

1/ *Nuns at Dawn*, 1970, oil on board, 91.5 x 122cm; commended, Inez Hutchison Award; all images this article of work by Margaret Dredge

2/ Richard Beck, *Portrait of Margaret Dredge in her studio*, 1972; image courtesy National Library of Australia; this portrait was taken for the publication *Artists in their Studios* by Richard Beck and Hal Missingham

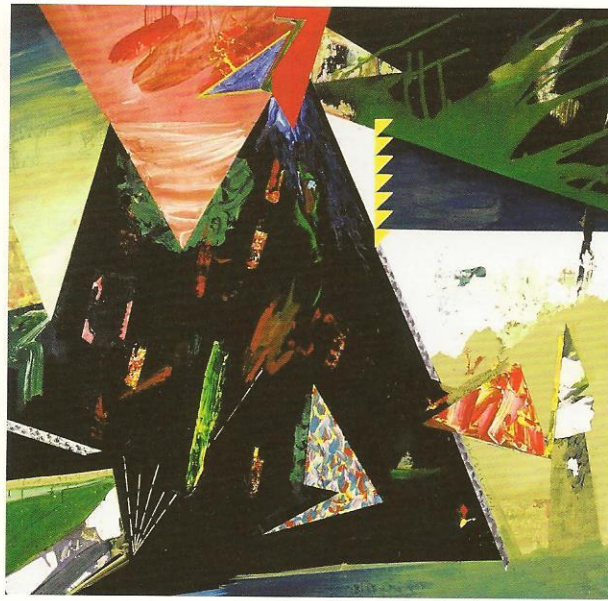
## Not the usual Book Club Story: the Margaret Dredge retrospective & the workings of Australia art historiography

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In April/May 2013 the Shoalhaven Regional Gallery in Nowra, New South Wales, via the initiative and expertise of guest curator Max Dingle, presented an authoritative and visually appealing retrospective of Melbourne abstractionist Margaret Dredge. As the artist who enjoyed a near four-decade working life in Melbourne was prolific but not widely acquired by public galleries, the majority of the works were from private holdings and even more effective and surprising because of their freshness and unfamiliarity. Thus the exhibition had something of the *éclat* of the magician's or burlesque artiste's 'reveal', given the amount of visual material that abounds in our digital age. The collection of non-figurative artworks from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had a presence and composure, particularly emphasised in the consistent achievements of the last decade or so of Dredge's career that prompted a favourable, engaged response from a general audience at the opening. This positive, open response is not necessarily a given with recent art – and certainly not with the uncompromising dualism and Darwinian certainty of Australian

contemporary art in the 1950s to 1970s, nor with non art professionals – and credit must be given to this still relatively unfamiliar artist.

Like all historic women artists, the questions raised by revisiting the work from a sympathetic yet informed position and systematically curating an overview as presented here by Dingle, are the malleable and contentious ones of reputation and historiography and how this impacts upon the critical and curatorial understanding of both the artist and the larger canonical narratives against (or with) which she stands. Here the sum of Dredge's conscious and self-monitored achievement – certainly after years of applied consideration in her studio – and the well-judged curatorial and institutional contextualising of her work in the retrospective prompt a particularly rich series of debates around public memory, and institutional, academic and journalistic practice in this country. The breadth of these debates alone indicates that Dredge merits a greater profile in public cultural memory in Australia.



1/ *St Joan*, 1964, oil on board, 122 x 183cm; exhibited in solo exhibition, Argus Gallery Melbourne 1965; Collection: M G Dingle & G B Hughes Collection

2/ *Untitled*, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 152.5; Collection: Geelong Museum & Art Gallery Collection

The art and social history evidence as to why Dredge should have a greater profile in public cultural memory in Australia is compelling but, it should be noted, these ideas are not the ones that the artist herself would have mandated. Unlike so many Australian women artists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards we do have an indication of her opinions and outlook upon her own work and on the broad field of art theory and art writing generally. For a feminist art historian Dredge's recorded voice is also highly important and rare. She left notes and essay fragments outlining her views on art. This body of writing went public at strategic moments – albeit in the small scale – when she wrote to major newspapers, mostly criticising art reviewers and art reviews. Consistently she expressed a pro-artist stance in an *a priori* and bedrock stand-off where critics and writers were cast as parasites and adversaries of the practitioner. Ironically the high abstractionists shared this abhorrence of textual commentary with the Meldrum tonal painters.

