

# A journey into abstraction

## The pictorial language of Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack

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A gift to the University of Melbourne through his widow, Olive Hirschfeld, the collection of the works of the German-Australian artist Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack (1893–1965) at the Ian Potter Museum of Art is a comprehensive and detailed excursion into the mind of an original and progressive artist.<sup>1</sup> In the main, the collection comprises finished works in paint, paper and ceramic, sketchbooks and visual diaries, mostly undertaken at least 15 years after the artist's departure from the Weimar Bauhaus in 1925.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the collection includes a substantial number of works that reflect Mack's preoccupation with the artistic possibilities of abstraction, and its appeal to the universal in its transcendence of national (and nationalistic) boundaries. As a comprehensive example of one of the lone voices of Australian abstract art during the 1950s and early 1960s, it represents an important resource in Australia's art history, both in terms of the history of abstraction in Australia and the artistic progression of Mack himself.

Certainly, if one is to appreciate the independent development of Mack as an artist, one should begin with Mack's works in abstraction. The works represent a fine example of his distinctive experiments with

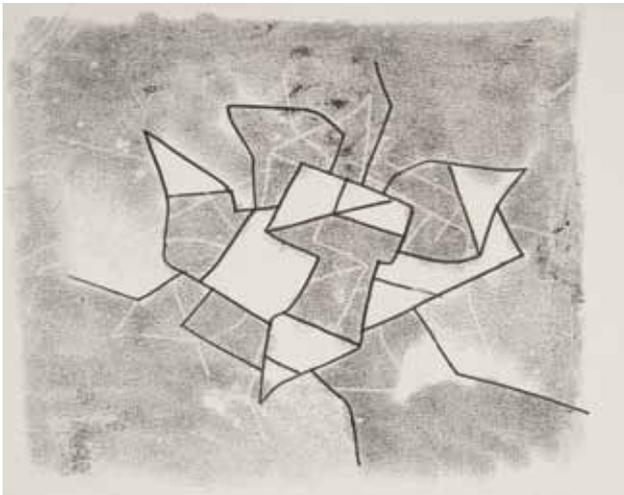
the dynamism of abstract line and form, and reveal the work of an artist with considerable European influence existing virtually unknown right on Australian art's very doorstep. When one considers the veritable lack of abstraction in the works of Australian artists from 1940 to the early 1960s, in conjunction with the departure in imagery, motif and overall conception from his works of the Bauhaus years that these works represent,<sup>3</sup> Mack's originality as an artist is only highlighted. For while it is clear that his early European influences exposed him to a very different artistic vision from that of his Australian counterparts pre-World War II, the works undertaken in Australia show a progression of development quite independent of these influences.

A fascinating and wholly original element of Mack's abstract works held in the Potter's collection are those which utilise a monotype technique known as oil transfer drawing.<sup>4</sup> The Potter monotypes, dating mostly from the late 1950s and early 1960s, form both a unique and distinctively important aspect of the Mack collection because of what they reveal about the artist, his development and his dedication to the pursuit of a singular pictorial language.

The history of Mack's use of the oil transfer technique began at the

Bauhaus. In his first months at the new Weimar school in 1919, Mack was assigned as an apprentice to the print workshop under Lyonel Feininger. Prior to this, Mack had produced some etchings of his experiences of war, but it is only from 1920 onwards that the oil transfer technique begins to appear in his work. It is likely Mack first encountered the technique in the work of Paul Klee, a colleague at the Bauhaus whose studio adjoined Mack's. This period of Klee's artistic output featured the technique heavily, thus it is likely that Mack was aware of Klee's employment of it, and indeed directly observed their production during his time in the print studio. As a 'print' technique, it was favoured by Klee as an immediate process that suited his artistic approach more than the laborious and often collaborative techniques of other forms of printmaking. In agreement with his overall artistic philosophy, it also preserved, 'in transparent layers, the sequence of events through which the image had been constructed'.<sup>5</sup> The process itself involved several steps. After laying the receiving paper on top of the inked plate, he would then place an original sketch or drawing over that, then another piece of paper to protect the original drawing.

Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, Untitled  
(Abstract composition), (n.d.),  
transfer printed ink on paper, 29.5 x 43.3 cm.  
Left: recto; right: verso. Reg no. 1982.0124.075,  
gift of Mrs Olive Hirschfeld, 1982,  
University of Melbourne Art Collection.  
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Utilising a stylus or other pointed implement, he would then trace the original drawing. The pressure from the stylus would penetrate through to the receiving paper, picking up the ink from the plate below and producing a copy (in mirror image) of the original drawing. Shading could then be applied through the pressure of one's hand or fingertips.<sup>6</sup>

The Potter's monotypes reflect an adjustment to the oil transfer technique not seen in Mack's work prior to his arrival in Australia. This later technique reflects an ingenious and more direct method of printmaking than that which he had employed with Klee at the Bauhaus studios. Using this method, the 'original' drawing is made directly

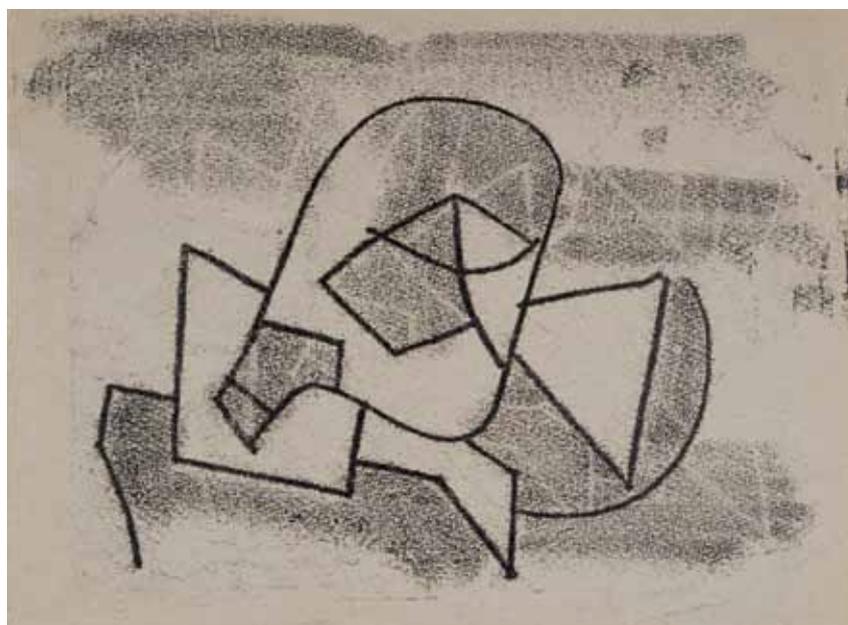
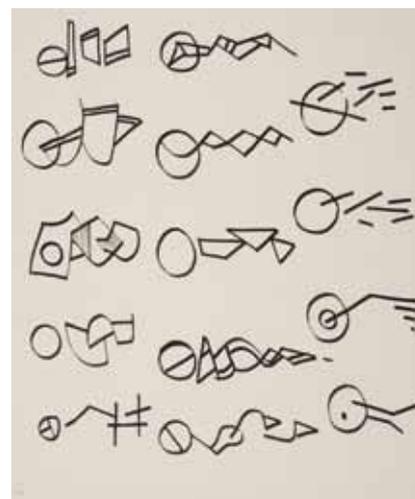
onto the back of the receiving paper with either pencil or ballpoint pen. The 'print' is received on the other side, thus inextricably linking both original and print on the same (but obverse) sheet of paper (illustrated above).<sup>7</sup> Rather than utilising the technique in order to produce a copy of another work, the reasons for choosing it were thus obviously aesthetic—the line produced is of a fine yet darkly definitive nature that varies in its quality according to viscosity of ink, texture of paper and the relative hardness of the pencil or pen used for the 'original' drawing. The technique also introduces the element of chance to the creation process, and the effects produced are in keeping with a Bauhaus

ideal of 'truth to materials'—a method of working that encouraged improvisation, and which was seen to enhance the creative process. The economy of technique also allowed the artist the aesthetic benefits of the production of a softer, printed line, but without the rigmarole of most print processes. The ability to produce such a line in an action akin to drawing undoubtedly informed the imagery used by Mack in many of the monotypes in the Potter collection, most of which are explorations of the natural rhythms of line, form and (where watercolours have been incorporated) colour.

