John Young lives and works in a renovated church hall in Alphington, an inner city suburb 10 minutes from the Melbourne CBD. "Done up" to Young’s specifications by architect Peter Brew, the space is bright, minimal, and as expansive as the monumental canvases that have characterised his practice in the 1990s. “This is the first time I’ve had a studio where I could actually work,” he told Australian Art Collector while taking a break from last-minute preparations to the immaculate paintings destined for Sydney and his latest show at Sherman Galleries. “Here I can do five pieces simultaneously!”

In February this year, after forging his career in Sydney, Young made the move to Melbourne, home town of his new wife Kate Mizrahi, an economist and PhD student in Japanese popular culture. Now firmly established in the stables of two of the country’s leading contemporary galleries, and with a résumé spanning two decades that lists major exhibitions throughout Asia, Europe and the US, Young has “arrived.” As prices for his major works have steadily climbed to around $30,000 Young now occupies a comfortable position within the artworld, achieving what many artists aspire to – to make a living from their creative endeavour. Describing himself as “mid-career”, Young may be the very epitome of artistic commitment, yet he maintains an amused, ironic attitude to his career. While the seriousness of his project remains beyond question, he can still face the absurdities of life with a self-effacing laugh.

Born in Hong Kong in 1956, Young lived there until he was 12. Does he remember a particular moment when he realised he wanted to be an artist? “There were lots of Chinese paintings that my mother had collected,” he replies, after some thought. “I was told these stories about people who had run away from disasters who would roll up their paintings and take them with them. That was my image of what art was.”

Like many other 12-year-olds, Young was more involved in watching television than in the political and social events around him. “You had popular culture, American culture, Astro Boy and things like that on television,” he recalls. “But at the same time you had a political reality going on. It was a turbulent time in Hong Kong. A lot of people (emerged from that time) who are doing very interesting work now.”

Young’s parents decided to send him to Australia, and while still at high school he read Andy Warhol’s seminal From A to B and Back Again. While many artists who emerged in the 1980s identified with only the surface, the glamour of Warhol, Young was impressed by Warhol’s transparency, a notion that would later become central to his own painting. “I was fascinated by the fact that Warhol was a constructed persona,” says Young. “But in retrospect, I realised that whatever the reality was behind the persona, he probably wasn’t worth knowing anyway.” From 1974 Young studied philosophy at Sydney University before enrolling at Sydney College of the Arts in 1978. Critics have said philosophy has been a major influence on his work. “Philosophy trains you into a very cerebral approach towards..."
things, but it also reminded me that I was missing the more sensual part of life. That was why I got back into painting, to do something more physical.’

It was in 1982, while Young was on a pilgrimage to places associated with the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that he had his first show. The exhibition ran for precisely one minute, in a house in the small Irish village of Rostrevor. A hundred people from Australia were invited to the opening but only the artist was there to witness it.

The early 1980s was a period of great change in Australia’s art scene. ‘It was when I really stepped into the art world,’ recalls Young. ‘It was an European decade. On the one hand you had people looking towards Düsseldorf and contemporary art. On the other hand, in theoretical circles, everyone was looking towards the Sorbonne.’ Young characterises the 1980s as being largely provincial in attitude but sees it as an important step in the evolution of conceptual painting. ‘The conceptual painters were more intellectually based and perhaps considered their position a bit more,’ says Young of the emerging generation of painters. Young was part of a group called Various Artists Ltd, which included such then-emerging artists as Lindy Lee, Janet Burchill, Jennifer McCamley, A D S Donaldson and Bette Miksd. The group was a loose amalgam of like-minded artists that mounted solo and group shows over a three year period. VAL was symptomatic of the trend towards a conceptual art that reached its height at the end of the decade. Young emerged as one of the group’s leading lights, joining Sydney gallery Yuill/Crowley in 1983 and Brisbane’s Bellas Gallery in 1985.

The early 1980s was a period of great change in Australia’s art scene. ‘It was when I really stepped into the art world,’ recalls Young. ‘It was an European decade. On the one hand you had people looking towards Düsseldorf and contemporary art. On the other hand, in theoretical circles, everyone was looking towards the Sorbonne.’ Young characterises the 1980s as being largely provincial in attitude but sees it as an important step in the evolution of conceptual painting. ‘The conceptual painters were more intellectually based and perhaps considered their position a bit more,’ says Young of the emerging generation of painters. Young was part of a group called Various Artists Ltd, which included such then-emerging artists as Lindy Lee, Janet Burchill, Jennifer McCamley, A D S Donaldson and Bette Miksd. The group was a loose amalgam of like-minded artists that mounted solo and group shows over a three year period. VAL was symptomatic of the trend towards a conceptual art that reached its height at the end of the decade. Young emerged as one of the group’s leading lights, joining Sydney gallery Yuill/Crowley in 1983 and Brisbane’s Bellas Gallery in 1985.

