

NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY

Australian painting in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection

Newcastle Art Gallery contains one of the few collections in regional Australia where it is possible to chart the complex history of art in Australia with works of stellar quality. Paintings dominate the key holdings since, from the time Europeans arrived in Australia, painting has been the ascendant form of expression in the visual arts. Before this, Indigenous Australians painted on bark and stone but the new arrivals did not take particular interest, since their vision of art was attuned to Europe.

Eighteenth and early nineteenth-century European artists looked to Greek mythology as a primary source for inspiration. For example, in 1813 John Glover painted a vision of the mythical home of the Greek gods as he imagined it from his London studio. The result, *View of Mount Olympus and the town of Brusa*, is one of Glover's largest known paintings. It is a masterwork of the Romantic movement whose artists favoured picturesque scenes that would fire the imagination through poetic rather than purely descriptive painting.

Seventeen years after painting this vision of Mt Olympus, Glover became the first major artist to immigrate to Australia. This decision to bring his family to Van Diemen's Land, adventurous for a sixty-four year old successful painter, paid handsome dividends.

Glover established a successful farm he called Patterdale on the northern slopes of Ben Lomond in north-eastern Tasmania and continued to practise his art; demonstrating it was possible to adapt the techniques and methods of composition he had used in painting the Lake District of England to depict the untidy eucalypt scrub of Australia. Glover died in 1849 after almost twenty fruitful years of painting in Tasmania. His *View of Mount Olympus* did not make the trip from London to Australia until 1971 when it arrived in Newcastle after being purchased through the dealer Joseph Brown by the NRAG, supported by the Newcastle Morning Herald, for \$5,000; an amount that now seems like a paltry sum in view of Glover's current million-dollar prices.

Since Newcastle was first established as a penal settlement it could hardly have been graced with the presence of an artist of Glover's stature but the recidivist convict Joseph Lycett proved the perfect artist for the time and the place. He had the forger's skill with details and eye for the main chance. Lycett's views of Newcastle were made to please his gaolers and their audience in England who sought after evidence of the civilizing achievements in the colonies. To satisfy this demand and still retain a ring of authenticity, Lycett took the same tack used during his illegitimate labours as a forger, but the results were very different. An examination of the accuracy of his details might have been the undoing for his counterfeit banknotes, but it proved the making of his paintings.

Inner view of Newcastle by Lycett gives central prominence to Nobbys Headland, the quintessential feature of Newcastle harbour. It was soon after Lycett's painting was completed that Nobbys was anchored to the mainland with the connecting breakwater that made for a much less hazardous entry to the harbour.

The layout of the town is probably as it was in 1818, although the sense of sanitized order is no doubt the forger's clever accommodation of Captain James Wallis's vision for the convict settlement. Artistic licence could only be encouraged when representing the Commandant's achievements. Therefore the modest grandeur of the recently

completed major buildings, the gaol, hospital and church, suggests they may have been in reality something less than imposing. The Christ Church is one of the dominating features of the painting, emphasising the symbolic importance placed on religion as a means of reforming the convicts. Lycett felt the influence more directly than most others since he helped decorate the interior of the church in 1817 when he painted the altar piece and several other panels. The experience didn't change his ways however, since, after he returned to England following his pardon in 1822, he revisited his criminal craft of making banknote facsimiles. This was subsequent to a failed attempt at a legitimate venture publishing his collection of engravings *Views of Australia 1824-25*, a project he had begun while in Newcastle.

All of Joseph Lycett's work from his three-year period in Newcastle was produced for an audience in England, for it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the Australian colonies were large enough or wealthy enough to support resident artists.

Conrad Martens arrived in Sydney in 1835 after a period as topographical artist on the *Beagle* during Charles Darwin's epoch changing voyage of discovery. Martens soon found a receptive colonial audience for his style of picturesque topography with Sydney Harbour as his primary subject. One such example is the watercolour *View of Sydney and Fort Macquarie 1837* in the Gallery's collection.

Newcastle also holds later works by the first Australian-born professional artist, William Charles Piguenit, who by necessity adopted the prevailing romantic fashion for Arcadian views of Australia. After 1850, the development of his style was influenced by the arrival in Australia of several supremely skilled artists from Europe.

Eugène von Guérard came to Australia from Austria in 1852. Like so many others, he was seeking gold. The discovery of gold changed everything in Australia, although the forty-two year old von Guérard did not strike it lucky on the goldfields of Ballarat. Instead, he went on to become one of the most significant late colonial painters in Australia.

His *Lake Gnotuk, near Camperdown 1858* is a superb example of von Guérard's skilful blend of empirical observation and sentiment inspired by German romanticism. The dark enfolding foreground and the infinitely distant horizon with the middle-distance punctuated by the oddly symmetrical lake, its glass-smooth surface indicating its immense depth, all give a hint of the 'weird melancholy' that so many colonials sensed in the Australian bush.

By the 1880s Australian taste in painting began to change towards a lighter, less introspective view of the landscape and a style where brushstrokes were unconstrained by documentative demands. Symbolism was still of prime importance as suggested in Tom Roberts' *Roses 1888*, which is as much an essay in decorative paint application as it is a symbolic token of sentiment. Before Eugène von Guérard retired to Europe in 1881 he had been Principal of the Art School of the National Gallery of Victoria where Roberts and many of the next generation of influential Australian painters had been trained. Tom Roberts also sailed for Europe in the same year as von Guérard, returning to Australia in 1885. Primed with knowledge of the latest trends in London and Paris, Roberts teamed up with the young Arthur Streeton to develop the first distinctive Australian school of painting.

The group held painting camps around Heidelberg in Victoria and mounted their first showing of work in Melbourne in 1889 in what is now regarded as one of the most important exhibitions in Australian art history. Such was the impact of the exhibition that Impressionism became a national style. As well as Roberts and

Streeton, Charles Conder and Frederick McCubbin were the other core early members of the Australian Impressionist group. These are represented in the Newcastle collection along with many other important proponents of the style such as Jane Sutherland and Ethel Carrick.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century the most admired of the Australian Impressionists was undoubtedly Arthur Streeton, who went on to dominate painting in Australia for the next forty years. The bleached colour and chunky brushwork in the early work by Streeton in the collection, *Australian December, the first crop 1887*, gives a foretaste of the vigour and freedom of application of his impressionistic technique.

The Gallery also holds a rare early portrait by Streeton and a 1926 virtuoso panel picture, *Barrenjoey*. The sun-drenched landscapes of the Australian Impressionists were highly influential, so much so that the pastoral landscape became a source of national symbolism well into the twentieth century. Painters such as Hans Heysen, Elioth Grüner, Sydney Long and Lloyd Rees created their own distinctive visions of the Australian landscape and all are represented in the collection with outstanding examples of their work.

The landscape tradition remains so omnipotent that it sometimes overshadows the strong strain of figurative painting in Australia. The best early Australian figurative painters showed that they could also capture the play of dappled light on saturated colour in scenes charged with the added psychological attraction of figures in moments of reverie or meditation.

Rupert Bunny's *Last fine days, Royan (Summertime)* 1908 and Hilda Rix Nicholas' *Grace* (circa 1914) are striking examples and not surprisingly they are among the most popular paintings in the collection. Bunny and Rix Nicholas were part of the great late nineteenth and early twentieth-century exodus of Australian artists to Europe. They went seeking inspiration from the originating source of culture and these pictures were both painted in France at a time when Paris was the powerhouse of the art world. When Rupert Bunny painted *Last fine days, Royan (Summertime)* he had already attained fame in France since he had been working there for almost twenty years. During the decade before the First World War, Bunny had exhibited widely in France, England, Russia, Italy and the United States, making him the first Australian artist to achieve international fame.

