

The secret lives of artworks

A Collecting Family: Brisbane 1980–2020

Member's Art Series 2021, Brisbane Club

A Collecting Family: Brisbane 1980-2020 opens with the Tim Johnson's luminous *Untitled (Phoenix and Birds)* (2007). In this work we encounter a kaleidoscopic vision of Eastern and Western symbols. The brilliant orange background creates a utopian non-space while the two phoenixes at the heart of the work symbolise rebirth, peace and prosperity. The stairwell beyond hosts a dark and brooding portrait of *Colleen #3* (1992). Typical of Gordon Shepherdson's work, and the era, the painting is rich with the traces of its making. Brushstrokes and finger strokes move across the surface in a dark dance of emotion. The distance, and connections, between these two artworks act as an entree to curators Jane Tynan and Zali Matthews' exhibition, which stretches from neat figuration into expressive abstraction, from light into darkness, from the Heavens to Earth, and circles—consistently—around the place we call home.

Landscapes real, imagined, loved and contested come to the fore in the Member's Lounge. Sunburnt browns and dark greens in the work of Fred Williams and William Robinson evoke the familiar scale and haunting timelessness of Australia's interior and the long stretches of road between here and elsewhere. By contrast, Scott Redford's brilliant pink screenprint *Motorcycle Emptiness #1* (2000) borrows a distinctly 1980s vernacular to capture the glitz of sweaty Gold Coast nights. In John Peart's abstract *Untitled* (c. 1978) we come upon a landscape for the mind. Like Gemma Smith's *Green and grey (reverse shadow)* (2016), his art entices us to think about the construction of a painting. Their works conjure each artist in the studio, making decisions about scale, colour, form and layers. Labour, and the craft and construction of making, are also present in pieces by Leonard Brown, David Lasisi and John Young. In the final work in this room, Megan Cope's *Winnam* (2019) attends to Country rather than landscape, mapping it first in the cartographic language of colonialism, and reinscribing it with Indigenous place names in her own hand. In her re-rendering, the beautifully dotted blue of the ocean creeps past today's shoreline. Unlike Williams' and Robinson's timeless visions of Australia, Cope's map heaves with the weight of history and drowns with the rising temperatures of the future.

Investigations of the built environment draw our next artists into conversation. On first glance, Howard Arkley's *Untitled* (1993) yellow house and the crimson sky of Lucy O'Dougherty's *Before the Deer Shooting Hours* (2017) strike a different tone from the jewel-like green and blue palettes of Paul Davies and Kate McKay, but on closer inspection, the scenes are filled with the same psychology. Devoid of human figures yet overly familiar, they sit between reality, dreamscapes and nightmares. In Davies' *Mums house with Econo lodge pool* (2011), an inverted reflection seen in the pool is just as tangible as the house above. Arkley's oddly-shaped facade appears like a glitch in the matrix. The isolation of O'Dougherty's scene is disturbing. And McKay's *Enclosure* (2016) conveys the oppositional acts of embracing and entrapment. To borrow from Freud, these uncanny works are both *heimlich* (homely) and *unheimlich* (unhomely).

In the Private Dining Room, the curators move toward domesticity, intimacy and the feminine. Natalya Hughes, Monica Rohan and Elizabeth Gower each deploy patterning and decoration as counterpoints to the hefty scale and subject matter of History painting. Hughes' *Olympia* (2016–17) is an explicit reworking of Edouard Manet's painting of the same name. That work's first showing at the Paris Salon garnered outrage for its frank depiction of a woman's nude, and working, body. Hughes decorates in order to dress the figure in purple, orange and blue. Similarly, Emma Van Leest, Martin Smith, Mark Whalen and Sandra Selig work against art history's preference for imposing geometric sculptures in favour of intricacy and fragility. Each work beckons our touch, along the crisp edges of incised paper in *Vessel* (2012) and *King Charles* (2009), over the small pink jumbles of thread in *Equations* (2008) and across the silvery surface of *Untitled* (from the Webs from my

Garden series) (2004–2005). In this room, the overlapping threads of the exhibition also start to emerge. Here we see an expressive painting by Gordon Shepherdson for a second time in *Figure with Asps* (2002). It resonates differently here with Aaron Butt’s monochromatic paintings. Equally, Kate McKay’s stunning *Dusk* (2018), recalls the domestic exteriors observed moments ago in the landing of the Brisbane Club. Hung in this room, the work’s attention to the garden’s shadows is highlighted, repeating the patterning seen in Rohan’s *Study 3* (2014) and *Fickle* (2015).

The Main Dining Room holds the heart and the conclusion of the exhibition. Hanging along one wall, artworks by Gordon Bennett and his alter ego, John Citizen command our attention. Each belongs to a larger series about the making of (art) history through the masculine figures of the explorer and the artist, the appropriation of Indigenous aesthetics, the consumption of culture and the navigation of identity. It’s especially curious to see Bennett’s critique of the commercial artworld hung here, in a collection show, yet by drawing on Pop and Postmodern aesthetics, Bennett traverses these politically-loaded topics with ease. Around the room conversations with and counterpoints to Bennett complete the show. Cope, Vernon Ah Kee, Richard Bell and Judy Watson continue Bennett’s savvy redeployment of Western Art imagery in Indigenous hands while Gower, Eugene Carchesio, Sally Gabori and Luke Roberts draw out his exploration of abstraction and decoration. Gabori’s *Bulkurdurdu, Crocodile* (2005) is a hidden highlight in the show. Made during her first year of artistic practice—when she was in her early 80s—it demonstrates her masterful tension between flat areas of bold colour and wriggling white lines.

Leonard Brown once lamented:

“A sale is a sale”, as Gertrude Stein would say. When an institution buys a work, that’s great; yet it comes with a kind of sadness, a future sealed, seen usually under fixed lighting and, when not on show, committed to life in a rack, seeing the light of day or the artificial light but occasionally. However, when a painting is hung domestically, it retains its wild, untamed nature.¹

This is the joy of private collections. In lounge rooms and dining rooms, away from institutional discourse, art has new things to say. By bringing together works from local families, this exhibition welcomes us into these conversations, and shares some of the secrets that they speak of people, place and home.

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¹ Leonard Brown interviewed by Kon Gouriotis, *Artist Profile*, iss. 41, 2017, <https://www.artistprofile.com.au/leonard-brown/>