



OUT OF THE PICTURE

It is painting by numbers – art created in the absence of the artist. ANGELA BENNIE talked to the people doing the brushwork for Sol LeWitt's vision.

WE JUST follow the plan," says Sachiko Cho, pointing to the wall. There is more to this ingenious remark than it first seems. You could say that Cho has just tossed gracefully into the air one of the foundation precepts of a significant strand of late 20th-century art. Who needs the hand of the great artist to create art? Just a set of plans will do. It is the idea that counts. And ideas are reproducible: just outline them on a plan and anyone's hand will do.

The idea is now being enacted, according to plan, at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art at Circular Quay in a logistical exercise that will see it enter Australian – and international – art history books, alongside Christo's wrap of Sydney's coastline at Little Bay and Jeff Koons's *Puppy*, the flower sculpture erected – according to plans – on the western side of the quay during the 1996 Festival of Sydney.

On the walls of one of the ground-floor gallery spaces and in the vaulted galleries on level 3, the MCA is the site of a conceptual art project from one of America's leading founders and exponents of the minimalist and conceptual art movement, Sol LeWitt.

The project involves plans drawn up by LeWitt in the United States for a series of wall paintings to be executed in Sydney, not by him but by a group of museum workers and volunteers under the instructions of his assistant, Cho.

Brought here under the patronage of the art collector John Kaldor – who also brought us Christo and Koons – the LeWitt



"Wall Paintings" have already been labelled elsewhere as "minimalism's finest hour" and as "everything that modernist art would appear to hold dear, concentrated into an essence".

The project had its genesis in 1968 in a ground-breaking series of wall drawings by LeWitt at the Ace gallery in New York, says Nicholas Baume, the project's curator.

Before the wall drawings of '68, LeWitt was already well established as one of the leading American minimalists. Baume says: "These drawings came very much from the period in the '60s when all the traditions of Renaissance painting were under challenge from the minimalists, in terms of their questions about the use of perspective,

illusion, space and the nature of painting itself."

To this thinking, painting was not about something, it was what it was, merely itself and of itself. If it was about anything at all, then it was about its own qualities, its surface, its materials, the space it occupied.

"But then," says Baume, "Sol also asked the question: why even work on an artificial surface, and then put that on the wall? Why not work directly on the wall? And that was when he first moved from his sculptural explorations of modular structures and began his first pencil drawings on plaster.

"The wall drawings became very famous. But then he moved on from using pencil and crayon in the 1980s and early 1990s into using very lush surfaces of paint

directly onto the wall. He still used very flat pigment and all his colours were derived from one layer of primary over another – black, red, yellow and blue – but he was now using colour, which was unusual."

LeWitt then began to build organised computational patterns upon these colour juxtapositions, upon his ideas about compositional structure, theories of primary and secondary colour, texture, surface and the nature of perception. He began to include the use of matt and gloss paint and juxtapose primary with secondary colour.

"What we have here, what he is doing here for the first time," says Baume of the work in progress at the MCA, "is using secondary colours in these quite wild juxtapositions with primary colours. So in a sense he is throwing out his colour system and embarking on a new investigation. He is beginning to use paint and the density of paint and incorporating surfaces and lines drawn from the use of gloss and matt. There are these huge sumptuous masses of black, gloss juxtaposed upon matt, and the effect is extraordinary.

"In the 1960s, none of his work was to do with colour – he only used white – and yet now here he is, a man in his 70s, turning into one of the greatest colourists of the late modernist period, yet without departing from his strict conceptualist methodology."

This is where Cho and "the plans" enter the picture. Within this methodology, a pivotal premise is that the artist be removed as far as possible from the execution of the work. As LeWitt said in 1967 in an essay quoted in the project catalogue: "When an artist uses a



conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

And when he came to Sydney early this year to check out the space, he reiterated shyly that all he did was give people "oh, just something to see, I guess".

The machine that makes the art might be the idea; and LeWitt

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might be the hand that draws the plan of the idea. But Cho – and, in this case, a small band of volunteers and museum staff – are the people who carry it out. LeWitt draws the plan of his idea in his studio in Connecticut. He gives it to Cho. And Cho? "We just follow the plans," she says.

Cho, who lives in New York, has been carrying out LeWitt's plans for nine years in galleries and spaces around the world. She met the artist in New York when he gave her husband a set of his plans as a gift. On her own initiative Cho executed the plans, bringing the ideas to their material fruition.

"When he saw what I had done, he liked it a lot. Sol liked what I did," Cho says. "So he asked me to do more plans for him, so I did. I feel some rapport with him ... I understand his plans."

Whatever the rapport, it is clear that Cho is no "perfunctory executor".

"She is a perfectionist," says one of the student volunteers on the project, Soren Thorburg. "She is very clear in her instructions; she is an expert in what she does."

Thorburg, a sculpture student from Denmark studying at the National Art School, came to the project by default: he wanted

experience working in museums. But now he is "utterly fascinated" with the artist's ideas and practice.

"It is his use of colours: he is very organised in what he does, the way he first uses the primaries and then the secondaries. I love the way he organises the secondaries so that they seem so much calmer; but they are not, they are just colours."

Matthew Kentmann, a painting student from the College of Fine Arts, is another volunteer. "It's working straight onto the walls that I find very unusual and interesting," he says. "The whole process of it."

Working with Thorburg and Kentmann are two other students, Gabrielle Brauer from the Victorian College of the Arts and Oscar Yanez from the Sydney College of the Arts, and the MCA's senior preparator, Darryl Chapman, and another preparator, John Webb.

Next week, a few days before the project's official opening on Friday, LeWitt himself will fly into town. What will he find? A perfunctory affair? A set of plans well executed? Or an idea?

"Oh, just something to see," he will probably say.

Sol LeWitt's Wall Paintings, a John Kaldor Art Project, will show at the Museum of Contemporary Art from July 31 to November 7.

LeWitt and wisdom ... clockwise from top left: Sachiko Cho, the artist's assistant, explains the plan to a volunteer; beginning the template for a colour pattern; layering the colours with rollers; completed ground-floor south wall, MCA; and Cho inspecting "splits" between colours.

Photographs by JAMES ALCOCK, SAHLAN HAYES and PATRICK CUMMINS