



JAMES DRINKWATER: the sea calls me by name
1 June - 11 August 2019



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FOREWORD

Newcastle Art Gallery is pleased to present *JAMES DRINKWATER: the sea calls me by name*, an exhibition featuring works of art by celebrated local artist James Drinkwater. Having collected Drinkwater's works of art since 2013, *the sea calls me by name* provides the opportunity to develop an exhibition that showcases an important contemporary artist from the collection. Drawn from the Gallery's holdings are paintings and mixed media works of art displayed together with ceramics, paintings and sculptures on loan from key private collections.

Drinkwater began painting when he was five years old and formally studied at the National Art School, Sydney in 2001 before travelling to Berlin for three years. Highly awarded for an artist in his early thirties, most notably receiving the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship 2014 and the John Olsen National Art School Life Drawing Prize in 2002; Drinkwater has also been a finalist in the Dobell Drawing Prize, Doug Moran Portrait Prize, John Glover Art Prize, Newcastle Art Gallery Kilgour Prize 2018, Paddington Art Prize, the Salon de Refuses, Sulman Prize and Wynne Prize.

JAMES DRINKWATER: the sea calls me by name explores the artist's intimate connection to his home base of Newcastle, the surrounding coastline and his cherished young family. He has garnered a growing reputation as an abstract artist who constantly pushes the boundaries of his art practice. Drinkwater's fearlessness in the telling of powerful and emotionally moving stories through his richly textured and layered works of art reflect an artist who wholeheartedly immerses himself in the environment of the places he paints; mapping the connections between art, culture and memory.

James Drinkwater is represented in collections nationally and internationally. My sincere appreciation goes to James for his boundless enthusiasm and fervour in working with the Gallery to develop this bold exhibition project. Thanks also to nanda/hobbs Gallery in Sydney, Nicholas Thompson Gallery, Melbourne and the many private lenders; it is through their generosity and support that the Gallery's vision for this major survey exhibition has been fulfilled.

Lauretta Morton
Director, Newcastle Art Gallery

JAMES DRINKWATER: the sea calls me by name

James Drinkwater is a romantic. His work is empathetic and emotionally resonant, with feeling being its most consistent and powerful driver. Places take on powerful significance, instilled with associations of experience or individuals. His work is about intimacy; relationships between people and place are open and exposed as the private is made public on the gallery walls.

Drinkwater's love for family and the significant others who come within his orbit is echoed in the unconstrained way in which he approaches his work. His paintings, drawings and sculpture are suffused with emotion, gestural and impulsive, with paint bursting beyond the canvas, unwilling to be confined by the frame. His is not the art of restraint.

As a young man, Drinkwater committed himself to a life in art that was single-minded and focused. As an emerging painter living in Melbourne he lived frugally, determined to limit the need to work for money in order to spend more time in the studio, and to afford materials. While not a natural ascetic – his enthusiasm for life would never allow that – Drinkwater's dedication to a life in art imposed a conscious discipline that grew from a singular determination to paint. He has been fortunate to find a companion in life – artist Lottie Consalvo – who shares this commitment.

This exhibition is a survey of the last decade of Drinkwater's practice, at the Gallery of his home city Newcastle. Newcastle is where his life in art began, with classes in life drawing and painting as a child, and is now the place he calls home. Newcastle continues to perform her historic function as a port city with the daily traffic of coal ships heading out to sea alongside her contemporary reality in which river and sea are also places of leisure. The city and suburbs are nestled by surf, river and lake, sites of memory and identity for generations of Novocastrians. The sea looms especially large in the foundation stories of James Drinkwater; it has been a continuous presence as he has grown from boy to man, and

forms a backdrop to the different phases of his life, either as immediate presence or distant desire. After a few years away from Newcastle, he has now settled with his young family in a continuation of the cycle, living a stone's throw from the ocean that affords him such artistic and spiritual sustenance.

Drinkwater's paintings and sculptures are abstractions grounded in figuration – principally landscape and the body – with an intense application of materials in successive gestural layers. His approach to building a picture has remained consistent as his subjects have oscillated between landscape and figure, to greater or lesser levels of abstraction. Collage and assemblage are integral to his method and he has made a virtue of using found materials, from old picture frames to street litter, in several bodies of work, notably in the 'Kenya' and 'Looking for urchins and Louis Ferrari' series, and in sculpture. Scraps are collaged or otherwise integrated into new works that carry with them the essence of the old. One gets the sense that these pieces of unloved trash have been rescued by the artist for the memories that they hold, their associations with the individuals or original functions too precious to be lost. He describes them as being 'imbued with memory, and their owners, and their witnessing' – scraps as secular relics.

