



BLACK IS THE COLOUR ...



BLACK IS THE COLOUR ...

Shoalhaven City Arts Centre
Main Gallery

Friday 2 April to 26 May 2010

Launch Saturday 10 April 12–2pm

12 Berry Street, Nowra

Cover: Margaret Dredge. *Untitled*. c 1969

Above: Murray Overheu. *Jonah's Door*. 1976 (detail)

Published by: Shoalhaven City Arts Centre
12 Berry Street, Nowra 2541

Text: Max Dingle

Design: Colleen Duncan, Holly Hill Graphics, Bomaderry

Printing: Ulladulla Printing Service, Ulladulla

ISBN 978-0-646-52904-2

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INTRODUCTION

In art, black is an essential colour, without it Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Vermeer, for example, would have found it difficult to achieve the effects of light in their paintings. Black provides depth and drama. In fashion black can be a cliché or the height of fashionability or it can be both at the same time; the little black dress is never out of fashion. Black according to science is the negation of colour, that is, it is not a "colour" at all. But if black is not a colour, what do we call the stuff in a tin in the artist's studio marked "black"? Black has

always been a colour to the artist, from the first cave painter, using soot or charcoal to the latest art video. Black can be an important marker or highlight that makes other colours in an art work stand out.

This exhibition explores the importance of black in art works from the M G Dingle and G B Hughes Collection.

THE M G DINGLE AND G B HUGHES COLLECTION

The collection has been assembled over a period of forty five years, the first art works were acquired in the early 1960's though the earliest painting held in the collection is from 1959.

There are a number of thematic strands within the collection including a strong representation of art made by Australian women artists; a theme that was explored in *Personal Journeys: 40 years of Australian Women's Abstract Art* exhibited at the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre in 2009. Another theme within the collection is a leaning toward "black and white", particularly paintings where black is important in making the art "work".

One of the interests in acquiring art is meeting and getting to know the artists, and where possible tracking development from their early career though a number of works purchased over extended periods. Along with this is a sense of providing support, through the acquisition of their works, to artists who have not, as yet, received the full recognition that their art deserves.

A case to point is Margaret Dredge, whose 1964 painting started the Collection. We first met in the 1960's in Melbourne and became and remained friends for all her life, she died in 2001. Margaret started exhibiting in group exhibitions in Melbourne and eventually was recognised as one of the leading artists in Victoria. However at the same time, in the 1970s, she also became very cynical about the world

of commercial art and the politics of the exhibition circuit and withdrew and, while continuing to paint, never exhibited her work in public again. Since her death a number of exhibitions have focused on Margaret's work and a major survey exhibition is in the preliminary planning stages.

A passion for art, the sense of providing support for Australian art and artists and the friendships that have been formed are integral to the way the collection is seen. Putting a collection together opens a number of artistic highways and byways, from poetry, literature to music and even though we have had a fairly tight focus there are the occasional surprise inclusions, such as Sean Lowry's video cover of Public Enemies' song Bring the Noise from 2009 and the Nimrod Theatre's street poster *Metamorphosis* from 1974. Art was never seen by Gavin, while he was alive, or I, as being only about a limited artistic style, we both love really great art of all styles and only on very rare occasions we did, and I will continue to, acquire wonderful works that fall outside of that focus.

On 5 July 2008 the Shoalhaven City Council and Gavin and I signed a deed of agreement accepting our bequest of the Collection to the Shoalhaven. While these exhibitions are about the Shoalhaven community accessing "their" collection, they are also a tribute to my lifelong partner Gavin, who died on 24 October 2008.

BLACK IS THE COLOUR ...

From a scientific point of view black is the negation of colour. The light that is visible to the human eye consists of a range of electromagnetic waves, which make up what we call the spectrum. When light strikes an object, some of the waves are absorbed and some are reflected. The eye perceives the reflected waves as particular colours depending on the composition of the reflection. When the whole spectrum is reflected we see the object as white or if only the blue waves are reflected the eye sees the colour blue. When all light is absorbed, no part of the light spectrum is reflected back to the eye. It is maximum darkness. Though complete blackness is very rare, a totally sealed room would be an example of "pure" black. The way we perceive black depends on contrast with surrounding colours but even the darkest materials, like charcoal or soot reflect a small percentage of available light.

