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Margaret Dredge *Retrospective 1960 to 2001*
Shoalhaven City Arts Centre
Until 21 May

By Dylan Rainforth

Painter Margaret Dredge (1928–2001) created abstract expressionist works every bit as strong as any number of her fellow travelers. So why does she remain less well known? Max Dingle, art collector and curator of Shoalhaven’s current retrospective, notes that following her death Dredge left behind a “legacy of paintings, etchings and works on paper that, in the main, had never been exhibited. This was because she withdrew from entering work in exhibitions just when her art was being critically acclaimed.”

Dredge first began exhibiting in group exhibitions with the Beaumaris Art Group and the Melbourne Contemporary Artists from 1961. As well as over twenty group exhibitions, she

mounted four solo shows – including one at the influential Pinacotheca Gallery – by 1969. But from then until 1975 she didn't exhibit at all, largely due to domestic pressures due to raising teenaged children and difficulties with her marriage.

It's a familiar story for women artists of the time. Dingle remarks that even before her temporary withdrawal from art Dredge was irritated – even as she delighted in the recognition – by 1960s critics such as Graeme Sturgeon and Patrick McCaughey, respectively, saying she had “assumed a place among the top two dozen women working in Melbourne” (why the qualification?) or that her paintings “exhibit[ed] the pleasures of good feminist art”. Whatever Dredge's thoughts on the feminist movement (she was a supporter of abortion law reform and other progressive causes), these critics' remarks reflect a marginalisation of her work.

In her 2004 thesis on Dredge, Meaghan Wilson-Anastasios also notes that the rise of “post-painterly abstraction” – where crisp areas of colour were favoured over dense, gestural brushwork – around the time of Dredge's 1969 withdrawal represented a challenge for the artist. Which is not to say she has not left beautiful examples of work in this style, such as *The Huntress* (1969).

But for Wilson-Anastasios, Dredge's work reaches its mature phase in the mid-1980s, from when on they “appear effortless, and attest to the enthusiasm of a painter who has finally discovered her voice”. Hopefully this retrospective is able to give that voice a wider audience.



Margaret Dredge, *So What*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 122 x 106 cm. Collection of the artist's estate.



Margaret Dredge, *Words*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 165 cm. Collection of the artist's estate.