



CONSTANCE STOKES

1906 – 1991

30 November 2021 – 31 March 2022

LAURINE · DIGGINS · FINE · ART



Portrait of Margaret Stokes 1936

oil on canvas
80.5 x 64.5 cm
private collection, Melbourne

The current global engagement with both historic and contemporary women's art over the past decade and a quarter has well outlasted the 1970s' previous intense focus on women's art. Here is an ideal context in which to affirm Constance Stokes' major contribution to twentieth century Australian art. Her life and work is central to the history of Australian art and particularly the much-contested place and impact of women in that narrative.

She was a consistent technician, well trained, highly self-aware and alert in her commitment to formal design and neoclassicism, as the two interviews she gave to the National Library of Australia document.¹ Producing work of the highest possible standard was her goal and for some years of her career, especially when her children were young, she limited her output in order to maintain the standards that she set for herself. Yet concurrently her figure subjects were often warm, nuanced and sensitive in their characterisation. Without compromising the undeniable seriousness of Stokes' intent,



Woman in Green Frilly Blouse 1979

oil on plywood
86.5 x 61 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



Still Life with Flowers

oil on composition board
47 x 36.5 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne

her work, and particularly its subjects, also spoke eloquently to a broad audience and have continued to speak directly to the open-minded beyond the sometimes wavering fortunes of her art at the hands of institutional professionals since the 1960s.

Often linked historically and curatorially to the classical modernists² in Australia, she was close to George Bell, but, as she made clear in interviews, never a pupil and he treated her as a professional colleague. Stokes' highly individual work tends to resist obvious alignment with that of sympathetic friends and colleagues. When set against that of other artists in her circle, Stokes' work is never as ironic or cynical as Dorothy Braund's; more consciously focussed on formal, even intellectual, outcomes than Sybil Craig's; and less romantic than Anne Montgomery's. Most notably her colour stands out as far bolder, cleaner and innovative than the work of many contemporaries and peers.

"For Stokes, as recounted in interviews, the driving factors of her art were her imagination, her sense of design, and, incarnation or memory."³ Women stand at the centre of her imagery, as she said "the woman takes first place."⁴ Many of the artworks in this present collection reflect her preference for portraying women. Her female studies became particularly important during the later phase of her career, when she, in effect, rebuilt her practice and her confidence after the early death of her husband in 1962. At this date Stokes faced a very different and not always congenial artistic, social and political world to the one in which she first found fame. Her response to these changing times and practices was to heighten her colour and simplify her compositions.

Despite her dislike of contemporary art developments of the 1960s, "I have no sympathy with them at all" as she said of abstractionists⁵, and she wondered why artists disengaged themselves from the visual world, the closest resonance to her use of colour ironically would



Portrait of Sybil Craig 1929
oil on canvas
89 x 70 cm
private collection, Melbourne



Male Nude
oil on composition board
40.7 x 25.5 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



Dorothy c.1970
oil on composition board
59 x 48 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



Woman Resting 1949
oil on composition board
56.5 x 43 cm
private collection, Melbourne

be the colourfield movement and the work of younger artists in Australia and overseas. Her interest in Matisse had already moved her beyond the early Picasso/ Ecole de Paris influences that helped her break free of academic realism, but the parallels to the 1960s' explosion of colour in design and abstract art in Stokes' art, lends it a unique potency. Colour was central to her practice in her later years and she delighted in developing complex and striking combinations. To that end her drawings were as important as her oils, allowing both directness and freedom. In her insightful and finely drawn study of her mother's life Lucilla Wyborn d'Abrera singles out the pastels and wash drawings for special attention as the crystallisation of Stokes' vision and achievement.⁶ In her later years Stokes' works on paper were never preparatory drafts, but fully rounded artworks in their own right where her technique and intention is eloquently revealed.

Whilst her figure studies are well known, Stokes' final oils of Wimmera landscapes are less

familiar. They powerfully contradict stereotypes of Stokes' practice as often focussed upon pure design and thus aloof from the observed world. These works are extremely radical expressions of minimal, ethereal abstraction, in both the brevity of the forms and the shimmering delicacy of the pigments. Yet simultaneously they are deeply embedded in the forms, vistas and light of the Wimmera. She had known and remembered this wide, even transcendental, terrain stretching to an equally wide horizon from her earliest childhood. With the assistance of her eldest son, who drove her out and set up basecamps, she revisited the Wimmera at the end of her life. The landscape is presented as elliptical and pared down, but concurrently as plausible and known.