It is not however the gesture of the maker that alone creates the auratic (or commodifiable) presence of the object but the audience and client is equally as co-consumer a party to the process. In high modernism there was an arrogance about prioritising the maker and do-er as having a greater and more legitimate insight, a view somewhat echoed in the way academia and public policy largely legitimates a single Darwinian thread of excellence and achievement with laurels being bestowed upon the single winner. This stands in contrast to a field of multiple players too diverse to be neatly captured in an overview, a digitised world of low-floor entry, high-ceiling output, where any top end domestic computer is as powerful as

those available for Star Wars special effects three decades ago. Yet what is surely important is not only the content of Dredge's ideas, but the fact she felt herself legitimised as a woman artist to speak in that charged and volatile arena of four decades ago.

Within this deathgame of attaining modernist credibility, Dredge was nobody's patsy, *belle hysterique* or weeping woman, and certainly neither the Joys nor the Clarices beloved of book clubs. She engaged with the debates and knew them thoroughly. Her still intact library indicates the clarity and modernist authority of the world she was creating, in tandem with informed friends and colleagues, artists, architects and other 'creatives' as we now usefully call them. Dredge's library alone would have historical value as a map of how sophisticated and worldly some committed Australians could be in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and from an Australian base. From the surviving texts, she tended towards the Francophile and Europhile rather than North American or British cultural identification, although those elements were not entirely absent. Her intellectual savvy often left occasional visual clues and puns, cultural, historical and art theoretical/reflexive, in some of her paintings, within the overall tendency to non-representation. She stands in opposition to those – often high-profiled - Australians who at mid-century claimed the country was too small, too *retardataire* to serve them, and left for the Northern Hemisphere. However Dredge did take a stance and walk out. She performed her own version of the East German *innere emigration* in 1969, resigning from two contemporary art societies and substantially withdrawing from the Melbourne art scene and its competing 'isms'. The Wildean

wordplay and camp but poisonous dart battles – still fun on paper four decades later to those who were not targets – of art criticism and competing theories were not congenial. She continued to paint with – ironically – increasingly more control of her formal skills and an increasingly individual footprint, although her work was never ever outsider art or from a paracosm, or fantasy world.

Dredge maintained contact and exchange with like-minded arts professionals, and had a relatively active commercial gallery profile during the 1960s and 1970s, exhibiting her work at first-ranking Melbourne commercial galleries Pinacotheca and the Argus Gallery, as well as at a major public space, the Gryphon Gallery. Printmaking workshops in particular offered a point of direct engagement with cutting-edge practice in Melbourne in the third-quarter of the 20th century. She attended etching workshops run by Bill Young with Geoffrey Goldie, John Spooner, Jon Cattapan and Maggie May.

One particularly inspirational point of comment and exchange was via correspondence to Dredge's uncle, US-based Australian artist John Vickery, who was a firsthand witness to what Mark Tansey named as the 'Triumph of the New York School'. Mostly Dredge's professional peers were of a parallel generation and tended to share her interest in a cerebral and intellectualised modernist formalism, and perhaps an interest in classical Japanese and Chinese art that fuelled a particularly refined strain of non-figurative taste at mid-century.<sup>1</sup> The return of imagery and narrative – albeit it via deconstruction and mobile and digital imaging, the embrace of French theory, and the gradual assimilation of textual as well as practice-based competencies into art schools, further distanced her from aspects of the mainstream during the 1980s. Concurrently her effective expressionist handling of paint (consistent from work

to work, and within the space of an individual canvas) also links her to core formalist concerns around younger Melbourne artists at that time.

