

paul snell
afterglow

Opening Friday December 9th
Closes Friday January 7th

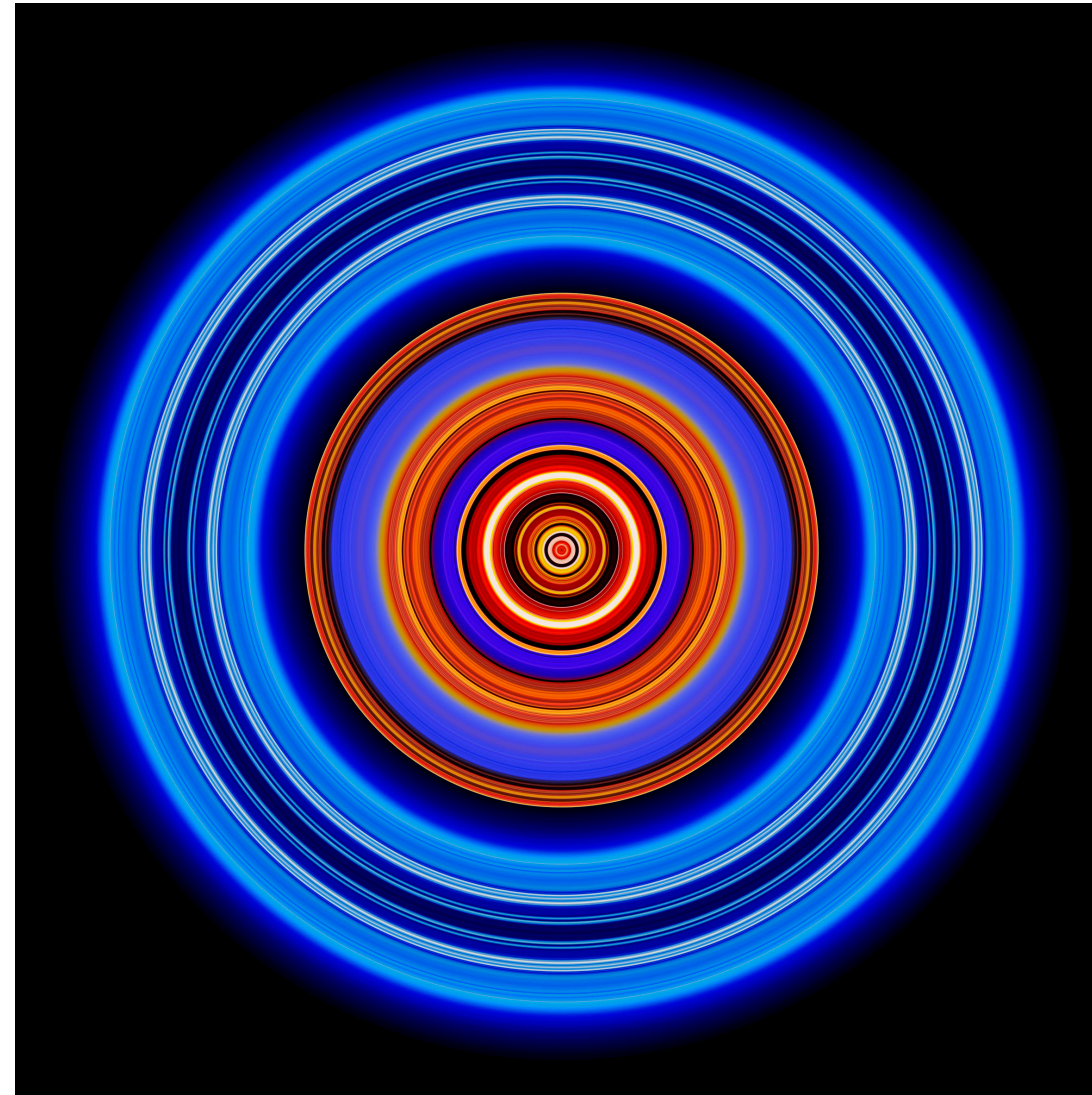
146 artspace
146 Elizabeth Street, Hobart, Tasmania