In his own documented references to abstract art, Mack emphasised the importance of movement and

**Right:** Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, *Untitled* (Abstract linear composition), (n.d.), ink on paper, 37.6 x 28.5 cm. Reg. no. 1982.0123.059, gift of Mrs Olive Hirschfeld, 1982, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Reproduced with the permission of Mr Christopher Bell.

**Below:** Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, *Kiss*, (n.d.), transfer printed ink on paper, 29.5 x 43.3 cm. Reg. no. 1982.0124.026, gift of Mrs Olive Hirschfeld, 1982, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Reproduced with the permission of Mr Christopher Bell.



balance in the work of art, and the artist's knowledge of 'pictorial means' through the composition of 'lines, shapes, values of light and dark, of textures and colours'.<sup>8</sup> Mack's objective was not to reproduce nature, but to produce an organic form that appealed to nature in its purity and balance. In several working sketches and drawings in ink and pencil (see example top right) one is able to observe Mack's pursuit of such balance. Almost through the use of a single stroke, Mack explores the potential for change of a particular form through several metamorphoses.

Experimenting between the differing linear effects required to impart the effect of two and three dimensions, in reading each form across the page, one is almost able to follow the artist's train of thought as he pursues a single motif: the use of a circle, a hatched or broken line and its effect upon the whole.<sup>9</sup>

Two monotypes from the collection exemplify this derivation of form to the elemental of two dimensions. In *Kiss* (illustrated above), the swooning embrace of lovers remains just that, two forms entwined as one through Mack's

use of overlapping line and his contradictory application of the advancing and receding qualities of light and shade. Where Mack has incorporated colour, as in the 1956 work *Untitled* (Abstract) (illustrated on page 20), it is used to aid a certain rhythmic flow, often ignoring the deep black, interlocking lines left by the transfer process. This use of colour independent of the dominance of the graphic line and accompanying shades of light and dark also has the effect of creating a certain spatial ambiguity, adding interest and longevity to the viewer's gaze. In *Untitled* (Fish-like forms—yellow, pink, green and blue) (illustrated on page 21 and on front cover), these qualities of light and shade are further contradicted through the use of both colour and texture. This textured appearance is achieved through a slight adjustment to the oil transfer process at the point of preparing the plate. After the application of ink—usually done with a roller to ensure a smooth and even application—the surface is graded by running a comb or similar object through it, removing some ink from places and allowing an excess or build-up in others. In effect, this working of the plate is akin to the more traditional painterly monotype technique of manipulating ink or paint upon a smooth surface to

Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, *Untitled (Abstract)*, 1956, transfer printed ink with watercolour on paper, 17.3 x 24.7 cm. Reg no. 1971.0022, gift of Mrs Olive Hirschfeld, 1971, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Reproduced with the permission of Mr Christopher Bell.