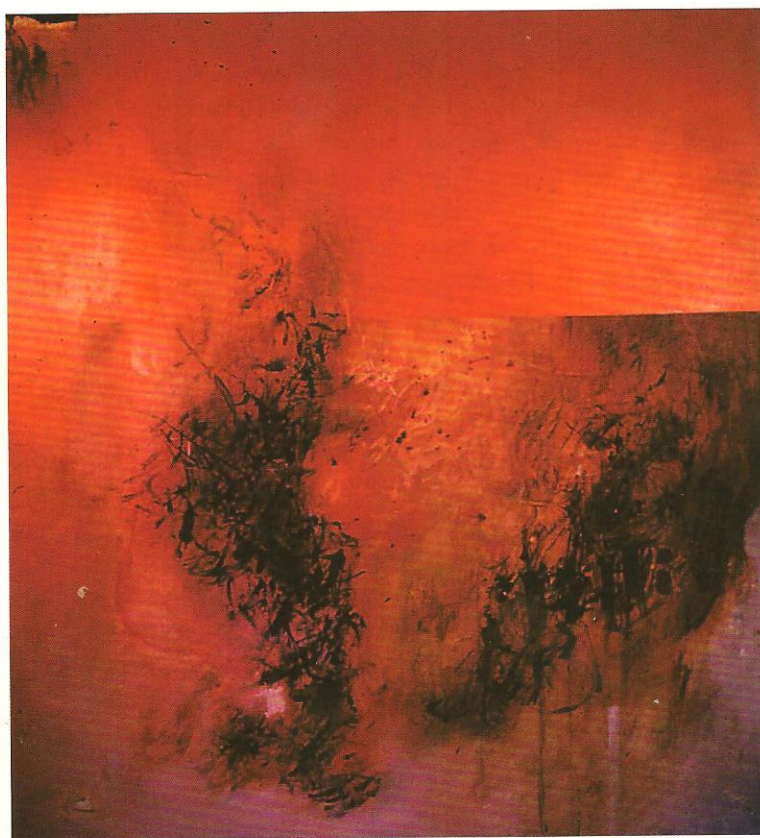
Her commitment and her views stamp her as thoroughly a child of her time, and that representational quality again emphasises her relevance to larger stories than her own biography. When considering the meaning and value of Dredge's cultural milieu, it should be noted that she was working across a particularly contentious and combative era of style wars and competing manifestoes and orthodoxies in 1960s east coast Australia. The era was marked by the rapid consolidation of an institutional, professional, commercial art world complex that still remains recognisably intact in the present, thus too Dredge's liveness in the current professional milieu. She felt capable of raising her voice and making decisions as a free agent at this crucial period. Reviews of the period are particularly noteworthy as they trace Dredge's high reputation in an era when visual artists were regularly belittled and savagely excoriated in the daily newspapers.

Margaret has been painting for eight years and has already achieved a status many strive for all their lives.<sup>2</sup>

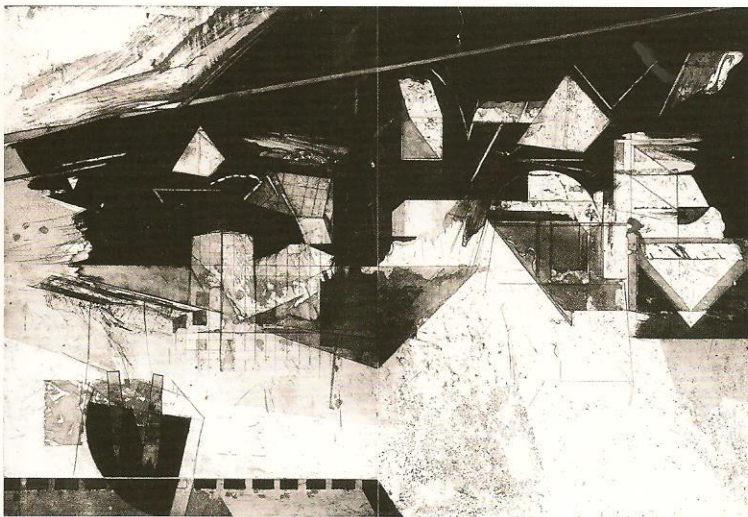
With this exhibition Margaret Dredge has assured a place amongst the top dozen women working in Melbourne.<sup>3</sup>