Represented by

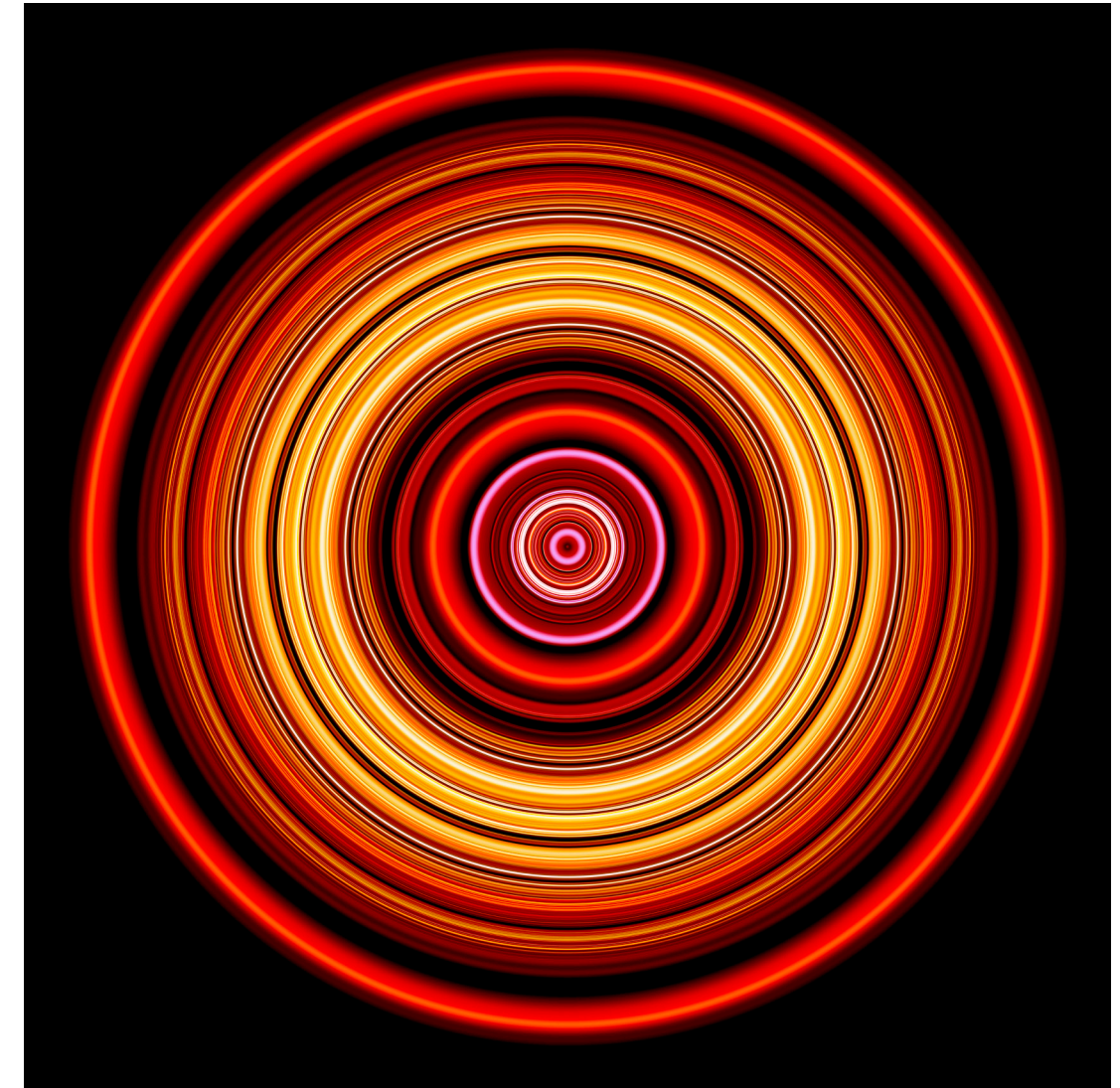


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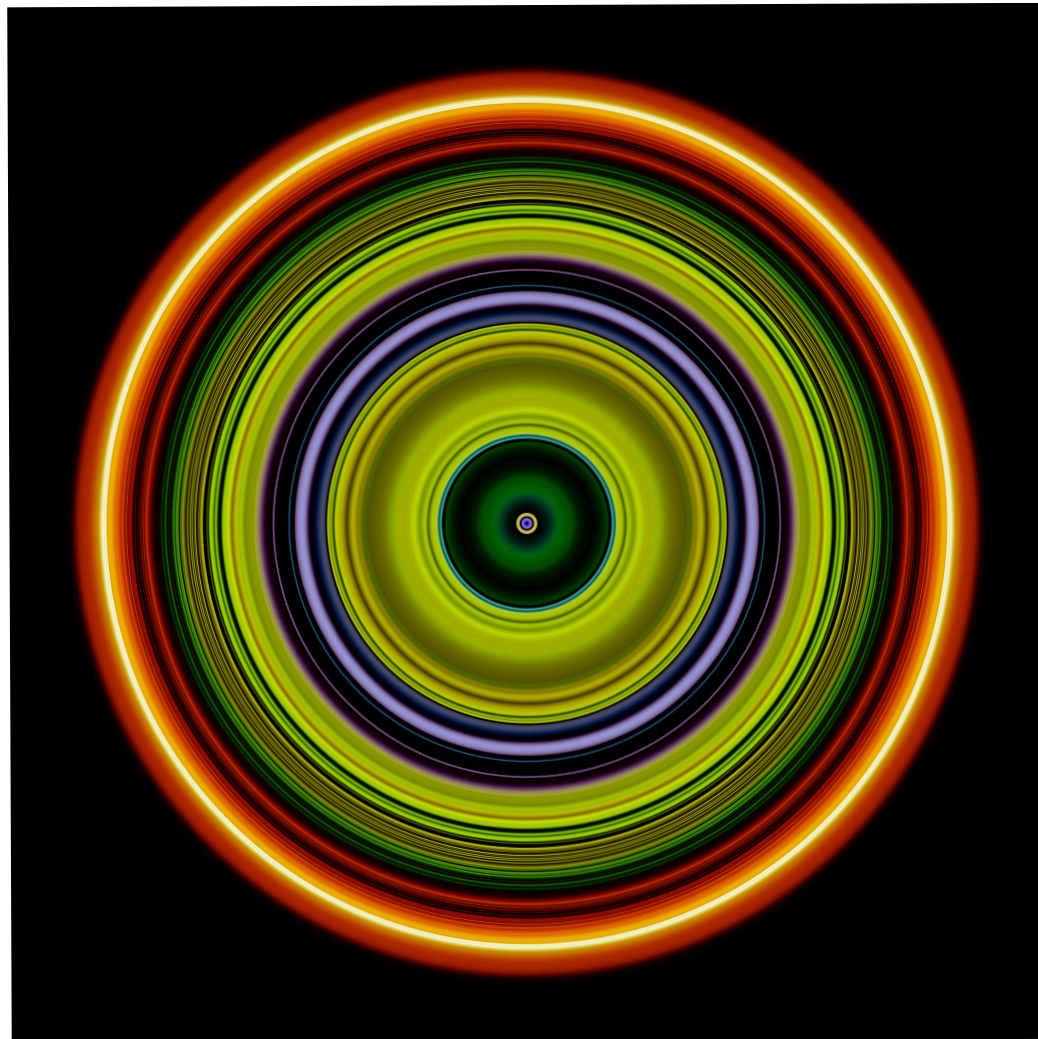


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Pulse #201103
2011
Lambda metallic print
120x120cm

Cover:
Pulse # 201101, 2011
Lambda metallic print
120x120cm

Back page:
Pulse # 201113, 2011
Lambda metallic print
120x120cm

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At first glance Snell's work may conjure up the geometries of Hungarian Victor Vasarely, Britain's Bridget Riley, America's Anonima group and Venezuelans Carlos Cruz-Diez, Jesus-Rafael Soto, all of whom contributed to The Responsive Eye, the major exhibition of optical art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1965. The works are indeed geometric – parallel lines and concentric circles of vibrant colour – a minimalist sensibility abounds.

