

# Artist makes her mark

The striking abstracts of Margaret Dredge had their genesis in her urge to express her inner self, writes artist, collector and curator  
**MAX DINGLE.**

Literature, music, film and a whole range of artistic intellectual pursuits all figure in the art of Margaret Dredge. Her paintings reflect an intelligence coming to grips with how to re-create an internal world with paint on canvas.

Born Margaret Vickery in 1928 in Murrumbidgee, her mother died during childbirth in 1930 and she was raised by her widowed father, a Gallipoli veteran. As a teenager Margaret was interested in studying art, and wanted to study at Victoria's National Gallery School. An intelligent young woman, she longed to expand her knowledge of art and culture, a trait that motivated her all her life. But her father insisted that academic studies were needed to increase the chances of secretarial work.

Dredge's early paintings were figurative and still life works, but her output soon led into abstraction, which was to become the focus of her artistic development.

Her first solo exhibition was held at Peter Burrows Gallery in Queens Road, Melbourne, in 1964.

It was at this time that books, music and architecture became a focus, the writings of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Klee, Mondrian, Albers and the music of Miles Davis, the Modern Jazz Quartet as well as Vivaldi and architectural works by Peter McIntyre, Boyd and Grounds. Dredge's cultural and intellectual horizons continued to expand.

In 1965 with group exhibitions and two solo exhibitions to her credit, a solo exhibition at the Argus Gallery bought her name to critical attention and a review by Bernard Smith in *The Age*, noted the paintings are "always well made and often possess a commanding presence".

Her next solo exhibition in 1967 at Pinacotheca in St Kilda, attracted the praise of Harry Blake in *The Sun* with the observation that the artist "has been painting for eight years and has already achieved a status many strive for all their lives".

Dredge had grown and developed and her art had changed from expressionistic abstractions developed in the early 1960s to an exploration of post-painterly abstraction and the minimalism trends occurring internationally.

She did achieve works of "pure" post-painterly abstraction, however she did not express personal satisfaction in this style.

Dredge had also studied the science of colour and noted "with pure colour, I must use it less hesitantly. If it is red, then it must be blood red. It was a mistake to use these decorator colours. I must somehow sour it all up."

By 1973 Dredge changed from using oils to acrylics and also started re-introducing self expressive language into her painting. It was also following the period of post-painterly abstraction that Dredge virtually withdrew from exhibiting publicly, only participating in group shows five times between 1980 and 1992.

The reasons for the artist's withdrawal were many, including the increasing commercial pressure to produce more of the same style of work.

After shifting house from Sandringham to Richmond and having a new studio built in 1982 Dredge returned to painting and from 1983, free of commercial pressures, she developed her overall abstractions and "made a very private but nonetheless significant stand in support of the artist's right to determine the direction and reception of their art".

There is a clear line of development, in a style characterised by agitation and turbulence.

The paint is applied thickly, by brush, palette knife and hand forming a sumptuous feast of mark making, such an uneasy vision that the eye finds difficulty finding rest in any particular place, constantly driven to explore a complex web.

Through the '90s the mark making is developing a lyric, almost calligraphic style. Less dense, a softer approach, as if the artist has expended the initial exuberance of first finding her exclusive and personal freedom and is now starting to examine in detail the layers of meaning and emotion embedded in the act of painting.

By the end of the decade Dredge had developed her love of painting into a lyricism that was articulate and emotionally moving.

No's Doorway, 1997, Vale PJD, 2001 and Words, 2001 are works by an artist at the peak of her powers, masterpieces of articulate and mature painting, that leave us with the sense that when she died in September 2001, Margaret Dredge left a legacy of great works of art and the knowledge that these were only an indicator of even greater potential.

Margaret Dredge – Retrospective 1960 to 2001 runs from April 2 to May 21 at the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre with a launch at midday on April 13 with special guest sculptor and painter Ron Robertson-Swann AO.

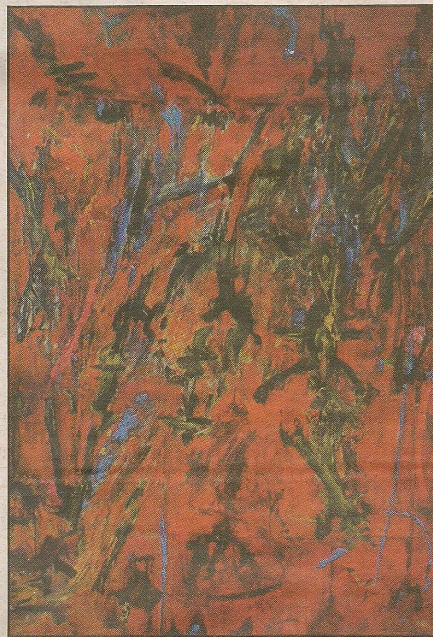
• Max Dingle and his late partner, Gavin Hughes, were friends with Margaret Dredge and bequeathed most of the works in this exhibition to the Shoalhaven.



# Art scene



**EXPRESS YOURSELF:** Margaret Dredge in her studio, Sandringham, