While recently re-watching an early video of Peter Daverington planning, painting then ‘whiting-out’ a thirty-metre long mural on the wall of a Melbourne art gallery, the word ‘shapeshifter’ jumped out from its soundtrack. Collaborating with friends on both mural and video, the track obviously made reference to what went on in Daverington’s artwork: in five days the gallery wall had transformed into a series of illusory volumetric shapes and architectural spaces bound by checkered palisades, ceilings, floors and steps that appeared to float in a black void and recede in two separate vanishing points.

Titled Modulations, this work was produced in 2005, the first year of Daverington’s Masters (MFA) at Melbourne University’s VCA. And while he used paint to shift (our perception of) shapes and spaces in the gallery, the word ‘shapeshifter’ could also pertain to his entire visual arts career.

Being a person or thing that is transformed, voluntarily or otherwise, from one form to another, shapeshifters are commonly used as a literary device in mythology, fairy tales, horror stories and science fiction. The shape or form that a person/thing becomes usually either enables their liberation from something or prevents them from doing something. In Daverington’s instance, the word can be applied on two levels: his art is a means of liberation – for himself and audience – as he explores his ideas through the spatial structures or ‘worlds’ he paints. And then, by travelling through space and time across the globe as well as in art history, music and other disciplines, these things become tools through which he transforms both himself and his art.

But it all goes back to painting. And much of it is about space. We all know the canonical (Western) art historical development of linear perspective; as human knowledge progressed and God’s position at the centre of the universe was replaced by man, the representation of space correspondingly changed stylistically from being two-dimensional in the medieval period to three-dimensional (3D) in the proto- and early Renaissance. By the time humanism was in full-swing (1420s), the architect Brunelleschi developed single-point linear perspective, or the ‘vanishing point’, enabling space to be represented as the human eye saw it: in 3D. Slightly later the artist Piero della Francesca refined linear
perspective, one of his classic works being *View of an Ideal City* (c.1470). Notably, della Francesca’s receding black-and-white checkered floor in *Flagellation of Christ* (c. 1454) leads our eyes to the central point of the painting at which a suffering Christ is situated, recalling Daverington’s use of checkered planes in the architectural volumes of his mural to lead our eyes to the black void.

Jump to late 20th-early 21st century Australian art, where architectural form and space are primary to the work of a group of contemporary painters. Perhaps it’s a partial legacy of Howard Arkley (RIP) and his postmodern representations of suburban Melbourne that a number of artists now deal with the subject, deploying a variety of media: from an Arkley-like use of the spray-gun, to the traditional paint brush. Artists Jon Cattapan, Louise Forthun and Stephen Haley alongside the younger Darren Wardle and Raafat Ishak spring to mind, though – apart from Ishak’s and some of Haley’s works – most seem to prefer engaging with real or imaginary modernist, gridded city high-rises or designer homes than Australian suburbia (which others deal with in the realm of the banal or uncanny).

While these artists’ oeuvres were developing, Daverington (‘Punch’) was one of several now successful visual artists who participated in Melbourne’s formative graffiti ‘movement’ (including Ash Keating, Russ Kitchin and Andy Mac, who runs City Lights and Until Never in Melbourne’s CBD). After then travelling the globe for twelve years, including living and studying the ney (flute), Ottoman and Sufi music composition, and calligraphy in Egypt and Turkey, Daverington returned to Melbourne in 2003 to study (completing his MFA in 2006) and work hard at establishing himself as a professional exhibiting studio artist. While much of his oeuvre has also engaged with modernist and postmodern architectures, the knowledge and experience gained from travel also seep into his work.

As an interesting hiatus, a combination of these disciplines appeared in a series of works he exhibited in 2007. This comprised twenty-two (plus one) analytical drawings using the Whirling Dervish – a Sufi devotional ceremony as a kind of architecture through which to explore human existence. Like the stars in a clear night sky, the series begins with a very distant view above numerous whirling Dervishes who appear as a ‘field’ of tiny white dots on a black ground (or void). Gradually the drawings move in closer on the whirling figures until one individual is focused upon, whereupon the drawings continue ‘moving in’ on the circulating folds of the Dervish’s ceremonial dress that cyclically fragments back into smaller and smaller parts – ‘as in the macrocosm, so in the microcosm’.

For most of the period between 2005 and 2007 Daverington’s works were predominantly building-less and, like Brunelleschi, did not contain any signs of people, ‘nature’, or mess. The skillful deployment of a slightly skewed perspectival space in works such as *Speedscape* (2005) and *Ontogenesis* (2005) resemble the interior spaces of autoCAD virtual ‘arcades’, while in works such as *Hyperspace: An Infinite Series* (2006) and *The Illuminated Void* (2007) his use of perspectival space is more traditional; linear geometric ‘hyperspaces’ comprise transparent planes of colour and impossible labyrinthine structures that recede into infinite horizon lines (or ‘vanishing points’) of light.