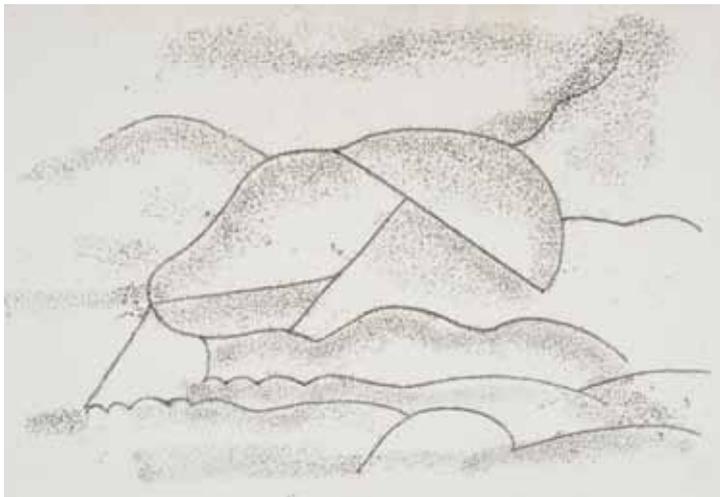
create an image that is subsequently printed onto a piece of paper after running through a press. The outline and shading of the drawn image are thus compromised by the uneven application of ink on the plate. In this work, the striations in the ink are more readily seen in the areas shaded through the pressure of the artist's hand or fingertips, made when creating the transferred image. Mack's application of colour consolidates the flattened form of the central fish-like shape, with those colours surrounding it adding a rhythmic flow, but no depth.

Many of the monotypes, such as *Untitled (Abstract composition with wave shapes)* (illustrated opposite,

above), and *Untitled (Abstract composition)* (illustrated on page 23), feature a large, unadorned 'vessel' of intersecting shapes and shades anchored to the centre of the page by either a definite horizon line that alludes to earth and sky, or by radiating horizontals that emanate from the vessel itself. Akin to a single musical chord played in open silence, these benign vessels loom between the second and third dimension, waiting over their vacant landscapes as sentinels of pure form. Although the oil transfer technique marries perfectly with the use of watercolour (the watercolours are repelled by the oil-based lithographic ink used, and thus lines do not bleed into colour),

many of the monotype works held by the Potter use no watercolour at all and are startlingly elegant in their simplicity. Deceptively rudimentary in their minimalism, Mack's use of overlapping and interconnected lines, combined with his deft employment of shading, allude to a certain depth, but always cleverly deny it. The direction of line in all of these 'vessel' monotypes extends horizontally, which at once alludes to the possibility of a landscape while also providing a static sense of balance and harmony. As viewers, our eyes are automatically centred on the page.

In *Untitled* (illustrated on page 22), the central figure is anchored in its landscape by horizontal fields both above and below, the boundaries of two worlds, between which a central vessel remains. This interplanetary 'head' is a combination of repeated circles, of different sizes and shades, and some truncated in form. This use of repetitive form gives a sense of unity—that even those separate remain to be considered as satellites, remaining as an interconnected singular being. The dominant use of blue for the circular form is a 'natural' combination in keeping with Bauhaus colour theory and the 'language' of colour.<sup>10</sup> The theme of 'between two worlds' was a constant and favoured motif of Mack's. It is possible to apply



Left: Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, *Untitled* (Abstract composition with wave shapes), (n.d.), transfer printed ink on paper, 29.5 x 43.4 cm. Reg no. 1982.0124.040, gift of Mrs Olive Hirschfeld, 1982, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Reproduced with the permission of Mr Christopher Bell.