The 1980s also saw the rise of artists who were ready to declare themselves in print. Young was involved in influential Australian publications like XX, On The Brink and Kei Yur Day and contributed to Art + Text. With his background in philosophy Young was better placed than most to write on conceptual art and in turn, the work that he has produced has attracted post-modern academics and writers. Young admits that the writing that surrounds his work could be seen as ‘difficult’ or ‘dense’ but adds that he accepts that this writing is part of a critical reaction to his work. ‘There are a lot of writers I really respect,’ he says. ‘I have actively encouraged their writing because I don’t believe in passivity in the face of theory.’ Young also acknowledges that writing about his work has had some negative effects. ‘It puts people on the defensive straight away. I think it was Barnett Newman who said art criticism is to artists what ornithology is to birds. I have always aspired to writing about art as well as making it, but I’ve never tried to have that sort of writing around to replace what it is I do.’

As we talk, the music of minimalist composer Phillip Glass plays softly in the background. It is an influence Young readily concedes. ‘There are more links from Glass than any other artist,’ he says, adding that minimalist composition uses many of the same structural devices he uses in painting. ‘Glass has actually changed from a very abstract structure to an evocative music made for films. A lot of the rationalist and repetitive structure that I use in my work is because of his music. The works I’m doing now are more sandwiched together; I’m bringing the works closer to memory and personal experience. What interests me is the change from an abstract activity like minimalist music, to something that is a lot more popularly acceptable.’

Along with artists such as Sol Le Witt, Su Lin Peng, Su Ren-shan Peng and Australian contemporaries such as Imants Tillers and Tim Johnson, Young cites the work of Hong Kong filmmakers Tsui Hark and Wong Kar Wai as influences on his work. He also compares his working methods to that of a film director, who, like Young, employs the skills of other artists in the production of the work. Over the years, through his Dualk Glaudo and Polychromes series of the 1990s, to his more recent landscapes, Young has worked with artists he considers specialists who can help him achieve a desired effect. But it is Young who maintains complete control over the finished product. ‘My assistants, they’re more like good cameramen,’ he explains. ‘They play that part very well, but they can stuff it up if they’re left on their own. So, you know, they’re people who are very good in their own areas. It’s more of a cinema director’s position that I’m working in, rather than a communal situation.’ How much input do Young’s assistants have in realising the finished work? ‘It changes from series to series,’ Young says. ‘With The Polychromes they had a lot of input so I called them “collaborators”. But I don’t like to call them that now. I don’t think they like to be called that either, simply because a lot of people use the word “collaborator” but what they mean is “amateur”. I find that exploitative at the end of the day because the amateurs don’t get anything out of it. And so it’s (really about) working with people who simply enjoy putting something together.’

Young is unusual among his peers because, unlike the abstraction favoured by his contemporaries such as A D S Donaldson or the text-based work of Janet Burchill, he has tended to...
produce conceptual, figurative painting. For a relatively brief period, from 1989 until 1992, Young ventured into colour abstraction with his *Polychromes* series but, significantly, his painting has explored the frisson of foreground and background images in the *Double Ground* series that began in 1993 and continues today. Young uses what he calls “underbelly images” in the foreground, images taken directly from found photographs. “They are all images that were done by no-name people or who are unknown nowadays,” says Young. “They’re from the 1950s to the 1970s. Photographs that have virtually no aura about them.” Young places these repainted images over backgrounds which have direct historical references, also taken from secondary sources. “I’m interested in generic structures – landscapes, nudes, flowers. The images are based on the energy and the mood that they hold.”

The meaning of a John Young work hovers discreetly in the background. In Zen Buddhist philosophy, the ‘meaning’ of Zen is the space between a proposition and its answer. In Young’s painting, the ‘meaning’ doesn’t make immediate sense for the viewer, but is a subtle shadow behind the screens of what Young refers to as “double ground” – the foreground and background planes. Put another way, the meaning of a John Young painting is a ghost in the shell of the work’s frame. Young has continued to work with generic structures, investigating the possibilities of landscape, and with a more personal investment in his *Double Ground* series. His new work explores a figurative abstraction where the imagery stands for nothing more than what it is: an abstract reference to personal experience and reflexivity. “Idealisation is a concept that I am very interested in at the moment,” he explains, “how people idealise other people. It also plays a lot in the imaginary. I’m still doing landscapes but they’re not at all naturalistic. The other series of works I’m doing are double-ground paintings, but their references are now more towards Buddhism.”

Young maintains complete control over the finished product, working with artists who can help him achieve the desired effect.