



BLACK IS THE COLOUR ...

An exhibition in May this year at the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre which was focused on black, *Black is the Colour ...* is not nearly as dark as might first be expected. There is, in fact, a good deal of colour as well — some of it quite bright. In a way, that's the point. It's the contrast between black and the other colours — between darkness and light — that drives the exhibition, rather than a minimal focus on black alone.

Importantly, while this is a theme-driven exhibition, the pool of works from which it draws is limited to a single collection: the M.G. Dingle and G.B. Hughes Collection, gifted to the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre in 2008. Curated by Max Dingle, *Black is the Colour ...* serves as a focused introduction to aspects of the collection, as well as being a tribute to his partner, the late Gavin Hughes.

Unlike an exhibition which sets out to explore a thesis or theme by selecting widely from contemporary artists or the holdings of a number of institutions or individuals, the focus here is more a revelation of a general leaning or tendency within this one collection, which includes works by artists such as Euan Macleod, Margaret Dredge, Aida Tomescu and Malcolm Benham.

Looking at the selection of works, it seems pretty clear that the collection was not developed within a rigid collection policy framework, but is the result of over forty years of personal engagement with art and artists by Max Dingle and Gavin Hughes. In other words, it's about private taste, rather than the public role of the museum as a collector. Private collectors can choose to buy what they like, rather than what they should.

What makes this exhibition interesting is that as well as allowing works to carry traces of the collecting process, with all its personal links and connections, a more formal set of relationships is developed through the focus on the role black plays within each work. In Max Dingle's words, for the selected pieces, "black is important in making the art 'work'". Although, of course, what often makes the black 'work' is its contrast with white, or juxtaposition with other colours.

Virginia Coventry's *Second Nature*, 1996, works at the edges of darkness, with an oscillating grid of deep purples and velvety black. Daniel Templeman's *Fiction*, 2004, plays an even simpler hand, with a neat square window of white cut out of an inky black rectangle, and rays of white playing diagonally across the surface like so many dust particles. In a way, this most minimal of

works gets right to the heart of the role of black in this exhibition — allowing us to read the work as both pure formal abstraction, and a simplified representation of that moment when it is the light streaming in that makes the darkness inside appear so much darker.

Right from the start, with Campbell Robertson-Swann's small black painted sculpture *Manhattan* (1998) sitting on its plinth below the exhibition's title, it is clear that black is not a static colour. Black changes in the play of light, its matt or gloss surface allowing shifts from the deepest dark to greys, purples, blues and perhaps even red. Indeed, as Robert Watson's *Consider the Road*, 2003, invites us to do, we might well imagine the black top not as a vantage point — from which we observe a changing landscape — but a dark meditative space that draws us in. Here, in the centre of the gallery, we dive into the black, and like the darkness we find behind our closed eyelids, other colours emerge. As this exhibition demonstrates, black is not an empty colour.

Peter Anderson

Top left: Margaret Dredge, *Untitled*, c.1969, oil on board, 70 x 48cm.
Top right: José Guerrero, *Untitled*, c.1990, screenprint, 100 x 80cm.