To artists black has always been a colour, though over time it has received varying amounts of recognition. People have always been able to express themselves in black (and white), for the pigments with which to paint their bodies or surroundings come readily to hand. Carbon, mostly in the form of soot or charcoal gives a permanent, commonplace black. In the first cave paintings it was very important, as the "palette" available consisted of charcoal or soot along with the earth colours such as ground lime, chalk or kaolin clay for white and iron oxide for red. It could be argued that black was the first colour to be used by these very early artists.

In painting it is very difficult to depict light without black, but the strong contrast can be used to dramatic effect, and has been "exploited" by artists such as Rembrandt and Caravaggio.

The biggest and most important change in people's perception of black occurred with the introduction of the printing press and the circulation of "black and white" publications along with the "discovery" of the spectrum by Newton and henceforth things were either in colour or in black and white. The mass distribution of images with the introduction of lithography and other image printing techniques, at a later date the development and spread of photography and then cinema or "moving pictures", reinforced the perceptual separation between colour and black and white. It is also interesting to note that in the cinema industry, while the



The Lute Player. Caravaggio. c.1596 Oil on Canvas
94 x 119 cm. The Hermitage, St Petersburg

“technicolour” process was technically available from 1915 the first colour cartoon was released in 1932 and the first true colour film in 1935. Technicolour films did not outnumber black and white films until the end of the 1960s. Michel Pastoureau, in his book *Black: The History of a Color**, argues that the dissemination of colour was held back not for technical reasons but for moral ones. The major industries and financial enterprises, in the most part, were in the control of Protestant families who imposed their values and principles. These values date back to the Protestant Reformation; by the sixteenth century, black, along with white and gray, were dignified and virtuous while colour, mainly red, yellow and green were considered immodest. There are parallels in household appliances and other objects of mass consumption, despite the chemistry industry being able to reproduce almost any colour, virtually all production from the mid 1800s to the 1920’s was in the white, gray and brown to black range.

Black has always been a favoured colour for regulators, administrators and other would be controllers of peoples’ behaviour. In Venice the gondola was not always black. Up to the 16th century they glowed with gilt and purple, red, blue and green paint and were covered in velvets, brocades and silks declaring the owner’s wealth and prestige. Then in the 1500s at the height of this competitive ostentation, the Doge, the head of state, possibly annoyed with the waste of resources, declared that all gondola were to be painted black, as they are to this day.

The Roman Emperor Domitian, an Emperor prone to exterminating people at a whim, in a famous banquet used black as an exercise of power. Guests, instructed to arrive at night without their servants, were escorted to a black clad room, seated on gravestone slabs, served black coloured food and were “entertained” by naked boys, painted black, dancing like ghosts in front of them while their host declaimed on the subject of death and slaughter, leading most of the terrified guests to conclude that they would be the next victims, though they all managed to make it home, somewhat shaken.

Until dyeing overcame the difficulties in producing cloth in black tones, blacks were more likely to be of a grey, blue or brown hue. In medieval times only the

insect gall found on particular oak leaves produced, in conjunction with iron salts, a range of good blacks. Enormous quantities of oak galls were required for a very small amount of dye material, consequently it was a very expensive product. Merchants and princes wore the deepest most beautiful black because it was rare and expensive while religious orders and various professionals wore the “black” they could afford, though in this case because black was a “moral” colour. While black was distinctive of rank and status, over time it became a favourite in the world of fashion and became entrenched in modern fashion with Coco Chanel’s creation of the “little black dress” in 1926.

Black implies weight and solidity, as well as deep space, which is infinite. It is the unknown that makes black inherently ominous and it is the unknown that black holds in common with unconsciousness and with death. Though not all cultures equate black with death and mourning, white is the colour of mourning in a number of Asian cultures and white used to be the colour female royalty wore during mourning in some European countries up until the 15th century.

Fear of the dark is spontaneous, but black is also a tremendous source of strength, it combines mystery with power which may be used for good or ill. Even so most of black’s associations are negative; black list, blackmail, black-ball, black market, black mass, black looks and the way black Monday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday commemorate random disasters. Black Sheep are the disreputable family members, this may have come about because farmers disliked the black fleece as it was not suitable for dying and could “contaminate” white wool. Though there is also a contradictory tradition in Sussex, England, that black sheep are omens of good luck.

Black Maria is a term used in the USA, UK, Ireland and some parts of Australia for police vehicles, particularly those with compartments on the back for taking prisoners to jail. These vehicles were usually painted black or very dark blue. The origin of the term is uncertain but Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable suggests the name came from Maria Lee, a large and fearsome black keeper of a sailors’ boarding house, who the police would call on for help with difficult prisoners.

