup> These relationships lead to a complex intertwining of idealism with abstraction’s moral mission, while holding on to ideas of spirituality and transcendentalism. There is also a continual and often fraught kinship with vernacular practices, such as craft, ornamentation, and architecture. At the core of these investigations, however, is a belief that pushing art forward and imagining new ways of creating it can lead to a better world.

Writing about the roots of abstract painting and its place in revolutionary thought, Boris Groys argues that the abstraction that preceded the Russian Revolution was an exercise in the complete undoing of the previous world. The goal of the artistic revolution within the context of the political revolution, therefore, was to set the stage by working against the desire for preservation of the old way of life. These works did not have to inspire action: tasks of mobilizing the public and critiquing existing structures were left to mass media. Instead, the role of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde, such as Malevich’s square paintings, was to investigate “how can art continue amidst the permanent destruction of cultural tradition and the known world [...]How does one make art that can escape permanent change – art that is atemporal, transhistorical?”<sup>iii</sup> The resulting images were paradoxes. While they survived the undoing of history and nostalgia and were in a sense outside of time, they also became representative of this destruction. They acted as proof that material forces can never be halted, and yet an image can never be completely destroyed. What remained was a testament that there would always be something left in the aftermath of destruction, carrying the promise of a world constantly re-imagined and built anew.

Some of Dunlop’s paintings directly reference forms and symbols of systematic oppression and violence, such as triangle diagrams drawn from a guide used by Nazi guards to dictate treatment of concentration camp prisoners. This complex system relied on combinations of triangles of different colours, lettering, and additional elements such as dots and stripes, to identify individual prisoners by race, affiliation, or nationality. The triangle diagram frames the exhibition in three different iterations: a luminous pink grid of triangles that echoes symbols used to identify homosexuals (Fig. 1 *systematic*, 2010), a bright white (with its small counterpart) that erases the distinctions that the system creates (Fig. 2 *systematic II*, 2013, and *Untitled*, 2013), and an ominous grey black painting with the pattern in a set of repeated grids (Fig. 3 *Untitled*, 2011). There are two other pieces based on direct political references. The first consists of silhouettes of buildings that identify structures in the Middle East, likely used for military training: a mosque, a home, a government building stencilled with a light white wash on bare canvas. The other is a gradated diagram of the human genome, with the colours so subtle that their boundaries are almost imperceptible.

The signs are disembodied within the paintings, while something in their repetition and transformation overwhelmingly points to the cruelty of reduction. The colour becomes a mourning veil pulled over them, concealing, except for texture and shadow, and muting their function of identification. Meanwhile, the underlying structure of paint and medium establishes the works’ materiality and presence, making oil paint appear sculptural. The gestures and mark-making constitute a constant flow between acts of erasure, effacement, and formation that permeates all other paintings in the exhibition, even if they do not carry the same direct correspondence to existing symbolism. Stripes created with thicknesses of paint in the untitled pieces from 2013 echo gaps and lines formed by the patterns in *systematic II*, but these new patterns act as veils to realities that are less directly articulated. Moving through and between them creates a series of encounters that constitute Dunlop’s visual language: a development of specific motifs and strategies that is almost imperceptible but monumentally significant.

The flow within the paintings is triggered by subtle combinations of colour and line, as well as the viewer’s constant negotiation between the forbidding and inviting. The parallel vertical and horizontal lines return to the boundaries of the small paintings, constraining the eye’s movement and keeping them quietly and constantly flickering. The marks within the patterns - vertical ridges on the otherwise smooth horizontal lines making the paint appear as tape, or the barely perceptible changes of colour underneath the veil of white grids - all participate in the interchange of chance and limitation. Writing about Agnes Martin, Jonathan D. Katz suggested that her work rests between perception and cognition; looking is an act of knowing, and vice versa.<sup>iii</sup> In demanding individual engaged perception and the suspension of language, Dunlop’s work similarly creates a heightened sensory awareness. It suggests that the project of authorship and subject formation – the process through which identity is negotiated and established - is an act of revealing and concealing where not

everything remains visible nor accessible. The identity of the paintings as objects is intimately tied to what lies beyond their physical appearance.

Dunlop is interested in developing the concept of semi-autonomy in relation to abstract painting; his paintings rest somewhere between reference and its absence. Their connections to concrete references, whether in diagrams or the artificial constraints of a stencil, are always balanced by a refusal to accept these conditions as fully binding. Liam Gillick, in an essay “Abstract” (2011) argues that this zone of semi-autonomy rests just out of reach, representing the impossibility of having turned something immaterial into an object. As with the process of erasure, the task of bringing into the realm of representation that which eludes it is a utopian goal. The resulting object continues to embody the impossibility of its own existence.

In his last collection of essays “Philosophie de la Relation” (“Philosophy or the Relation,” 2009), the late Martiniquan writer and poet Eduard Glissant presented his theory of opacity as a way of ethically engaging with difference. Opacity allows partial seeing and acceptance of incomplete understanding. It is the quality of an ambiguous gesture that nevertheless carries meaning, or a sense of familiarity with something unmistakably foreign. What is integral to Glissant’s opacity is that it is irreproducible and impossible to pin down, while placing emphasis on specificity that renders any generalizations obsolete. Dunlop’s paintings function within this framework. The pieces about violence and systematic oppression affirm their physical presence so strongly, and dictate their own terms of engagement so firmly, that they act against the violent generalizations that have brought about their symbolism.

Opacity, played out in the moments permitting or resisting entry into the works, is crystallized in the last painting completed for the exhibition (Fig.4 *Untitled*, 2013). The piece is based on patterns that are etched onto glass to literally make it opaque. The surface is shielded by horizontal and slanting white lines, complete with subtle ridges, breaks, and thicknesses. The paint takes on the physical qualities of tape and the practical purpose of etched glass. It partially conceals an ambiguous space from view, allowing only subtle variations in colour and depth to come through. As an opaque or liminal space, it is also a space of great possibility. It forms an interstitial zone that can evade definition, but whose meaning is connected to the “complexity and irreducibility of lived experience.”<sup>iv</sup> The power of these gestures lies not in their externally assigned meaning or translation into language, but in their capacity to ask questions within and through acts of looking.

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## LIST OF WORKS

*Untitled*  
38 x 46, 2012, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Untitled*  
28 x 34, 2011, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Untitled*  
24 x 24, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Untitled*  
30 x 32, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Untitled*  
24 x 24, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Systemic*  
35 ½ x 48, 2010, Oil/pencil on canvas  
*Untitled*  
32 x 32, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Untitled*  
20 x 26, 2012, Carbon on paper  
*Untitled*  
20 x 26, 2012, Carbon on paper  
*Untitled*  
20 x 26, 2012, Carbon on paper  
*Untitled*  
20 x 20, 2012, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*X*  
24 X 30, 2010, Oil and Pencil on canvas  
*16*  
22 x 24, 2011, Acrylic on canvas  
*Untitled*  
24 x 30, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Untitled*  
26 x 26, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Systemic II*  
35 x 46, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Untitled*  
10 x 10, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
*Untitled*  
24 x 24, 2013, Acrylic and oil on canvas  
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All photographs courtesy of the artist.  
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<sup>i</sup> Maria Lind, “Introduction,” in *Abstraction* (London : Whitechapel Gallery ; Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2013), p.10.  
<sup>ii</sup> Boris Groys, “Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich,” *E-Flux Journal* #47 (2013), {<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/becoming-revolutionary-on-kazimir-malevich/>}.

<sup>iii</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, “Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction,” in *Agnes Martin*, Rhea Anastas, Lynne Cooke, et al. (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011), p. 184.

<sup>iv</sup> Jan Verwoert, “Against Interpretations”, *Frieze* 7 (Winter 2012), {<http://frieze-magazin.de/archiv/features/blickdicht/?lang=en>}