Drawing forms a strong foundation in Drinkwater's work. It can be seen as the substructure in many paintings, occasionally emerging through layers of paint to assert its equality in the image. It also forms part of a longstanding daily practice which he first started as a young boy taking life drawing classes, and now used as a way of starting work each day, as a sort of limbering up. He limits himself to a small but classical repertoire of materials – charcoal or ink – and whatever paper he has to hand, and describes this free stream-of-consciousness drawing as "a way of entering the studio". Occasionally one drawing might stand out as having particular merit, but overwhelmingly the act itself is of the greatest value.



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The exhibition commences with a key early painting 'Poor boy', made in Melbourne in 2009 as the artist was embarking upon his career as a painter. It is redolent of the work he was looking at, at the time, including the Melbourne moderns, Sidney Nolan in particular. The 'poor boy' is a reference to himself, not made with pity, but matter-of-factly, in recognition of his prioritising art over the accoutrements of a prosperous life. In placing himself at the centre of this work, Drinkwater asserts the primacy of the personal; his identification as an artist is parallel to his work, which is indivisible from his response to the world around him.

Landscape, however, was the dominant element in Drinkwater's paintings from the early to mid 2010's. In 2012 Drinkwater and Consalvo had spent a short but intense period in Kenya, working with a friend who had established a childrens' home in a village near Nairobi. They spent time making art with the resident children, but also drawing inspiration for their own work from the dusty streets and lush greenery of the village. Drinkwater made a number of paintings inspired by that experience shortly after returning to Australia, a number of which are in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection. They combine a light palette and broad swathes of complementary colour with graphic dots and lines painted or scratched into the surface, recalling both the local textiles and frenetic pace of life he found in Kenya.

The figure was a major subject in Drinkwater's early Melbourne paintings, and has remained a key trope in his work. One key figurative series was the 'The boy and the ballet', made shortly after the family had returned to Newcastle after living in Berlin between 2009-12, in which Drinkwater incorporated the active body as a subject through his own experience as a dancer. He had not danced before and decided to enrol in ballet classes as a new discipline, not unlike his approach to life drawing which had long been part of his practice. 'Port de bras', a gesture in ballet, is the title of a key painting of this period. Incorporating

collage taken from another work started in Berlin, the elegant central form with extended 'limb-like' forms reaching towards the edges of the canvas is superimposed over the colours and forms of Merewether Beach where he was living. The 'boy' is a reference to Drinkwater's young son Vincenzo, but the work combines the figure of both father and son in a way that is both auto-biographical and universal, with an untroubled optimism emanating from its light palette and sense of youthful energy.

In 2014 Drinkwater was a finalist in the Wynne Prize for landscape painting at the Art Gallery of New South Wales with 'Down the Awabakal trail', and he was to go on to be included in the prize a further four times. This recognition was public confirmation that his work resonated with others and provided impetus for him to continue down his chosen path as an artist. The same year he was awarded the Brett Whiteley Travelling Scholarship which enabled him in 2015 to spend three months in Paris, taking in the city and the great works of art housed there. The break from everyday life that Paris afforded, combined with the deadline of an imminent exhibition in London, led to a change of direction in which the figure began to re-emerge, in paintings inspired by the streets, markets and residents of Paris' African quarter, the 18th arrondissement.

Drinkwater and Consalvo had followed the scholarship in Paris with a holiday in the south of France. The unspoilt sea-side country proved a home-like antidote to the riches of Paris and the frenetic pace life had been taking. 'Arriving in Nice' 2016 and 'Two red suns setting over Nice' 2016 are celebratory paintings that recall that time, capturing the strong light of the Mediterranean while making a subtle tribute to the paintings of Matisse, whose chapel Drinkwater visited in Vence. 'Monuments of Nice 2' 2016 reflects the sense of respite and calm the artist experienced during this period, with its increased sophistication of colour and negative space.





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The urge to travel has long been strong with Australian artists, and Drinkwater has proved no exception. Works in this exhibition include those made in Melbourne, Berlin, Kenya, Paris, Tahiti and Newcastle. Initially driven by a desire to see great works of art, new sights and experiences, travel has proved to be a powerful and necessary stimulus for his work in the early years. More recently, as his family responsibilities have grown, the smaller orbit of family life has provided new inspiration for his work, finding the microcosms of intimate relationships and daily life to be infinite in their potential.