The best natural black dye comes from the bark of a Brazilian tree, and imparts a fine bloomy blue-black to nylon and silk, producing the ultimate in provocative lingerie.

Black flowers are bred: they are not a product of nature. All-black animals are rare but where they occur the black is given by the pigment melanin. This is also the pigment that colours the skin and hair of various races in the human species.

Black holes in space are concentrated areas of mass so immense, that the mammoth force of gravity denies anything within a certain area around it from passing. Everything including light is absorbed into the black hole, which is why it was named thus, the light inside can never be seen by any outside observer. It is believed that black holes are created by the collapse of a red super giant star. As these stars reach the end of their lives, an imbalance of inward and outward pressure forces the star to collapse.

Information on black holes is limited, though numerous schools of theory exist. We know black holes exist not because we can see them, but because of the impact they have on the space around them. While a number of scientists offer theories on black holes they remain a constant area of intrigue and curiosity. In science fiction black holes are sometimes depicted as gateways to a separate universe where some speculate that a whole new spectrum may be found.

White is the maximum lightness, in theory a white surface reflects all light. In practice even the whitest materials such as magnesium oxide or snow absorb 3 to 5 percent of light. Grey spans the extremes between black and white. A neutral grey is obtained when all spectral wavelengths are absorbed more or less to the same degree.

If it argued that black is an absence of colour from a scientific point of view, then what is in a tin of black paint? It seems then the exception to the scientific definition is when black is referred to as a pigment or colouring agent of material objects.

Night is a less popular subject with artists though a number are well known for their depiction of subject matter surrounded by darkness. Sometimes this is accidental, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*, a title

given a considerable time after the work was painted, is in fact a depiction of a daylight scene, it just ended looking like a night scene after a buildup of grime and layers of dark varnish. Nocturne (from the French for "nocturnal" or night) was used by James McNeill Whistler in the title of a number of his paintings, e.g. *Nocturne: The Solent 1866* and *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket 1874*. This was consistent with his theory that art should essentially be concerned with the arrangement of colors in harmony. A nocturne is usually a musical composition and indicated that the work was an ensemble piece in several movements, normally intended for playing at night though it can be inspired by, or evocative of, the night. As well most people generally think of a nocturne as being tranquil, often expressive and lyrical, and sometimes rather gloomy. A number of other artists have followed Whistler's example, in naming paintings after this musical composition or naming their paintings after Whistler.

Guy Goffette, in his book *Forever Nude*, notes that Pierre Bonnard understood how to get the best from this colour which complements every other and reinforces it." He gave black a sensuality, a depth, a pulse which few of contemporaries could rival, except perhaps Matisse, who did so by other means, to other ends." Nothing in Bonnard's painting is more vital and yet more subtle than his use of black. The only thing which can support colour, can make it exult, is black.*

During the late 1940s, famous artists from the New York School – Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella, and Barnett Newman – intently studied the colour black. This resulted in an astonishing number of series of almost monochromatic black paintings, which today are considered treasures of internationally important collections such as the Whitney Museum in New York.* In Paris, December 1946, Aimé Maeght curated an exhibition, *Le noir est un couleur*, (Black is a Colour) and included Atlan, Bonnard, Braque, Matisse and Rouault.*

Geelong Art Gallery's 1993 exhibition *The Black Show*, curated by Peter Timms, toured Australia, it included black paintings by Ad Reinhardt as well as work by Australian artists Peter Booth, Anne Graham and Brent Harris.*

In this exhibition the art works are not necessarily “all black” works, black can also be an important marker or highlight that makes the painting “work” or the other colours “sing”. Examples include Murray Overheu’s *Jonah’s Door*, a lyric abstraction that takes the ocean as its theme. The black depths of the sea are central and the blues rise up to two lines of “rolling white surf”, and also Ross Laurie’s *Winter*, where the black is the underlying colour that in low light makes the painting almost totally “black” but under bright lighting it is seen that the palette is a range of dark blues and greys over black. Two examples of black making other colours “sing” are a bit like parallel evolution where Richard Allen in 1997 came to a similar solution to José Guerrero in 1990 where the central form in the painting/print is a very dominant black, but in fact, its presence highlights the pinks, reds and yellows escaping from around the edges. This type of artistic response is also explored in Jason Kantek’s *Rendered Brick – Bath Towel 2009*, the painting has evolved into 3 dimensions with the black (with a touch of dark blue) dominating the front and the colours pushing for recognition on the sides.