The impressive works to be seen at Peter Burrows Studio 3 Queens Road are the sensitive and robust paintings by Margaret Dredge.<sup>4</sup>

In the narrative of feminist or woman-centric art histories in Australia there is a hiatus somewhere between the death of Margaret Preston and Joy Hester and the emergence of second-wave feminist art in the 1970s. Women artists did not disappear but the accessible, popularly understood narrative seems to jump a track or two – perhaps in the gap between Janine Burke's two texts (*Australian Women Artists*) which finished its narrative in 1940, and *Field of Vision* which started its narrative in the late 1970s. Bridging figures from the 1950s to the 1970s who retained peer group and critical support including Shay Docking, Erica McGilchrist, Mary McLeish, Janet Dawson, Jenna Bruce and many others have far less traction in popular memory than they did when exhibiting half-a-century ago.<sup>5</sup> These lost years were particularly when Margaret Dredge was active as a publicly exhibiting artist. Moreover this was a time that was not highly friendly or accepting of female practitioners, even against a transhistorical norm of placing female artists as difficult and contentious and certainly marginal. Both the high



*Rift*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 152.5 x 152.5cm;  
co-winner, Flinders Art Award; Collection: Shire of Flinders Collection



1/ *Nomadic Journey*, 1981, etching, 120 x 92cm;  
exhibited Gryphon Gallery 1982;  
Collection: M G Dingle & G B Hughes Collection

2/ *Words*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 165cm;  
exhibited Icon Museum of Art 2003 and Span Gallery 2005;  
Collection: Artist's estate



reputation she won in public and her commitment to the stony path of a purist formalism contribute to an understanding of the full range of women artists' presence in Australia, and thus again we can make a case for her.

Invoking feminism in the context of evaluating Margaret Dredge is also complex. Having noted above her belief that art is to be assessed strictly in terms of its technical and formal performance, Dredge herself may not have appreciated being positioned in a feminist art history. Feminism was one of the narratives that she believed should not be appended to and interfere with the act of mark-making on canvas. In the tough love of the mid-century modern, asking for special consideration as a woman was already to show weakness and disqualify one for the race with all its intonations of machismo. One was virtually giving the espada the sign of 'come and get me' and kneeling in the bloody sand. Being described as one of Melbourne's best women artists (and quite fairly so) in a review appalled rather than pleased her. Dredge's reputation was high enough for her to have been approached to join in events around the foundation of the Women's Art Register and the Women's Art Forum. It would appear that Dredge substantially ignored their approaches, but it again indicates her profile in the 1970s that she was seen as someone to include in a woman-

centric challenge to the mainstream. Certainly the separatist movements that emerged in the 1970s, either in social life or in art practice, were alien to her outlook and cultural interests. Throughout her career she found support and advocacy from males both via the informality of personal debates around art and in a professional context as dealers and critics, who supported her practice.

Dredge did also have a network of female artist friends that substantially impacted upon her working life. Inez Hutchison encouraged a professional outlook in her early practice as she did with a number of other mentorees. Two particular longstanding friends, Melbourne artists June Stephenson and Meg Benwell,<sup>6</sup> were again highly talented, astute and pictorially intelligent and often critically well regarded, but both non-aligned with any dominant group in Melbourne and substantially under-esteemed institutionally. Like the other women in her network, Dredge built her professional commitment to art out of a somewhat unexpected if not unpromising start in suburban Melbourne in the interwar years. Sandra Leveson was another sympathetic colleague who shared Dredge's interest in abstraction, likewise painted large scale-works and was highly visible in major professional at a time when women artists were often given scant attention.

## Ashfield Artist In Residence

Ashfield Council invites Australian rural, remote and regional artists to submit an application for a residency in Ashfield. The artist will stay at the historic Thirning Villa and will be paid an allowance of \$200 per week. A collaborative residency would be considered and international artists are welcome to apply. Residencies are available during April 2014 to March 2015. The average residency length is 3 months although this is negotiable. Closing date: 20 September 2013. Contact: Anthia Hart 02 9716 1866 info@ashfield.nsw.gov.au

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Leveson could also be classed like Dredge as an artist who was active in the 1960s and 1970s between the two highly acclaimed tranches of Australian women artists.