Drinkwater's recent series 'Looking for urchins and Louis Ferrari' 2018 represents a melding of previous preoccupations with place and family. Continuity between generations – that of his late grandfather, Louis, and the present with his two children – combine on the beach, in the search for sea urchins in the rock pools or the sight of his daughter running past nearby workers' cottages in which his ancestors had lived. The 'VMI' paintings, several of which are in the Newcastle Art Gallery collection, are a tribute to his son Vinnie. They incorporate text that echoes the rudimentary way the child started writing his name, almost like a glyph, wherever he could inscribe it. The addition of this limited and ambiguous text, combined with dates, is a new feature of his work, but one he is increasingly using as a way of helping decode subject matter. Drinkwater's children have started to replace their father as

the central figures of his art, as his focus has moved beyond himself towards the present and the future.

The story of James Drinkwater's art – drawings, paintings, sculpture and ceramics – is essentially one of intimacy, memory and place. It is a continuation of an expressive tradition in Australian painting that continues to offer fertile ground for art and story-telling. The decade of work displayed in this survey exhibition is the first chapter in what promises to be a long and rich tale drawn from the most personal and primal responses to the condition of being human.

Anne Ryan
Curator, Australian Art
Art Gallery of New South Wales

LIST OF WORKS

<i>Poor boy</i> 2009 oil on canvas 65.0 x 84.0cm Jay Mewburn and Ambyr Wood Collection	<i>Port de bras</i> 2014 oil and collage on board 122.0 x 92.0cm Private collection	<i>Le Bouillon Chartier</i> 2015 oil on linen 116.0 x 81.0cm Private collection	<i>Vincenzo with fire engine</i> 2016 oil on hardboard 180.0 x 120.0cm Private collection	<i>The girl</i> 2018 corten steel 196.0 x 81.0cm Private collection
<i>Girl with working harbour</i> 2008-2018 oil on canvas 70.0 x 100.0cm Private collection	<i>The boy and the ballet</i> 2014 oil on board 122.0 x 92.0cm Private collection	<i>Le jardin, Tuesday</i> 2015 oil on linen 61.0 x 50.0cm Private collection	<i>Hester in the French Polynesia</i> 2017 corten steel and enamel 240.0 x 130.0 x 80.0cm Private collection	<i>The woman</i> 2018 corten steel and enamel 203.0 x 87.0 x 90.0cm Artist collection
<i>Berlin collages 1-6</i> 2011 collage 20.0 x 15.0cm each Artist collection	<i>The boy stands up</i> 2014 oil on hardboard 122.0 x 92.0cm Private collection	<i>Market Place, African quarter, Paris</i> 2015 oil on linen 81.0 x 100.0cm Private collection	<i>VMI 1-6</i> 2017 oil and hard collage on hardboard 172.0 x 134.0cm each Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by James Drinkwater and dedicated to Vincenzo Drinkwater 2018 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	<i>The sea calls me by name</i> 2018 oil on canvas 240.0 x 180.0cm Private collection
<i>Walking through Sunday II</i> 2012 mixed media on paper 75.0 x 56.5cm Purchased 2013 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	<i>The garden room</i> 2014 oil on hardboard 122.0 x 92.0cm Private collection	<i>The producers house, near the presidential suite</i> 2015 oil on linen 195.0 x 130.0cm Private collection	<i>Arriving in the East End</i> 2018 oil on canvas 240.0 x 180.0cm Private collection	<i>White gulls into black</i> 2018 oil on canvas 240.0 x 180.0cm Private collection
<i>Dusty red school</i> 2012 oil on canvas 120.0 x 100.0cm Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by James Drinkwater 2016 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	<i>The table in the tower</i> 2014 oil on hardboard 122.0 x 92.0cm Garth Ashford & Suzanna Vanjelor collection	<i>Table arrangement Vence</i> 2015 oil on linen 55.0 x 46.0cm Private collection	<i>Arriving in the East End</i> 2018 oil on canvas 240.0 x 180.0cm Private collection	<i>Surrender – a self portrait</i> 2019 mixed media assemblage dimensions variable Artist collection
<i>Mang'u village, rush hour</i> 2012 oil on canvas 130.0 x 120.0cm Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by James Drinkwater 2016 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	<i>Through tight bush to the sea</i> 2014 oil on hardboard 122.0 x 92.0cm Dylan Palmer collection	<i>The Sennelier Merchant</i> 2015 oil on linen 116.0 x 73.0cm Private collection	<i>I love you heavily</i> 2018 oil on hardboard 104.0 x 122.0cm Artist collection	<i>Ocean face S.M.S.S 1919</i> cast bronze 52.0 x 31.5cm Artist collection
<i>Honoured to be in Saika</i> 2012 oil on canvas 130.0 x 120.0cm Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by James Drinkwater 2016 Newcastle Art Gallery collection	<i>We three fell asleep on that beach</i> 2014 oil and collage on hardboard 82.0 x 67.0cm Private collection	<i>Vallauris</i> 2015 oil on linen 55.0 x 46.0cm Private collection	<i>I think you are here now Lou</i> 2018 oil on canvas 76.0 x 99.0cm PAC collection	<i>Stella Maris</i> 2019 oil on canvas 200.0 x 160.0cm Artist collection
<i>Artist seeking patron</i> 2013 Advertisement – The Sydney Morning Herald 24 July 2013 2.0 x 3.5cm Artist collection	<i>Woolly tooth mammals</i> 2014 oil on hardboard 122.0 x 92.0cm Private collection	<i>Arriving in Nice</i> 2016 oil on hardboard 220.0 x 170.8cm Private collection	<i>James James ocean face</i> 2018 oil on canvas 240.0 x 180.0cm Artist collection	<i>Into the Cowrie hole</i> 2019 mixed media dimensions variable Artist collection
<i>In bloom In womb, Lloyd Street</i> 2014 oil on hardboard 160.0 x 120.0cm Private collection	<i>Bathers in Paris, mother and child</i> 2015 oil on linen 195.0 x 130.0cm Private collection	<i>Arriving in Nice 2</i> 2016 oil on hardboard 180.0 x 120.0cm Casey Fernandez Family collection	<i>Looking for urchins and Louis Ferrari</i> 2018 oil on canvas 240.0 x 180.0cm Private collection	<i>The girl and the boy with working harbour 1-10</i> 2019 mixed media on paper 65.0 x 50.0cm each Artist collection
<i>In the Chapel Garden</i> 2014 oil and collage on hardboard 160.0 x 120.0cm Private collection	<i>Beggar near St. Paul</i> 2015 oil on linen 24.0 x 19.0cm Private collection	<i>Avenue Henri Matisse 2</i> 2016 oil on hardboard 180.0 x 120.0cm Private collection	<i>Night swim in the sea baths</i> 2018 oil on canvas 96.0 x 99.0cm Private collection	<i>The magnificent life of Nevla Consalvo</i> 2019 oil on canvas 200.0 x 160.0cm Artist collection
	<i>Curiosities, St Germain des pres</i> 2015 oil on linen 130.0 x 89.0cm Private collection	<i>Boy with painted arm</i> 2016 oil and mixed media on board 180.0 x 122.0cm Private collection	<i>The Bulker wades past the peninsula and so we jubilate 2</i> 2018 oil on canvas 240.0 x 180.0cm Denney collection	<i>A series of letters 1-4</i> 2019 oil on canvas 101.0 x 122.0cm Artist collection
	<i>From Pont Marie</i> 2015 oil on linen 130.0 x 81.0cm Private collection	<i>Monuments of Nice 2</i> 2016 oil on hardboard 180.0 x 120.0cm Private collection	<i>The boy</i> 2018 corten steel 216.0 x 95.0 x 84.0cm Private collection	<i>Notes from the sea monster with no fins</i> 2019 slip cast earthenware underglazes and oxide dimensions variable Artist collection

IMAGES

Front Cover

The sea calls me by name 2018
oil on canvas
240.0 x 180.0cm
Private collection
Photography: Dean Beletich

1. *Mang'u village, rush hour* 2012
oil on canvas
130.0 x 120.0cm
Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by James Drinkwater 2016
Newcastle Art Gallery collection

2. *Poor boy* 2009
oil on canvas
65.0 x 84.0cm Jay Mewburn and Ambyr Wood Collection
Photography: Dean Beletich

3. *The boy and the ballet* 2014
oil on board
122.0 x 92.0cm
Private collection
Photography: Dean Beletich

4. *Hester in the French Polynesia* 2017
corten steel and enamel
240.0 x 130.0 x 80.0cm
Private collection
Photography: Dean Beletich

5. *VMI 6* 2017
oil and hard collage on hardboard
172.0 x 134.0cm
Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by James Drinkwater and dedicated to Vincenzo Drinkwater 2018
Newcastle Art Gallery collection
Photography: Dean Beletich

6. *Looking for urchins and Louis Ferrari* 2018
oil on canvas
240.0 x 180.0cm
Private collection
Photography: Dean Beletich

7. *Arriving in the East End* 2018
oil on canvas
240.0 x 180.0cm
Private collection
Photography: Dean Beletich

8. *White gulls into black* 2018
oil on canvas
240.0 x 180.0cm
Private collection
Photography: Dean Beletich