Angus Nivison in his *Talking to a Prawn*, inspired by William Dobell’s 1970 painting *Gentleman Talking to a Prawn* that depicts an evening in a local pub and a drunk “conversing” with a prawn, uses black and blue blacks not only to convey a nocturne or evening scenario, but also an underwater “prawn-scape” as well as the sombre psychological state of the “Gentleman’s” mind.

Just as in nature, there are very few pure blacks in the works in this exhibition, for instance in Richard Allen’s *Wind Break* the black highlight is a black green and Virginia Coventry, in her painting *Second Nature*, uses a black purple.

Artists use black to provide contrast, depth, passion, drama, the softness of velvet, the hardness of steel and for the psychological and emotional responses it evokes in the human mind.

Max Dingle

*References include Wikipedia and various internet sources as well as:

Nichola Fletcher *Charlemagne’s Tablecloth* 2004 Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Guy Goffette *Forever Nude* English translation by Frank Wynne 2008 William Heinemann

Michel Pastoureau *Black: The History of a Color* English translation 2009 Princeton University Press

S. Rosenthal (ed.) *Black Paintings: Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella* 2006 Hatje Cantz

Peter Timms *What’s Wrong With Contemporary Art?* 2004 UNSW Press

RICHARD ALLEN



***Wind Break* (1997) acrylic on canvas 121 x 41 cm**

In a case of parallel evolution, *Wind Break*, painted several years after José Guerrero's *Untitled*, also in this exhibition, is similarly bold, with a slightly out of balance, strong black form doing its best to obliterate the other colours and generates a satisfying uneasy feeling, even as you realize that the strong horizontal and vertical markings at the base in fact provide "architectural" balance. While the contrast with the black causes the "pretty" pinks and blues to hold their own against the red / orange / yellow forces aligned against them.

MALCOLM BENHAM



***Witness – The Messenger* 1994**
acrylic on linen on board 182 x 210 cm

This is a major painting, a highlight of the artist's work at this period. The palette is mainly black, white and grey but these overlay a range of blues, reds and pinks as can be seen through the gouges and scratches in the surface. The repeated half moon/bowl motif in each of the three panels "holds" the composition as do the diagonal placement of the black forms.

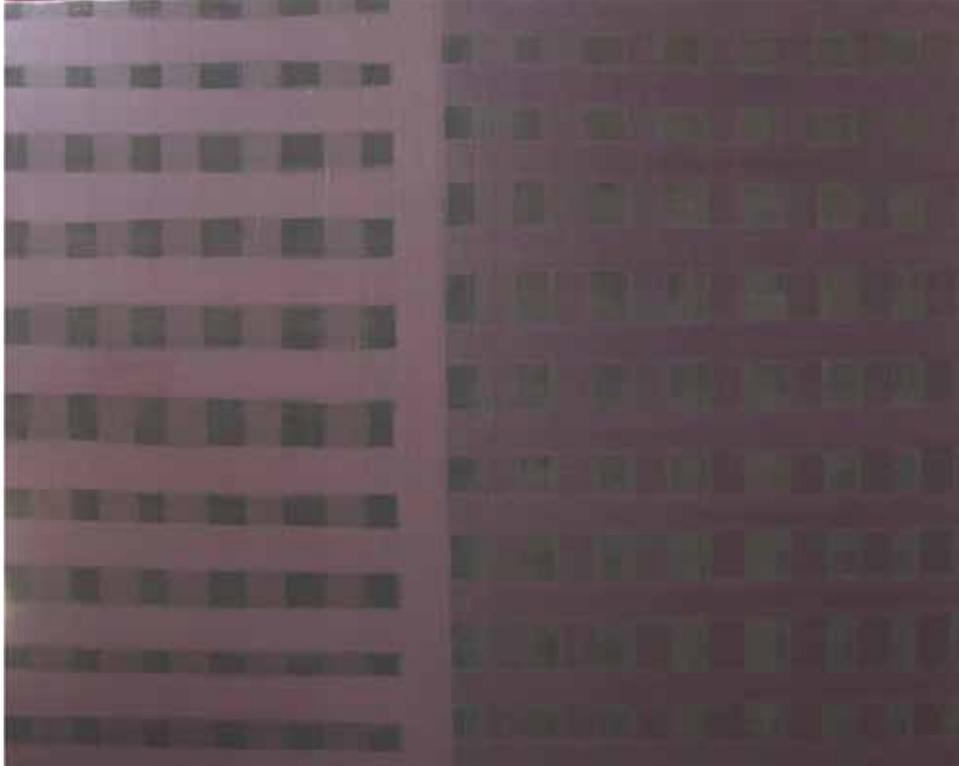
GRACE BURZESE



Bone Factory 2002
acrylic on canvas 64cm diameter

The powerful vertical blacks initially dominate this painting, but the swirling whites and blues conspire with the round canvas to provide a counterbalance that results in an uneasy harmony.