Beyond her artwork, critics' and curators' high regard for her work from the 1930s to the 1960s is central to assessing women artists' impact on mainstream Australian art practice in the modernist and postwar period. Whilst interwar artists such as Clarice Beckett, Margaret Preston



Williamstown
oil on composition board
86 x 108 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



(Green Urn)
ink and pastel on paper
38 x 28 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



Still Life 1956
oil on canvas
55 x 55 cm
private collection, Melbourne



Reclining Nude 1961
conté pencil and pastel on paper
28 x 38 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



Seated Dancer 1980s
oil on composition board
37.5 x 26.5 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne

and Grace Cossington Smith have captured more academic and curatorial attention in recent years, ignoring Stokes' highly visible presence leaves a significant void in present day understandings of women artists' position in mid century Australia. Although she only showed in group exhibitions, art reviews of the 1940s and 1950s celebrated her as both an anomaly – a housewife and mother with a career – and as a leading innovative artist. "Constance Stokes, a magnificent craftsman, ... an objective artist of a high order."⁷ She was included in major exhibitions that sought to "define" contemporary Australian art across the 1940s and 1950s including the 1941 Carnegie Corporation exhibition of Australian art in the United States; purchase by the Orient Line in 1950 as part of a collection of contemporary Australian art to decorate the Liner Oronsay; the Victorian Jubilee exhibition of 1951 touring regional Victoria by train; the exhibition of Australian contemporary art in London 1953; the 1953 Venice Biennale; the Second International Contemporary Art Exhibition in India, 1953; and the touring

exhibition of Australian contemporary art selected by the directors of six Australian public galleries in 1954. By the 1960s public collections across three states had purchased her work, and there were a steady series of acquisitions into the 1970s, including galleries in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Although Stokes' work is often read as open and uncomplicated, the recent biography, substantially compiled from unpublished papers by her daughter Lucilla, uncovers Stokes' richly layered intellectual probity and wideranging cultural experiences. Relatively few Melbourne contemporaries (apart from longterm expatriates) shared her first hand experiences of European art and culture. Stokes particularly made effective use of winning the 1929 National Gallery of Victoria Travelling Scholarship, not only training at the Royal Academy Schools, but also seeking out more radical tuition at the Andre Lhote academy in Paris. Thus she is placed in a small group of Australians such as Grace Crowley and Dorrit

Black who had studied in Paris. Her time in Paris gave her direct knowledge of the Ecole de Paris, which remained a lodestar for her practice. Both her studies of the female nude and of characters such as clowns, acrobats and dancers recall her engagement with early twentieth century French art. A second overseas trip as an extended honeymoon and a business trip also allowed for further overseas study and observation of both fine art and contemporary industrial design in Europe and Scandinavia. Equally on her two European journeys she observed social life and customs from traditional village life in Spain to the *Sturmabteilung* marching in Berlin.



In a Churchyard 1933
oil on canvas
61 x 61 cm



Woman with Orange Flower 1970s
oil on composition board
55 x 39 cm

The Blue Hat 1971
oil on composition board
56 x 44 cm (sight)
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



(Flowers and Blue Vase) 1987
oil on canvas
34.2 x 39.2 cm



Woman in Striped Towel 1969
ink, pastel and watercolour on paper
38 x 28 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne

None of her immediate family were particularly creative, but her talent was spotted by Susan Cochrane, an artist contemporary of Sutherland, Southern, Price, Vale et al, who taught art at Genazzano. Cochrane gave Stokes private lessons and encouraged her to study at the National Gallery School, and Stokes retained a lifelong gratitude for Cochrane's support. Both teachers and students at the National Gallery School regarded Stokes as exceptional. Bernard Hall joked that she must have been an artist in a previous life.⁸ As an outstanding student she bookended the conclusion of Hall's teaching career as Hugh Ramsay had launched its beginning. Hall wrote glowingly "[y]ou have always been such a satisfactory student and have a splendid record."⁹ In turn Stokes always praised the solid grounding she received from Hall and the foundation he gave her in working with professional rigour.¹⁰

