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A CLOSER LOOK AT ... FIGURES AND LANDSCAPE IN AUSTRALIAN MODERNISM Showing until 10th November 2018

A feature of the modern artist was not only the exploration of new approaches to line, form and colour but also their exposure to new materials and techniques and the interest to discover new methods of creating artworks and pushing past traditions, whether that be subject matter or the application of paint. Often, this meant an artist did not confine themselves to one medium, so painters branched out to embrace other practices such as printmaking or sculpture to fully express their ideas. Such multifaceted talents are clear in the work of both George Baldessin and Brett Whiteley, subjects of the current exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, *Baldessin/Whiteley Parallel Visions* (showing until 28 Jan 2019).

The genius of Baldessin is under appreciated, in part due to his premature death in a car accident aged only 39. He is perhaps best known for his sculptural pears at the entrance to the National Gallery of Australia. Here an everyday object is elevated to heroic status, a characteristic of much modern art. The pear is an important iconographical symbol for Baldessin, with its links to traditional still life; nature and decay; sensuality; desire and particularly to the female human form.



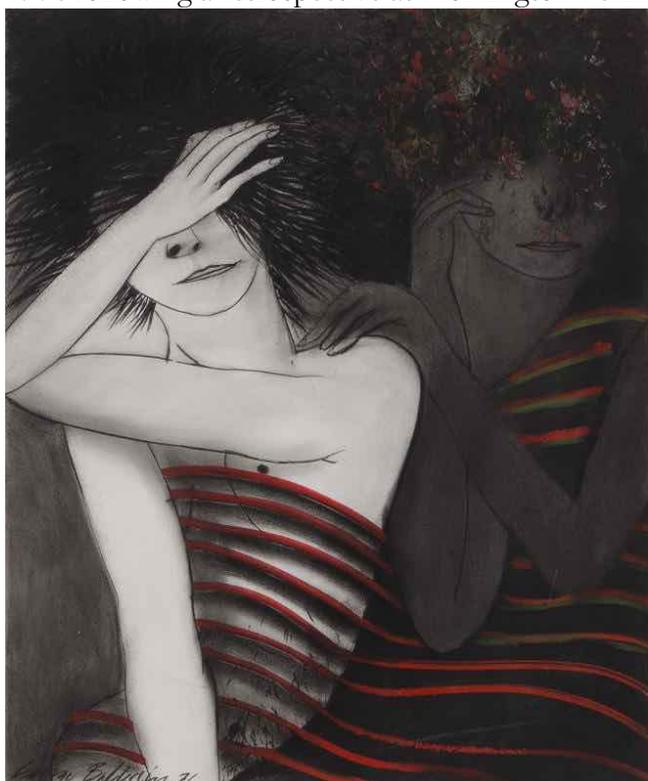
George Baldessin *Face with Pears* 1976 watercolour and ink on paper 76 x 56 cm

Despite studying painting at Royal Melbourne Technical College (1958-61), Baldessin then travelled to Europe to study printmaking at the Chelsea School of Art in London (where he was particularly interested in depicting the human figure) and sculpture with Marino Marini at the Brera Academy of Fine Art in Milan. Throughout his career Baldessin experimented with materials and techniques over a variety of mediums, exploring new possibilities, for example, conceiving the silver-aluminium foil printing method. Baldessin's interest in printmaking was extended through his studies at the famed Lacouriere in Paris in the mid 1970s.



George Baldessin *The Dance* 1973 coloured etching edition 25 28 x 30.5 cm

Baldessin's influence on younger artists was especially significant, teaching at RMIT and establishing art studios where young artists were encouraged to further their printmaking skills. His originality and skill was recognized from his first solo exhibition in 1964; including winning the Alcorso-Sekers travelling scholarship for sculpture (travelling to Japan in 1966); Geelong Print Prize 1970; Drawing Prize at the Second International Bienale for Drawing in Yugoslavia; Comalco invitation award for sculpture in 1971; and representing Australian at the XIII Bienale de Sao Paulo, Brazil with silver laminate etchings and a sculptural installation. The National Gallery of Australia acquired 279 of his prints and etching plates in 1974 following a retrospective at Mornington Peninsula Arts Centre.



George Baldessin (*Deux Personages*) 1976 charcoal, conte, wash & synthetic polymer on paper 73 x 60 cm

Much of Baldessin's imagery explores universal human conditions, sometimes through distorted figures in an almost surreal manner, and his highly personal response to his art practice is a key component of the modern artist. This is also a strong feature in the work of Brett Whiteley.

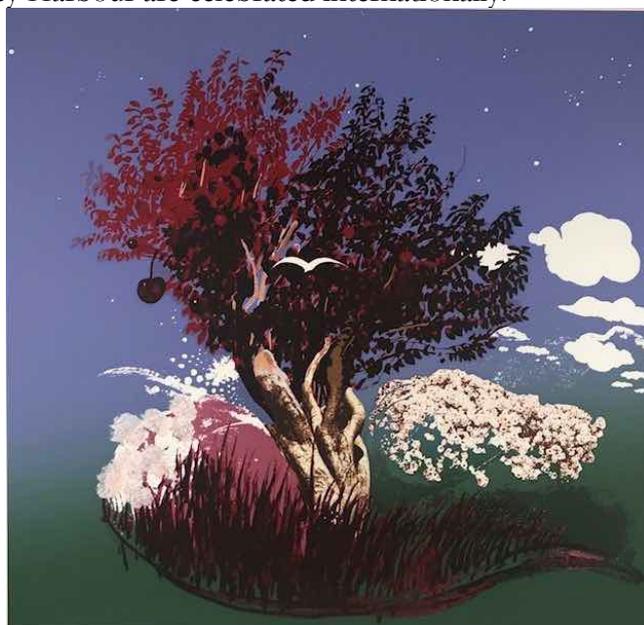


Brett Whiteley 1939 – 1992 *Nude and Necklace* 1978 oil and mixed media on canvas on board 80.5 x 106 cm

Whiteley, like Baldessin, worked across a variety of materials; painting; drawing; printmaking; photography; sculpture; ceramics and an exploration of mixed media and collage. His sensual and lyrical nudes and images of Sydney Harbour are celebrated internationally.



Brett Whiteley 1939 – 1992 *Lavender Bay in the Rain* 1987 screenprint edition 41/75 101 x 75 cm



Poem for a Lover 1988 screenprint edition 52/80 60 x 95 cm

Whiteley was awarded the Italian Government Travelling Art Scholarship in 1959 and travelled in Europe, the USA and Fiji, before returning to Sydney in 1969. Whiteley's use of saturated colour in his personal and large-scale interiors are reminiscent of modern artist Henri Matisse. In 1976 Whiteley was awarded both the Archibald and Sulman Prize and the following year the Wynne Prize and all three prizes in 1978. He was awarded an order of

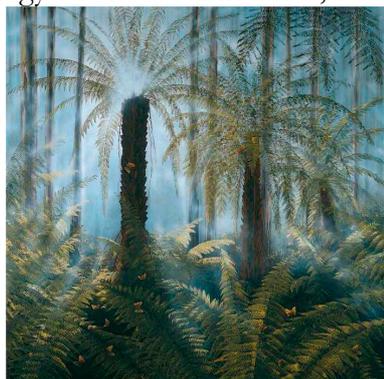
National Aboriginal Art Award, Darwin 1988; the Kate Challis RAKA Melbourne, 1993; National Indigenous Heritage Art Award, Canberra, 1994 and Order of Australia, 1993). His role as Victorian representative of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council enabled Onus to travel to Maningrida in Arnhem Land which was to have a profound impact on his imagery, combining traditional and contemporary indigenous visual and narrative representations with realistic landscapes. Onus used his original art to convey political messages and bring indigenous issues to a wider audience.



Lin Onus 1948–1996 *Fish and Storm Clouds (Guyi Na Ngawalngwal)* 1994 synthetic polymer on linen 183 x 183 cm

Fish and Storm Clouds is a mesmerizing painting with an air of quiet contemplation where the viewer can lose themselves between the reflected clouds and trees on the water and staring into the depths where the rarrk-marked fish emerge. The painting provokes a meditative effect, allowing thoughts and ideas to arise, just like the shadowy fish.

“I kind of hope that history may see me as some sort of bridge between cultures, between technology and ideas.” Lin Onus, 1990



(detail)

Lin Onus *Butterflies in Sherbrooke Forest* 1993 synthetic polymer on canvas 240 x 240 cm

Of course, indigenous bark painting was quickly being accepted in the Australian art market in the mid twentieth century and the rise of western desert painting bloomed from the 1970s. Perhaps the growth of modern art allowed for a fresh interpretation of these paintings with their deep spirituality, personal connection for the artist and use of abstracted patterning.



Nelson Maldjiwa Nayilbidj 1927 – 1974
Mamandi Spirit Attacking Mimib Spirit
natural pigments on bark 24.6 x 40 cm



Dick Nguleingulei Murrumurra c.1920 – 1988
Mimib Woman and Two Njanjmab (Bush Cats)
natural pigments on bark 31 x 48 cm

The relationship with the Australian landscape was a popular theme of exploration for a great majority of Australian artists in the modernist period as a more Australian identity was sought. We have taken *A Closer Look* already at the depictions of desert, bush and outback in artists such as Drysdale, Boyd, Nolan and Tucker, and the development of a more personal response from artists in depicting their own experience of landscape.



Ray Croke 1922 – 2015 (*Landscape*) 1966 oil on composition board 61 x 91 cm

Ray Croke's images of Northern Queensland were shaped by his personal experience of that particular landscape. Following a period in the army, which took him to North Queensland and Borneo, Croke worked and lived on Thursday Island before he eventually settled in Cairns in the 1960s. His atmospheric paintings are evocative, capturing the heat of the climate, the dusty earth and sparse trees and distinctive architecture and presence of the indigenous population. His paintings of island life are as synonymous for Croke as for modern artist Gauguin, and are marked by a quiet sensitivity and genuine affection for his subjects. The figures are anonymous, a feeling further promoted by the usually flattened surfaces, the silhouette fostered by the actual experience of the bright tropical light. There is a

sense that the viewer is a voyeur, allowed a glimpse into secret island life through Crooke's expressive paintings.



Ray Crooke 1922 – 2015 *Thursday Island* oil on composition board 61 x 76 cm

In the work of Fred Williams we see an artist seeking his own way to interpret the Australian landscape, developing a unique visual language to depict the scrubby trees; the areas of sparseness amongst the bush; the sometimes harsh light. Williams experimented with angles and viewpoints in his compositions, sometimes quite cubist and separate, at other times using a high horizon line and tilted planes. Williams immersed himself in the landscape, often travelling to paint en plein air, linking back to the tradition of the Australian impressionists.



Frederick Ronald Williams 1927 – 1982 *The Charcoal Burners* 1959 oil on composition board 61 x 71 cm

The Charcoal Burners, painted in 1959 from a painting trip with Arthur Boyd to Barmah Forest, (also the site of Onus' *Fish and Storm Clouds*) depicts smoke clouds billowing from oil drum

braziers in a clearing amongst the towering gums. The abstracted shapes, the use of colour to conjure atmosphere and the textural application of paint are all tools of the modern artist. Patrick McCaughey's remarks regarding the related painting in the National Gallery of Victoria (*The Charcoal Burner* 1959 oil on composition board 86.3 x 91.4 cm) equally apply here, "Already looking at the bones of the landscape, Williams was drawn to the early phase of Cubism, as it gave structure to the unspectacular landscape ... Just as Braque... eschewed view painting and disdained the picturesque, so Williams in turn generalised the landscape, constructing it and rendering it taut, modern and vivid."

(McCaughey, P., *Fred Williams – The Charcoal Burner* 1959 in Harding, L. and Cramer, S., *Cubism and Australian Art*, exhibition catalogue, Heide Museum of Modern Art and Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2009, p.217)



Michael Ingleton 1952 – *Perceval and Williams at Mernda* 1972 silver gelatin print 22 x 30 cm

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