Bunny quietly returned to Australia in 1933 during the great depression and continued painting until his death in 1947. Even though he was always admired by astute critics, it took some time for Bunny to achieve the reputation he now has as one of the greatest Australian painters. During the Australian art market boom in the 1980s, the prices for his works soared to astronomical levels with dealers, collectors and curators scouring the world to retrieve his undiscovered works. One Sydney paper headlined it as the "Great Bunny Hunt". In such a competitive climate no regional gallery could afford even a small picture but this wasn't why the staff at the Newcastle Art Gallery were left looking on with bemused wonder. The Gallery's collection contained sixteen Rupert Bunny works including not only *Last fine days, Royan (Summertime)* purchased in 1962, but also major paintings from every period in his career. Almost overnight, they saw these works turn into a multi-million dollar asset for the Gallery. The reason that Newcastle has such a magnificent collection of Rupert Bunny pictures is because the Gallery's second Director, David Thomas, was an expert on Bunny's work. Thomas mounted a major Rupert Bunny retrospective in Newcastle in 1968 and published a monograph on the artist. Because of his knowledge and contacts, David Thomas purchased astutely and attracted bequests to create a comprehensive survey of the artist's work and a superb cultural legacy for the city.

It is far less surprising to discover the strength of the Gallery's holdings of almost forty works by William Dobell, the greatest Australian portrait painter of the twentieth century. Dobell was born in Newcastle and the house

where he lived as a child is a short walk from the Gallery. He spent his late career living on the banks of Lake Macquarie at Wangi Wangi, having retreated there in 1944 after the scandalous Sydney court case when his Archibald Prize win was contested by a group of conservative artists. This disaffected group claimed Dobell's portrait of Joshua Smith was a caricature and not a portrait as stipulated by the conditions of the Archibald. The trial was front-page news across Australia, generating the sort of publicity that most artists would have craved, but Dobell was not that sort of artist. He won the case but lost the privacy he coveted. Dobell's portraits always flirted with caricature; that is their great strength. His teasing distortions of his subjects stripped sentimentality and arrogance from them, but Dobell mostly left his sitter's dignity intact. In his best portraits, the quizzical appearance of the subject's features is foiled by Dobell's obsessively complex treatment of the painted surface. To understand the secret of Dobell's portraits they have to be carefully examined in the flesh since they are painted with the delicacy of touch and unerring finesse of a reconstructive surgeon. *Portrait of a strapper* 1941, one of his great portraits and one of the iconic images in Australian art, was presented to Newcastle in 1959 by Captain Neil McEacharn. Dobell's transformation of an anonymous stable hand into a monumental Australian type appears effortless but it took months to work this magic.

The mannered display of rug and bridle strap is Dobell's concession to the European tradition of adding professional attributes to a sitter's portrait but the whimsical infiltration of equine character into the strapper's features is pure Dobell. The overall effect is a distinctly Australian depreciation of pomposity, of tradition, of self. Such disparagement also touches the core of Dobell's art, and perhaps another feature of the Australian character, a deep pessimism masked by a genial façade. Dobell's anxiety comes closer to the surface in his unsettling New Guinea paintings. The bitter sweet combinations of colours, dramatic contrasts of scale and disruptive shapes in works such as *Boy with bow* 1953 leave the impression that things could unravel very quickly.

Up until his death in 1970, Dobell was a great supporter of Newcastle Art Gallery, showing his work and attending social events. Even though he shunned publicity he was a charming mixer in any company, be it a formal civic event or down at the local pub. Dobell was always perplexed at being described as a modernist since he saw his work as a continuation of the academic traditions of painting. His devotion to, and dependence on, sound observational drawing supports his contention. All of his interest in technical mastery of line and form was as a means to the end of creating portraits and subject pictures. Obviously, Dobell appreciated a well-composed picture, but the idea of a painting as primarily an ensemble of abstract shapes was outside of his lexicon. The defining feature of early modern art was this shift away from painting a personal record of natural perception to the creation of paintings as dazzling surrogates for visual experience. This move toward an abstract view of the world can be beautifully demonstrated through key examples of early twentieth-century modernist painting in the Newcastle collection.