Yet feminist art history is not only about the crusaders and those who express feminist ideas. The records of women who maintained themselves against odds that often excluded all but a narrow frame of reference both in their own lifetimes and even more so amongst subsequent generations with the schematisation and simplification of narratives brought on by a – as noted above – stubborn academic and institutional templates of validation, are part of a broader consideration of women's art. Margaret Dredge's parallels may well be Margaret Preston for claiming the centre, Alice Bale for regarding herself as foremost a creative professional to match any friend or foe – both freely expressed their views in the press – and Stella Bowen for staying with the uncompromising commitment to a mainstream excellence, despite the complications and distractions. Nor should we say that the artist was unfairly victimised or forgotten. Dredge's reputation was high amongst her peers, even if she did not exhibit widely from the 1970s onwards. She has featured in two curated retrospectives (Deakin University Art Museum and Shoalhaven Regional Gallery) and a Masters thesis written at the University of Melbourne, all of which indicates Dredge's cultural impact and the intellectual robustness of her career.

Speaking on her own terms, Dredge's formalist values made total and beguiling sense when a selection of her works were brought together. Her alertness to trends in the local artworld was acute; one could track the history of abstract modes in Melbourne in the 1960s and early 1970s through her work: from richly glazed mandalas and hierarchical patterns to hard-edged; to texture painting with PVC medium and other surface enhancing additions; to the final expressionist works. The exhibits were satisfying collectively and individually. The later works have a particular pulsating energy, but also a sense for design as expressionist gesture is balanced by alertness to an effective composition. Her mark-making was frenetic but also had the freehanded fluidity, and gestural confidence of Oriental script. Variety came into the later works by her handling of colour, which ranged from black and white, to strongly bold red and orange paintings, to delicate, airy, *eau de nil* greens and blues, and with many different moods and effects, but also a kinship between works without ever being directly repetitive. Dredge's printmaking alone should dispel any questions about her technical and design abilities. Her control of the printmaker's repertoire of marks – her deployment of

velvety blacks of aquatinting, and the liveliness and verve of the small flick of an etching tool, the effortless wrangling with the opportunities and complications of printmaking, indicates her understanding of that medium as well as large-scale painting.

Dredge's resting place in the last years of her career, a confidence with her large toolbox of technical competencies, a visual intelligence and total commitment as a painter, shone through her work to also give the spaces of the Shoalhaven Regional Gallery and surrounding structure (a repurposed generic international-style civic building from the era in which the artist gained her public reputation) a greater visual, formal and spatial *gravitas* than perhaps it usually expressed.

One felt converted to the logical inevitability of the non-figurative art. The examination of the recent past gave a new twist to that standard competency of the regional gallery, the biographical survey retrospective of a particular artist. Furthermore the project demonstrated the ongoing contribution of both the regional galleries and professional independent scholars such as Dingle to creating a richer and more nuanced vision of Australian art history, and to enhancing cultural life and cultural discourse across the country.

1. Documented by the privileging of the collection of Oriental art in the prominent ground floor of the original layout and design of the St Kilda Road Campus of the National Gallery of Victoria, whilst Australian art was up two escalators. The positioning of this collection was regarded by later generations of both professionals and public as somewhat baffling.

2. Harry Blake, *The Age*, 5 October 1967; Margaret Dredge papers.

3. Graeme Sturgeon, *The Australian*, 3 April 1979.

4. Bernard Smith, *The Age*, undated, c. March 1965; Margaret Dredge papers.

5. As Yvonne Audette demonstrates, these artists were capable of a significant contribution to the art of their generation, with Lina Bryans, for example, scintillating through sheer willpower as much as talent.

6. Benwell and Stephenson were also linked by close friendship to other independent women artists in Melbourne: Anne Graham and Judith Perrey, both stylistically very different artists but within this friendship continuum that has substantially escaped academic and curatorial recognition.

*Margaret Dredge: Retrospective 1960-2001, Dingle & Hughes Collection*, curated by Max Dingles, was exhibited at the Shoalhaven Regional Gallery, 2 April to 21 May 2013: shoalhaven.nsw.gov.au

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