Marriage led to her reducing her creative activities, but not before she had attracted some

fame in the mid 1930s Melbourne press. Stokes spent considerable energy keeping in touch with professional colleagues, with the Thursday night drawing group organised by Bell offering a regular expansion beyond the domestic and interaction with some of the more senior creative figures in Melbourne. Stokes never evaded the responsibilities in homemaking and childraising expected by both society and church in her lifetime, but still keenly felt the divergent demands of her talent and accepted options for women's lives.¹¹ Despite many pressures of homelife, Stokes' reputation reached stellar levels during the 1940s and 1950s, endorsed by Sir Kenneth Clark, Sir Daryl Lindsay, Sir Joseph Burke, George Bell, Arnold Shore, Alan McCulloch and later Bernard Smith.

Stokes' husband was ultimately supportive of her art; he shared her avant garde interests, particularly around cosmopolitan design. Family memory suggests that one of the early signs of the heart weakness that was to end Eric Stokes'



Italian Women at the Market
oil on composition board
76 x 61 cm
private collection, Melbourne



The Striped Dressing Gown 1973
ink and pastel on paper
38 x 28 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



Woman in the Garden c.1981
oil on composition board
54.5 x 46 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne

life was brought on by a public event at the National Gallery of Victoria where the question of women's [implied lesser] talents as artists was being debated.¹² The early and sudden death of her husband, sent Stokes into a deep depression, from which she emerged through working intensively on her art. An exhibition at Leveson Street Gallery was a critical and commercial success, triggering a final and lengthy bout of creative work. Many of the artworks shown here are from that late flowering. Stokes had stayed aloof from even household and domestic finance. The need to make a living from her art refocused her attention onto her practice and brokered a new independence and disciplined approach to her work.

Discussion of Stokes having been erased from the artworld fails to account for private collectors' and the art market's consistent endorsement of her work across nearly a century. Nine decades of collectors and art market enthusiasm stands in direct contradiction to the wavering and



Dr Lawrence Stokes c.1935
oil on canvas
76.4 x 63.5 cm
private collection, Melbourne

changeable opinions of public institutions such as art museums and university art history departments, since the late 1950s. Even in the middle of her career when her output was limited, collectors, organisers of exhibitions and owners of galleries would plead for works – their letters are preserved in the artist's archive - or patiently join a waiting list for the next completed work.¹³ This current exhibition highlights Stokes' work via a platform i.e. an art dealership – that is substantially addressed to private collectors. Thus Stokes' works are presented to an audience whose loyalty and respect has never faltered.

– Dr. Juliette Peers

FOOTNOTES:

1. For the National Library of Australia with Hazel de Berg 1965 and Barbara Blackman 1987
2. She described herself as a "classical" painter
3. Interview in *The Herald* 9 December 1952 p 15 cf interviews with both Hazel De Berg and Barbara Blackman



Landscape
oil on composition board
26.7 x 38 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne

4. Interview with Barbara Blackman
5. Interview with Barbara Blackman
6. Lucilla Wyborn d'Abrera *Constance Stokes Art and Life* Melbourne: Hill House Publishing pp 206-215
7. *The Herald* 17 October 1949 p 10
8. Wyborn d'Abrera p 22
9. Letter Bernard Hall to Constance Parkin [Stokes] 6 January 1931 in Wyborn d'Abrera p 36
10. Constance Stokes in conversation with Juliette Peers 1986
11. *The Herald* 9 December 1952 p 15
12. Wyborn d'Abrera p 105
13. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-21/forgotten-artist-constance-stokes-gets-recognition-in-exhibition/8729478>



Contemplation 1968
oil on composition board
57.5 x 82.5 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



(Pink Gown)
ink and pastel on paper
38 x 28 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



Portrait of Phil Waterhouse c.1980
oil on composition board
74 x 60 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne



The Sunbather
oil on plywood
74 x 119 cm
private collection, Melbourne



At the Café
oil on canvasboard
23 x 33 cm (sight)
private collection, Melbourne



Girl in Fur Collar, London 1970s
oil on composition board
53.6 x 45.5 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne

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cover
My Young Mother 1970s
oil on canvas
46 x 35.5 cm
the Estate of the Artist, Melbourne

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Tues – Friday 10 am – 6 pm
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