The work also suggests an allegiance with contemporary concrete photography with its aim to reveal the fundamental possibilities of photography by making photography into something absolute and excluding everything that is non-photographic in order to create a project of formal aesthetics.¹

It is interesting to note the reinstatement of a manifesto. The last time this happened was the Greenbergian moment before postmodernism, deconstruction and critique took over from the capacity to judge a work on the one moment of pure aesthetic transcendence. From this viewpoint Snell's work could be seen as old-fashioned, harking back to a bygone utopia when things, at least at the levels of art, had the capacity for universality. Perhaps this moment was missed by photography. To some degree Maholy-Nagy and Man Ray managed to reduce the photographic image to its constituent parts of form and light, but extrapolating this project with the intensity of a Malevich still remains a seductive call.

For me these are both a false leads. Op Art's dazzling movement, vibrating patterns, warping geometries and generated moiré effects was criticized in its heyday by modernist purists like Greenberg for its stress on illusion and deception that some felt was more aligned to trompe l'oeil than could be tolerated. Op Art's endgame was the aftereffect – the impossibility of holding fast to vision in the struggle to focus on the shifting pulsating surface. In Snell's work the sensations are inverted – optical art's often painful disallowance and rejection of vision is replaced by an effect that draws us in and envelops us. Indeed, in beholding these works a sensation overwhelms and draws the viewer into these tangible palpable plains and vortices.

Snell's work also undermines the ambition of concrete photography, for the experience generated by an encounter with these dynamic modulations of colour is far from objective. Here there is no cool distance from which to undertake the observation. Rather these work extend into the space evoking a desire to enter, a seduction that implicates the subjective body rather than the objective eye.

It is something about photography itself that prevents the complete fulfillment of objectivity. The real world of tangible objects and definable time still adheres to the medium despite the intervention of digital media and the theoretical turn. Concrete photography's manifesto seeks disassociation from the real and yet these works cannot but hold onto their initiating moment even if by the smallest thread. Snell is drawn to Nietzsche's edict that: 'Nothing spoils the enjoyment of art more effectively than the material perception of its manufacture. The noise of work, traces of its having been made, reminders of its status as an artifact and so on counter the effect of art as art.'²

However, despite the considerable efforts made to remove the clues, each work is generated from precise coordinates, a specific geometric orientation and a particular slice through time. Where and when this might be is no longer apparent, nevertheless the magical or banal moments linger within these transformations begging the questions. The photographic reality of the stimulus hovers, for without it the image falls into nothing. In the tiny strands that keep the work connected to the real world something happens – I find myself enveloped in the gap between something and nothing – something and everything.

These works are sublime. In invoking this genre the connection to Snell's painterly sensibility resonates. It is no wonder he is included in this year's Blake Prize for contemporary Australian art that invites artists to explore the themes of spirituality, religion and human justice. While the seductive religiosity of Snell's works is readily perceived and could prove an end in itself, for me the warning to humanity lies in the recognition that as I allow myself to become completely absorbed into their luscious beauty I am hearing the siren sing.

Jane Deeth
September 2011

References

Jäger G (2004) <http://concrete-photography.org/credo-eng.html>, accessed 24 September 2011
² Nietzsche F quoted in Horak R (2003) Rethinking Photography I+II: Narration and New Reduction in Photography, Fotohof Editions, Saltzberg, p.58