The pioneers of modern painting in Australia, Margaret Preston, Roland Wakelin and Grace Cossington Smith are well represented. In *Boatsheds* 1918, Roland Wakelin takes a most humble subject and translates it into a symphony of shape and colour. Wakelin was interested in advanced theories of simultaneity between colours and musical notes which explains the rainbow transformation of the once drab boat sheds. Every part of the picture surface vibrates with colour, yet the carefully constructed or composed forms of the buildings give a stability suggesting a muffled influence of Cubism. The features that charm the viewer today were the source of the painting's radicality in 1918, as it created immense controversy when it was exhibited in Sydney at that time and in the next year. The painting is a pivotal work in the development of modern art in Australia.

Grace Cossington Smith's *Trees* (circa 1927) is another. Cossington Smith may have been one of the few Australian artists to take a keen interest in the developments of modern art in Europe but she hardly fitted the profile of a radical modernist. Her experiments in modernism were conducted over a lifetime spent painting in the same house in the Sydney suburb of Turramurra. Almost all of her paintings drew their sources from her immediate surroundings in Sydney, particularly the domestic confines of her house. In the case of *Trees*, the basis was the view from her back verandah looking across a tennis court to a large screen of trees behind several blooming peach trees. Her early contact with advanced art from Paris and London had liberated her attitude and painting became an endless exploration of light and colour.

Her hermetic devotion to the same domestic realm only concentrated the intensity of her life-time of experiments to make timeless paintings with "form in pure colour vibrating with light," as she put it in when writing about *Way to the Studio* 1957, also in the Newcastle collection. Yet another Cossington Smith painting in the collection is *Strike* (circa 1917). This little jewel of a painting demonstrates that even when Cossington Smith depicted topical events she concentrated on the painterly values of light, colour and composition and this is why the picture continues to hold its fascination long after the passion and politics that motivated it have subsided.

Grace Cossington Smith's restrained or even genteel devotion to her art could not be more of a contrast to the full-throttle approach of Margaret Preston. Preston was an artist with a mission— to establish a genuine Australian modernist idiom to replace the pervasive pastoral landscape tradition, the 'gumleaf school' as she called it. Her quest for a decorative, vernacular modernism took an extraordinarily eclectic turn as she sought sources for her prints and paintings from a range as diverse as French art magazines and Aboriginal war shields. Preston could be culturally insensitive and brash, standing on enough of her contemporaries' toes to be referred to as 'Mad Maggie'— behind her back, naturally— but she was the most prolific and important advocate of modern art in Australia between the Wars. She was a restless spirit and travelled widely throughout her sixty productive years both outside and inside Australia.

In later life, Preston visited Newcastle to lecture on art and took a particular interest in the city, bequeathing part of her art library to the Gallery. The collection is richly endowed with Margaret Preston prints as well as the painting *Native Flowers* 1941 which represents her particular blend of modernist abstraction, native flowers and designs derived from Aboriginal art.

While the decorative and domestic basis of Preston's art did establish an alternative to the pastoral tradition in Australia, at the same time Russell Drysdale was demonstrating that the red heart of Australia offered possibilities for a fresh view of landscape painting. Drysdale's *The Crow trap* 1941 epitomises his harsh Australian vision where figures are just some of the oddities and weird shapes that populate the alien vista. The only figures that ever found congruence with Drysdale's landscapes were the Aboriginal subjects he painted during the 1950s. As in his *Mother and Child* 1953, in the NAG collection, the Aboriginal figures were immingled with the country by being placed close up to the picture plane and enveloped by the surrounding landscape. The originality of Drysdale's vision of the Australian landscape has been blunted by the many imitators that followed, since by the end of the 1950s the estranged red centre had become as much a part of the national ethos as the radiant, golden summers of the Australian Impressionists.