Rather like Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, Daverington’s 2005 paintings suggest a critique of the production and consumption that occurs within today’s virtual spaces comparable to Benjamin’s critique of 19th century Paris’s arcades of unfulfilled
desire. Functioning as streets for the spectacle of consumer culture, the windows in these paintings were filled with the ‘aura’-less products of industrial production that few could afford. Today, as analogue vision – emulating the human eye (in 3D) – is being phased out, we are experiencing an increase in the production and consumption of a digital one through television, cinema and the hardware and software required for games and computer-aided design. Within this, software programs such as autoCAD are a means by which the housing of our ever-growing population is being designed, built and sold. While also representing unfulfilled desire, as the price of real estate continues to escalate, it’s gradually destroying the once-basic relationship that existed between humans and nature, or the ‘landscape’.

In his _Vertigo_ (2005), on the other hand, arabesques float in an architectural space comprised of repeated checkered planes that also recedes into a central vanishing point. While harking back to della Francesca’s _Flagellation of Christ_, and Daverington’s mural, the influence of Islamic mathematics and geometry are very present. Arabesque art consists of a series of repeating geometric forms which are occasionally accompanied by calligraphic or arabesque forms that appear to ‘run off’ the canvas. Together these allude to an infinite pattern that extends beyond the visible material world, a symbol that God’s creation is not only decentralised but has no beginning and no end. Daverington’s central vanishing point – symbolising ‘man’s central position in the universe since the Renaissance – provides an interesting juxtaposition against this symbolic recession into infinity.

His linear geometric ‘hyperspaces’ became more minimal in 2006 and 2007. With a hint towards classical architecture, except for its mathematical basis on ideal human proportions, Daverington’s repeated transparent planes cross at a central point in 3D (x, y and z axes). This suggests a labyrinth, a sacred geometry deployed since pre-Christian times that represents an holistic universal order comprising north, south, east and west as well as upper and lower planes (comparable to later Christian notions of heaven and hell, with earth, or ‘man’, in between). More recently, the labyrinth is said to represent the ‘existential dilemmas of modern, urban man, who finds himself trapped in a prison-like world and condemned to wander aimlessly therein’. With Daverington’s concerns about the increasing domination of virtual space and contemporary architecture, this seems quite apt.

In 2008 Daverington’s aforementioned lamentations for the land become literal. In works like _Imprisoned Landscape_ (2008) Romantic depictions of a dramatically sublime ‘nature’ appear trapped in labyrinths that were now painted in a reduced and darker palette. His work also ventured off the canvas, becoming an installation in _Ali Laam Meem_ (2008); on the end wall of the gallery, Daverington painted a huge, elegant mountain trapped inside a structured hyperspace. This was reflected in a huge metal plate that he ‘mirrored’ with the application of a heat gun. Exploring 19th and 20th century depictions of landscape by German Romantic artists Caspar David Friedrich and Karl Blechen and the later German-American painter Albert Bierstadt, Daverington extended these concerns in 2009.

It was during the Renaissance that depictions of nature first gained significance, especially in the background of paintings of Madonna – Leonardo Da Vinci’s _Virgin of the Rocks_ (1483–6) being a fine example. Continuing as a subject, the landscape eventually became its own genre (which has since been deconstructed). Daverington’s interest in painted representations of nature has since broadened from the Romantic and Sublime, his more recent works referencing (sur)realistic depictions by the Flemish artist Bruegel and colonial Australian representations by Eugene von Guérard.
But it is Daverington’s ‘shapeshifting’ activity – across forms, ideas, time and space – that was crucial to his exhibition Poiesis at Melbourne’s Arc One Gallery last September. Here, he left his smoothly rendered virtual spaces behind for a new body of works that could have been mistaken for a group exhibition about painting. Continuing to travel, and to study and draw from a variety of art historical periods and artists as well as some of his own history (i.e., his early murals), he explores the possibilities of paint (using a palette knife in works such as the bizarre speculation in Glacial Palm, 2011) and engages a whole host of new ideas and motifs – such as a female (or hermaphrodite?), Christ painted in the style of Byzantine Iconography, or an autumnal forest that confusingly appears like a kitsch wallpaper interior. A fitting footnote to Poiesis was Daverington’s award last December of the City of Port Phillip’s annual Rupert Bunny Foundation Visual Arts Fellowship, established to ‘support a contemporary visual artist with an identifiable commitment to visual arts excellence’. Daverington’s artistic achievement to date is certainly ‘identifiable’ even as he shifts skillfully, almost elusively between an increasing range of ‘shapes’ (forms and concepts) in his ever-questing, multidimensional creativity.

Peter Daverington’s most recent solo exhibition, Poiesis, was shown at Arc One Gallery, Melbourne, 13 September to 8 October 2011. For details on the 2011 Rupert Bunny Foundation Visual Arts Fellowship, see: portphillip.vic.gov.au/rbf_fellowship.htm

2. Walter Benjamin, Arcades Project, 1927–40, but unfinished as he died in 1940; first printed in the 1980s after which numerous versions have appeared.

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