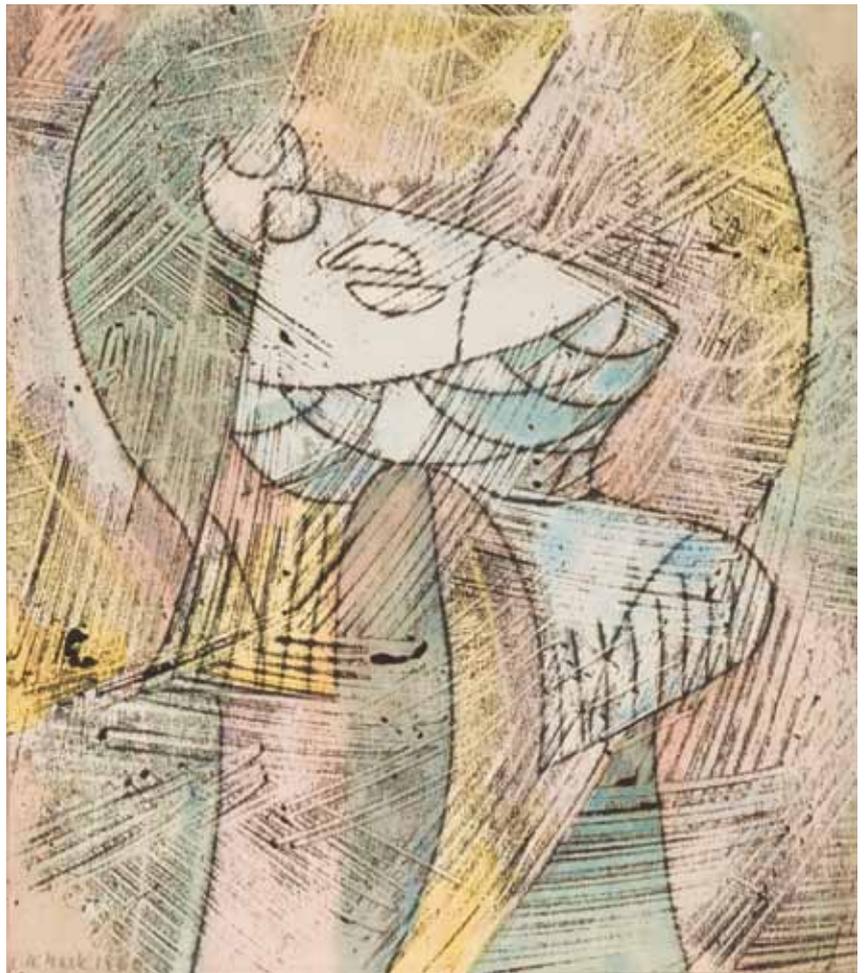
Below: Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, *Untitled* (Fish-like forms – yellow, pink, green and blue), 1960, transfer printed ink with watercolour on paper, 23.6 x 20.5 cm. Reg. no.1982.0099, gift of Mrs Olive Hirschfeld, 1982, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Reproduced with the permission of Mr Christopher Bell. See also detail on front cover.

this theme to Mack's experiences as an immigrant in Australia and, before that, as a displaced German exiled because of his political beliefs. It is worth considering this motif in a more spiritual sense, however, in light of his intention for the higher purposes of art and its use as a tool of self-discovery in the spiritual journey of the individual. Mack's spiritual interests tended to steer away from doctrinal Christian religion and, while he was referred to as a saintly figure by students and work colleagues alike, this serenity could have its antecedents in multiple sources rather than any singular one. From his initial days at the Bauhaus with Johannes Itten—a follower of the Mazdaznan sect—to his own readings in Theosophy (where planets and solar systems are conscious entities in themselves),<sup>11</sup> it could be said that Mack's interests in the spiritual—and the very nature of human existence—were wide and varied. Certainly much of his imagery focussed on the universal man and his connection with wider humanity and creation.

This connection and the application of art as a balm for a disjointed, displaced and generally traumatised society—its possible psychological and physiological benefits and its application to broader

use—were not concepts unique to the Bauhaus, but this overall philosophy was one of the central proclamations of the art school's manifesto upon its establishment in 1919.<sup>12</sup> With

colleagues such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Laszlo Maholy-Nagy, Mack studied and worked alongside the pioneers of modernism in a questioning of every kind of tradition,



Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, Untitled, 1958, transfer printed ink and watercolour on paper, 15.8 x 21.9 cm. Reg no. 1971.0027, gift of Mrs Olive Hirschfeld, 1971, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Reproduced with the permission of Mr Christopher Bell.

that they hoped would lead to a new way of living and of considering the world. Much of this involved a reduction of the visual arts to their most basic elements—the relationship between form and colour, the rhythm of point and line—and then the application of those discoveries to the development of an aesthetic in industry, design and the visual arts that, when applied to all the things that surround us, would result in a unity within society. While this objective may be considered utopian, it reflected an important moment in the consideration of art, its purpose and reception. The seemingly radical breaking down of barriers between the ‘high’ and ‘applied’ arts saw the beginning of art that existed outside the walls of museums and the educated and stepped into the lives of society at large.