VIRGINIA COVENTRY



***Second Nature* 1996**
acrylic on canvas 88 x 110 cm

In this painting the black purple and the black paint, depending on the viewers position, alternate from foreground to background producing a three dimensional "optical" effect that is totally fascinating. The texture of the paint finish gives the impression of soft velvet alternating with satin.

MARGARET DREDGE



Untitled c 1969
oil on board
(Black/White geometric) 70 x 48 cm

A painting from the period when the artist was drawn to hard edge abstraction, and in this elegant exploration of form in black, white and greys, the softness of the curved elements are anything but "hard edge".

MARGARET DREDGE



Untitled 1980s
oil on canvas

A work that feels like contemporary dance performed to a jazz score that has been choreographed to canvas, a cathartic release of emotion through mark making and pushing paint into jagged, jarring forms. The juxtaposition of black and white paint gives a strong grey feeling to the whole work that subdues the oranges, yellows and browns.

PETER GARDINER



***debris field VI* 2003**
enamel on board 120 x 120 cm

Apart from being a virtuoso example of the manipulation of paint, *debris field VI* visually dominates its surrounds. The shiny black paint against the white ground, the depth of perspective and the rhythm in form, hijack the eye in a dance of exploration that makes escape difficult.

JOSÉ GUERRERO



***Untitled* c. 1990 Screenprint 100 x 80 cm**

This bold painting with the strong black form doing its best to obliterate the other colours and its uneven weight at the top gives a satisfying uneasy feeling, which nags in the background even as you realize that the strong diagonal black marking at the base in fact provides balance. The pinks, reds and yellows, because they are emphasised by the black, hold their own.

BRIAN HARTIGAN



"14.3.94"

acrylic on paper 75 x 56 cm

The artist's control of tone within this painting is exquisite. The balance of forms and the depth of field are provided by the sure application of the black paint.

DAVID HORTON



Bison 2005
steel 23 x 55 x 27 cm

This elegant work, with its fine black finish evokes a line of musical notes on a page or a story told in a series of images. The black helps provide this feel as well as a monumentality, despite *Bison's* modest size.

JASON KANTEK



Rendered Brick – Bath Towel 2009
Oil on canvas on board 120 x 53 x 13 cm

The blackness at the front of this piece is the blackness of velvet, soft and deep, while the texture of the oil is spiky and prickly and as your eye travels to peer at the sides, the prickles intensify and there is the surprise of the bright colours only hinted at on the front, like turning over some dark mysterious matter in a forest or on the seashore, suddenly revealing colour and a flash of “naked” pink.

ROSS LAURIE



***Django* 1995-96**
oil on canvas 153 x 92 cm

Django Reinhardt one of the most renowned European jazz guitarists due to his innovative and distinctive playing, has inspired artists everywhere. While his influence on this painting is not known, the rhythms set up within the painting by the black, red and white forms are certainly evocative of the finest jazz.

ROSS LAURIE



Winter II 1994
oil on canvas

In low light conditions this painting can seem to be almost totally “black” but under bright lighting it appears to be that the palette is a range of dark blues and greys over a black ground.

SEAN LOWRY



Public Enemy: Bring the Noise 2009 video

Lapdancer2 : A collection of popular songs reinterpreted within the moving image 2009

Cinema, and then television, at their introductions were also , along with printing and science, strong 'advocates' for keeping, within the general perception, the two categories "Colour" and "Black and White" separated.

Video, a technological development from cinema and television, allows artists to work in new media and produce richly textured work such as Sean's video of his own cover versions of popular songs. *Public Enemy: Bring the Noise* turns the act of lighting a sparkler into high art that is entertaining , fun and slightly satirical.

SUE McLEAN



Untitled c. 1996
partially charred timber, gourd, feathers, nails
50 x 25 x 5 cm

This artist really does go “back to basics” in the use of black and white feathers and charcoal, some of humanity’s first materials used in art practice and body decoration, to produce a beautiful black and white sculpture.