In the 1960s, however, Fred Williams revitalized landscape painting in Australia. Williams' selection of colour and the way his remnants of foliage seem to float on top of the ground owed something to Drysdale but Fred Williams learnt much by looking further back to the paintings of Eugène von Guérard. Like von Guérard, Williams wanted to paint landscapes that were dislocating in their vastness while retaining the intimacy of the familiar. His attempt

to create an evocation of the general forms of the landscape rather than a particular record of a single view was so successful that it is now common to hear certain landscapes referred to as looking like a Fred Williams' painting.

The Newcastle Region Gallery has an excellent representative collection of the work of Fred Williams. Most of the purchases were selected in the 1960s during the tenure of the first and second Directors of the Gallery, Gil Docking and David Thomas. Naturally enough, the policy of purchasing exciting new work did not please the conservative elements in Newcastle who were outraged in 1966 when the Gallery paid \$1,700 for the glorious *Landscape in Upwey* 1965-66. The Director, David Thomas, was not daunted by this opposition and he was so sure of the quality of Fred Williams' paintings that in 1971 he mounted the first ever public showing of the artist's work in Newcastle Art Gallery. Time has vindicated his judgement a thousand fold and the Newcastle public have access to definitive works by the most celebrated and sought after Australian landscape painter of the last half of the twentieth century.

Late in his career Arthur Boyd also made an original contribution to Australian landscape painting. Working from the base of his property Bundanon he produced sumptuous, expressive views along the Shoalhaven River. The work in the collection, *Shoalhaven River afternoon* 1983 is one of the highlights of a series of massive paintings he produced during the 1980s. The scale of this image of Pulpit Rock on the banks of the river is big enough to swallow up a viewer in the seeming acres of paint that Boyd, sometimes literally, swept across the canvas with a broom.

Boyd's earlier, more sedate landscapes and bold figurative compositions are also represented in the collection with prime examples. Boyd returned to Australia in the 1970s after many years working in Britain. Like his great contemporary, Sidney Nolan, he found that being based close to a major art centre such as London was most important to maintain the international success he had achieved.

Nolan spent the major part of his career working in Britain and he died in London in 1992. However he was a regular visitor to Australia since it remained the primary source of his inspiration from the 1940s when his reputation was established through his Ned Kelly paintings that ultimately became the most iconic images in Australian culture. Nolan was always a technical maestro with a most intelligent pictorial sense for the quirky and idiosyncratic that is so often associated with Australian bush characters and so perfectly encapsulated in *Easter Show* from 1964.

As with Nolan and Boyd, many Australian artists who came to prominence in the 1950s remained committed to figurative painting. Robert Dickerson and Charles Blackman both painted human dramas in urban or suburban settings. Blackman's *Running boy, walking girl* 1954, his *Night tide at Flinders* 1958 and *The Student* 1961 along with Dickerson's *Guy* 1957 and Paddy's *market* 1969, are all anxious visions of emotional alienation as much as they are scenes of physical isolation.

When it comes to expressive exuberance, there were few twentieth-century Australian painters to match the Newcastle-born artists Jon Molvig and John Olsen. Before moving to Sydney and later Brisbane, Molvig had worked at the Newcastle steel works and many of his works from the 1960s reflect his memories of an industrial landscape. He had a gift for insightful portraiture and flair for emotive expressionistic figure studies, and the full range of his work is represented in the collection. John Olsen has said that his formative years spent in Newcastle also influenced his early work but his painting would develop a light-hearted lyricism at the opposite end of the expressionistic spectrum to Molvig's dark, brooding introspection. In 1980, Olsen revitalized his

cultural connection to the City when he returned to paint a mural commissioned for the foyer of the newly refurbished Newcastle City Hall. The sheer exuberance of his *Climbing sun over the Hunter* still lights up the entry at the top of the stairs leading into the City Hall. Even so, the most devastatingly stunning work by Olsen in Newcastle is in the collection. *Life burst* is over six metres long and was originally painted as a ceiling mural for the home of his Sydney dealer in 1964. The title brilliantly captures the painting's impact as a pyrotechnic science experiment, where miniature amoebic forms trace frenzied trajectories across the cream ground, colliding and exploding into massive sun creatures. It is easy to see why Olsen dominated the art scene in Sydney and Australia during the 1960s with his particular whimsically vulgar brand of abstract expressionism, backed with the boisterous personality of a genuine larrikin.

Just before and during the Second World War a much quieter painting revolution was going on in Sydney. This was the development of geometric abstraction, purely constructivist paintings where dynamic symmetry was created without a dependence on perceptual relationships to natural forms or objects. Sometimes referred to as non-objective abstraction, such work has always demanded an informed and receptive audience. This explains why when Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson first exhibited their constructive abstractions in Sydney in 1944 and 1948 the public took no notice. Along with Rah Fizelle, Grace Crowley set up a progressive art school in Sydney in 1932 after Crowley had spent several years studying the latest Cubist and related painting styles in France. Her French sources are still evident in the works she exhibited in Australia's first abstract art exhibition Exhibition I at David Jones Gallery, Sydney in 1938. *Still Life* 1938 in the Newcastle collection is a fine example of this early abstract style. Ralph Balson also exhibited in Exhibition I as he had been a student at the Fizelle-Crowley school, although in later life Grace Crowley said it was Balson who did all the teaching in their relationship.

By the early 1940s they were following a tandem path of experiment leading to purely abstract works such as Balson's *Construction 3* 1941 in Newcastle. It would take more than ten years for such an intellectual approach to painting to be accepted in Australia and when the Director Gil Docking purchased this work in 1962 it was a most adventurous decision. No doubt, Docking had picked up the vibrations of the coming storm, as the sixties was to be the decade of abstraction— not the modestly scaled variety of subdued, dynamic symmetry pioneered by Balson and Crowley but the sort that assaulted the viewer with the uncompromising visual power of scale and colour. Various referred to as hard-edge, minimalist or colour-field abstraction these were paintings that the public could not ignore and mostly they didn't like what they saw.

The shock of the new is always disconcerting for the public but for curators of contemporary art it is the clarion call to collect. When the National Gallery of Victoria opened its new building in 1968 the decision was made to celebrate the event with an exhibition that would highlight the radical new hard-edge abstraction favoured by many young Australian artists. The result was the landmark exhibition *The Field* that also toured to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. So fierce was the reaction of the public and some critics, that curators and collectors held back from acquisition of the works, waiting for the reassurance of consensus. Thankfully, the second Director of the Newcastle Art Gallery, David Thomas, kept his head in this maelstrom of outrage and was guided by the two axioms for cultural custodians with modest budgets: buy the best and buy early.

Newcastle Art Gallery had already purchased several of the *Field* artists long before the show. In fact, Sydney Ball's *Canto No 19* 1965 acquired in 1966 was the first work by the artist to enter a public collection. During 1968 and 1969 the Gallery systematically acquired major works by *The Field* artists. Many, such as Col Jordan's *Daedalus series 7* 1968, were purchased in the year they were painted. As a result, the Gallery now holds seminal works by artists that have gone on to become major figures in Australian art. Such works include:

Dale Hickeys' Painting 1968, Robert Hunter's Untitled 1968, Ron Robertson-Swann's Rainbow sea 1970 and Peter Booth's Untitled 1962. In recent years Tony Bishop and Alan Oldfield repaid the Gallery's early interest in abstract art of the sixties by gifting works they exhibited in The Field and Janet Dawson donated a major work from the same year as the momentous exhibition.

Subsequent Directors have followed David Thomas in building on this strength in sixties abstraction with astute purchases of key works by artists of The Field generation such as James Doolin, Joe Szarbo and Robert Jacks. In total, the Gallery now holds over thirty major works related to this groundbreaking period. As the Gallery has demonstrated on a number of occasions, this is sufficient enough to mount an exhibition of such quality that it concedes nothing to any of the state galleries. When these works are now displayed it is awe not shock that they engender. Their once offensive fields of saturated colour have become serenely contemplative and the realization of how beautifully painted they are increases their dignified status. Most remain uncompromising works and it is difficult to know if their majestic presence results from their scale or the fact that they are like battle-ships, wondrous objects from another era. Most of The Field artists abandoned a minimalist approach and hard-edge abstraction did not last as a dominant force beyond the next decade.

By the end of the 1970s it was commonplace to hear the suggestion that painting had run its course and that minimalism marked its endpoint of development rather than a new beginning. As so often occurs with such assessments, the opposite was about to happen.

Painting returned with a vengeance to be the dominant art form of the 1980s. One of the most interesting aspects of this so-called return to painting was the reassessment of the careers of many Australian artists who had never stopped painting. Keith Looby, Andrew Sibley and Jan Senbergs were of the same generation as the abstract painters in The Field but they had remained devoted to developing a figurative-based approach to painting. Each formulated a highly individual style that came to full maturity during the 1980s. Andrew Sibley's *Reluctant rider: Circus series* 1982, that was donated by the artist in 1999, exemplifies his decades of refinement of a personal vision and mastery of his idiosyncratic painting techniques.

Some senior artists such as John Brack, Jeffrey Smart and Margaret Olley had always been admired and collected but in the early 1980s they all became veritable mega-stars. Fortunately, the Gallery already held significant works by all of these artists since the resultant escalation in prices put their major work out of the reach of most regional galleries. Before this radical re-evaluation, Margaret Olley had been busy painting figurative, landscape and still life subjects for fifty years. Sometimes she painted figure-interior or figure-still life combinations as in *Self portrait with everlastings* from 1974 that was part of the resplendent Anne von Bertouch collection, bequeathed to the Gallery in 2003. The collection also contains straight landscape and still life examples of Olley's painting. Margaret Olley lived in Newcastle at different times over the years and she has been a most generous supporter of the Gallery.

Peter Booth had exhibited in The Field, but he made a dramatic shift at the end of the 1970s to expressionist works heavy with paint and macabre imagery. By 1984 he was heralded as an international leader of the new painting trend, labelled Neo-Expressionism. Many younger artists also took up the style and Mandy Martin's massive *Folly* of 1988 is one of the key works from the period. With dimensions of around three by four and a half metres, the painting is so large that only a purpose-designed gallery such as Newcastle Region can display it. *Folly* encapsulates the neo-romantic strain in many paintings at that time when artists plundered historical images for source material, particularly the sublime landscapes of nineteenth-century painters such as von Guérard, although their homage was often tinged with an element of parody.

Appropriation was the catch phrase of the 1980s in Australia, as it was internationally. Imants Tillers was a cardinal exponent of the new painting, appropriating nineteenth and twentieth century paintings, comic books and Aboriginal art to create composite pictures made up from arrangements of small canvas boards. Tillers' *White Aborigines (No. 2)* 1983 is an emblematic work from the eighties consisting of 100 individual canvas boards.

During the 1990s and the beginning of the first decade of this century artists have continued to demonstrate the relevance of painting as a craft and vehicle for expression. Jon Cattapan's *Body Chart* 1995 and Tim Maguire's *Untitled 98U47* 1998 demonstrate the evocative power of painting as abstract field and symbolic image.

In his *Surface tension No. 3* from 1998 Philip Wolfhagen attests to the continuing validity of the painter's role as acute observer and translator of the natural world. Probably the most important development in Australian painting over the past two decades has been the recognition of Aboriginal art as a significant force in contemporary visual culture. Artists such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye gained not only national but also international acclaim in recent decades. Thanks to the generosity of benefactors, the Gallery has acquired a number of works by Emily Kngwarreye and other important Aboriginal artists.

Ross Woodrow, 2008.