Taking this into account, it is important to consider Mack’s monotypes as part of a broader artistic project that included his paintings, his experiments with light and colour, and his emphasis on the importance of the visual arts in education. The problem of form that he addressed in his monotypes was a problem to be solved by the pursuit of a balance and unity that was not a representation of the seen in nature, but was instead akin to an act of creation

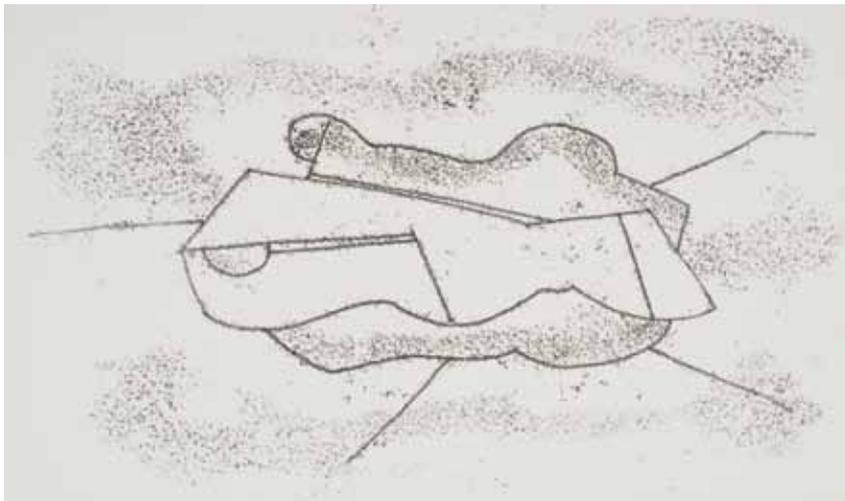


in the presentation of a version of the unseen. While Mack may have worked quite independently of the small yet active group of Australian abstract artists that began to emerge in greater numbers from the early 1960s, the place of his abstract works in Australia’s art history remains no less important. For while Mack’s works share the utopian aspirations of his abstractionist contemporaries in Australia in their pursuit of a universal pictorial language, they also form a direct and important link to the original European proponents of abstraction in western art.

Stacie Bobele completed her Master of Arts (art history) at the Australian National University in 2008. This article is a result of her research undertaken as the inaugural Ursula Hoff Intern, based at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.

#### Notes

- 1 Of German descent, Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack came to Australia in 1940 aboard the refugee ship, *Dunera*, along with 2,000 other men. Upon his arrival, he was interned briefly in the camps at Orange and Hay, then at Tatura. His release was secured in 1942 by Sir James Darling, then headmaster of Geelong Grammar School, where he was appointed art master. He remained in the position for 15 years until his retirement. For further



Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, Untitled  
(Abstract composition), (n.d.),  
transfer printed ink on paper,  
20.1 x 28.0 cm. (The orientation of some of these  
unsigned abstract works is open to interpretation.)  
Reg no. 1982.0124.041,  
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- biographical information see Tim Fisher, 'Hirschfeld-Mack, Ludwig (1893–1965)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 14, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996, pp. 457–458; and Andrew McNamara on Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack in Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad (eds), *Modern times: The untold story of modernism in Australia*, Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing in association with the Powerhouse Museum, 2008. Resi Schwarzbauer and Felicity Renowden are currently researching Mack's biography.
- 2 Several months after Mack's death in 1965, his widow Olive Hirschfeld contacted the National Gallery of Australia with a view to donating many of her husband's artworks. Distribution of this substantial donation took place over several years and resulted in Mack's works being held in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, National Gallery of Victoria, Queensland Art Gallery and the University of Melbourne. Several regional galleries also benefited from this generous donation. Mack's works are also held at the Bauhaus-Archiv in Darmstadt and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.
  - 3 The National Gallery of Victoria holds several works from this period such as *Fries* (c.1920s) and *Stadt* (c.1922) which have a distinct figurative and fantasy-like narrative quality, differing greatly from Mack's Australian works of the late 1950s and early 1960s.
  - 4 The technique is also known in German as *Durchdruckzeichnung*.
  - 5 Jim Jordan, 'Klee's prints and oil transfer works: Some further reflections', in *The graphic legacy of Paul Klee: An exhibition of Klee's prints*, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Edith C. Blum Art Institute, Milton and Sally Avery Centre for the Arts, Bard College Center, 1983. The immediate origins of this technique can be found in Paul Klee's drawings of the 1902–1905 period, where Klee would colour the backs of his drawings in red chalk, scoring them with a stylus for a direct transfer onto a bottom sheet.
  - 6 This technique is also used for transferring a drawing to the lithographic stone. When done in this way, the print produced is a true replica of the original image, rather than being a mirror image or reversal, as is common with the printing process.
  - 7 Several oil transfer works from Mack's time at the Bauhaus are held in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia and National Gallery of Victoria; none of these shows evidence of pencil or pen impressions on the verso, which suggests the use of a stylus at the very least. Whether these works were 'copies' of original drawings is difficult to confirm. It is also impossible to say whether this later technique was a learnt one, or one that occurred to Mack independently. Certainly, the technique was used by other European and British artists contemporaneously to Mack, particularly when in straitened circumstances, given its economy of means and materials. Interestingly, a fellow *Dunera* refugee, the Melbourne-based artist Erwin Fabian, also uses the technique extensively but claims to have not crossed paths with Mack in an art practice sense while interned at Tatura. (Erwin Fabian, Interview with Stacie Bobele, 24 May 2010.)
  - 8 Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack, Lecture notes on abstract art. Accession no. 1971.0009, reference 4/3/18, Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack Collection, University of Melbourne Archives. Donated by Olive Hirschfeld in September 1971, the University of Melbourne Archives' Ludwig Hirschfeld Mack Collection is the largest single holding of Mack's personal notes, letters, diaries, catalogues and photographs. Combined with the extensive collection of artworks in the Ian Potter Museum of Art, they represent an astonishing and comprehensive record of the life of the artist.
  - 9 These working drawings reflect the artistic practice of Henry Moore, whose studio Mack visited in late 1949. In his own notes, Mack explained that in these drawings 'Moore derives his results from a subconscious search. He showed me his daily exercises in pencil, crayon and watercolours ... a few years ago in London. There were large packets of such practices and rows of small sketches, which he developed in linear arrangements across the pages. They were similar to the way Klee started a flow of lines in variations.' (Mack, Lecture notes on abstract art.)
  - 10 Wassily Kandinsky initiated an experiment that involved sending hundreds of postcards to the general Weimar public and asking each respondent to match red, blue and yellow with the square, circle and triangle. The results were surprising, with Mack stating that an 'overwhelming number' were returned with the combination red: square, yellow: triangle and blue: circle. Bauhaus colour theory emphasised the objective physical and perceptual effects of colour, rather than its subjective and symbolic uses. Based on established colour systems from Goethe to the scientist Wilhelm Ostwald, colour was investigated at the Bauhaus for its functional and aesthetic purposes, with a specific and compulsory colour theory course. This course was run for two years between 1923 and 1924 by Mack himself. (Clark V. Poling, *Bauhaus color: Exhibition catalogue from the High Museum of Art, Emory University*, Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1975.)
  - 11 Several of Mack's letters refer to different ideas of the spiritual and in one he refers to his reading of Rudolph Steiner's *Astralworld* and C.W. Leadbeater's *Man: Visible and invisible* (Hirschfeld Mack, Letter to Herr Talhoff, 20 November 1925. Inv. no. 2390/1–23, Original letters, Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin.)
  - 12 'Together let us desire, conceive and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise towards heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.' (Walter Gropius, 'Bauhaus manifesto', 1919, in Éva Forgács [translated by John Bártki], *The Bauhaus idea and Bauhaus politics*, New York: Central European University Press, 1995.)