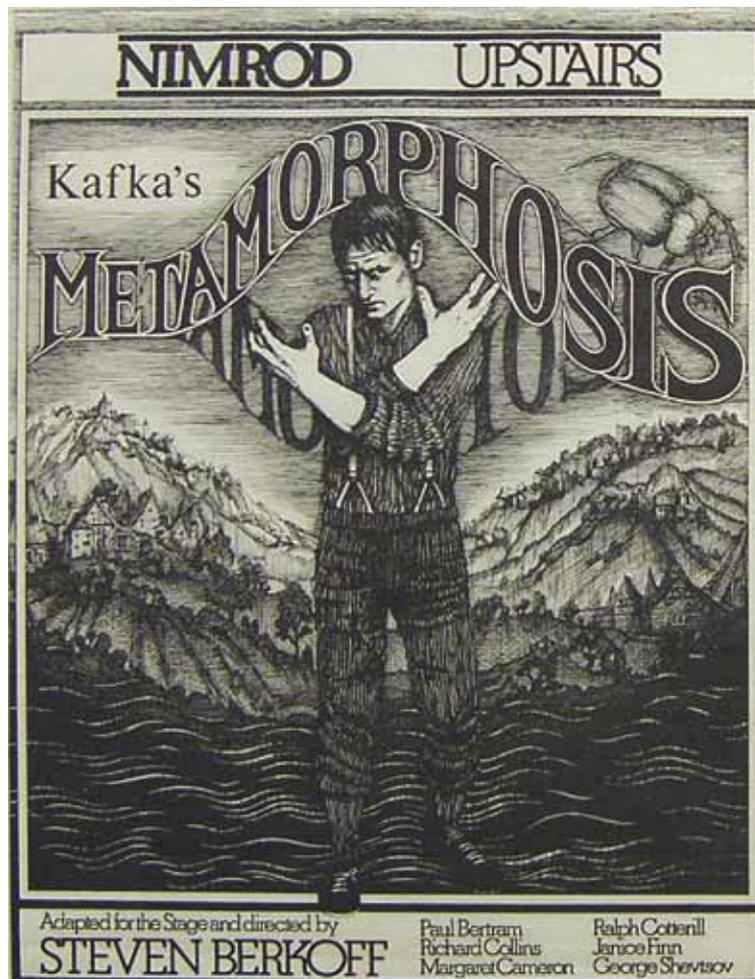
EUAN McLEOD



Black & White against Dark & Light late 1980s
oil on paper

In this painting while black paint is an important element in the effect of "dark and light" black is also used in another context in the reference to the skin pigmentation of one of the figures in the landscape.

NIMROD THEATRE



Metamorphosis 1978 street poster 60 x 77 cm

The introduction of the printing press and the subsequent technology that allowed the mass distribution of images was one of the first shifts of "Black", in the general perception, from being a colour to a new category – Black and White.

In his book *See How it Runs* Julian Meyrick writes that *Metamorphosis*, a show with "Ralph Cotterill in the lead ('the one man in Australia capable of playing an insect and making you believe it' Sun 24 Aug 1978), had a galvanic effect on its audiences." This stunning street poster for the play had a similar startling effect on me, I had to have one. After unsuccessfully trying to extract an intact poster from hoardings, I resorted to fronting Nimrod Theatre and asking for a copy.

ANGUS NIVISON

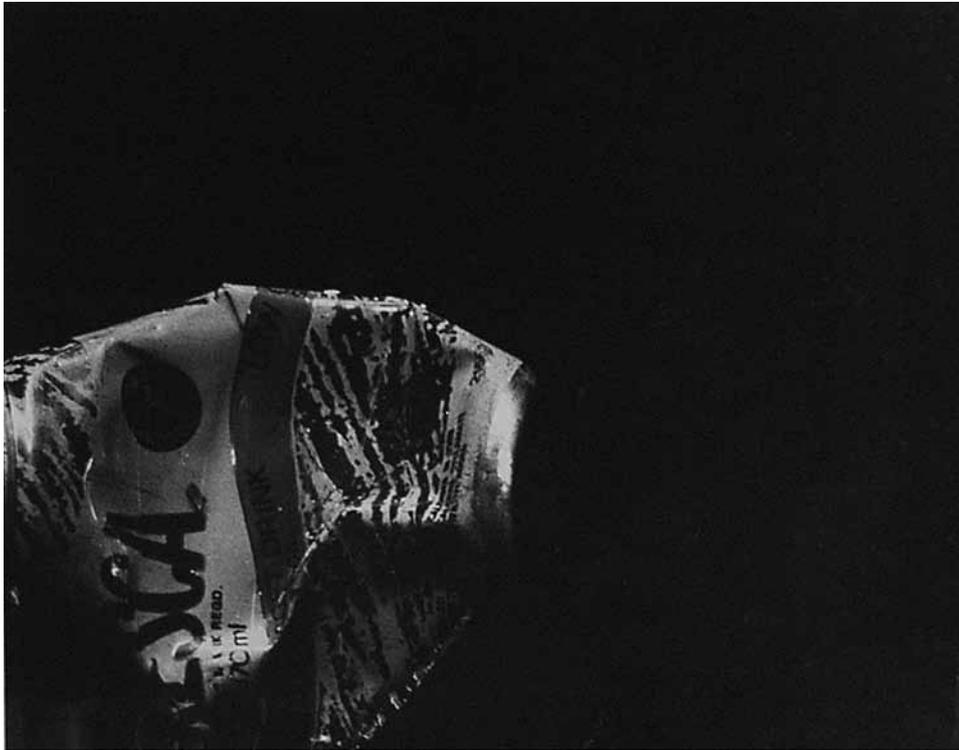


***Talking to a Prawn* c. 1995**
gesso, acrylic, graphite & Charcoal on paper 134 x 105 cm

The artist, Angus Nivison, has used a palette of blue blacks and blacks in a homage to William Dobell and was inspired by a small painting of Dobell's, "Gentleman Talking to a Prawn", an evening scene set in a pub, the subject gentleman being four sheets to the wind.

In Angus's words, " My work represents the fictitious prawn he's gazing at. The all over sombre palette reflects the state of the gentleman's mind. If you look hard enough you can see the prawn. So it is a nocturne interior/seascape."

JUDY OVERHEU



Tresca 1976

photograph 63 x 53 cm

Photography reinforced the general perception created by technology, printing and science, particularly Issac Newton's 'discovery' of the spectrum, that black was not a colour but belonged in it's own category, Black and White.

Judy's photograph of a crushed soft drink can, leaps from the mundane to art by giving the black background the bulk of the viewing area and compressing the "subject" into a corner and highlighting the importance of black in producing the abstract composition of the light parts of the crushed can. The image also sets an impression that there is probably something going on out of frame.

MURRAY OVERHEU



***Jonah's Door* 1976**
acrylic on canvas 170 x 170 cm.

Jonah's Door is a huge sweeping painting that encompasses the ocean from rolling surf and wild stormy seas, through colourful schools of fish, the calm serenity of a windless and cloudless day to the blackest depths of the unknown.

JOHN PEART



***Nocturne II* 1998**
oil on board 60 x 50 cm

The rhythmic black and white moonscape is embedded with jewel like colours and sandwiched between dry, almost sombre, patterns of shadow on stone. At about the time this painting was exhibited, in an interview by Elizabeth Cummings, the artist has said that while music was an early direct influence, embedding rhythm is now an important element of his art.

ROBYN QUINN



***Desert Twilight* 1990**
Etching 75 x 60 cm

This is an enigmatic work that smells of dry, cracked, cooling earth under the emerging beauty of the night. The artist has made full use of the velvet blacks produced through the process of etching.

CAMPBELL ROBERTSON SWANN



US 2000

stainless and painted steel 37 x 34 x 24 cm

US, a marquette for a much larger work exploits the contrast between the shine of the stainless steel and the blackness of the painted steel. It is a beautifully subtle piece that brings to mind an architectural monument or a ceremonial gateway.

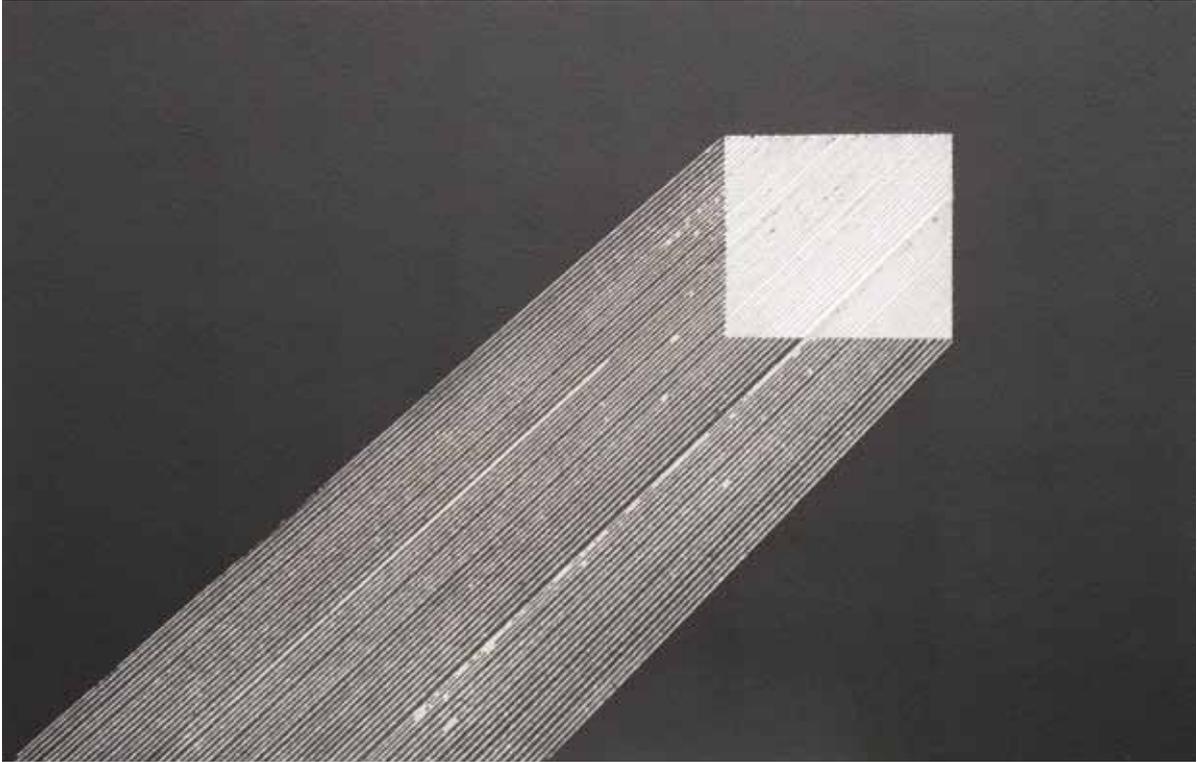
CAMPBELL ROBERTSON SWANN



Manhattan 1998
painted steel 76 x 45 x 19 cm

The monolithic presence is heightened by the blackness, the forms and shapes evoke skyscrapers and modern cities, while the whole is unsettled by the slightly skewed side "pillar" with its subtle bent corner.

DANIEL TEMPLEMAN



***Friction* 2004**
acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 cm

Almost cartoon like in its simplicity, this immediately engaging work evokes the “old masters” use of black to evoke light, particularly Caravaggio’s use of a source of light from a “window”, out of frame, to highlight the scene.

AIDA TOMESCU



***Black to White* 1993**
ink on paper 100 x 80 cm

This drawing, hung in the Kedumba Drawing award, is a wonderful and expressive use of black ink on paper. Reminiscent of Japanese calligraphy at its best, and subtle use of red highlights the black and its transition to white.

JOHN VICKERY



***Invincible* 1959 gouache on hardboard 76 x 50 cm.**

While the white cuniform seems to float above the rest of the painting, it only does this because the black free form brush strokes provide the depth and energy that lifts the relatively formal red, grey and white above the paintings surface. This painting is from the cruciform series of John Vickery's paintings and was inherited by his niece Margaret Dredge. It was a particular favourite of Margaret's and in fact, still has instructions to the framer in Margaret's handwriting on the verso, from the time Margaret selected it to hang in her home.

ROBERT WATSON



***Consider the Road* 2003 Acrylic & oil paint, printing ink, enamel paint on wallpaper 700 x 52 cm**

This wonderful idiosyncratic work was acquired from an exhibition of Robert's work held at the Mildura Regional Gallery. The exhibition space was "festooned" with paintings on rolls of wallpaper, running around and up and down the walls and across the floor. The blacks in the work are produced using three or four different mediums giving beautiful variations in intensity, with the red highlights giving further emphasis to the blackness of the "road".

The Jarrah storage case for *Consider the Road* was made by Shoalhaven cabinetmaker Graham Brennan in January 2010.



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ISBN 978-0-646-52904-2



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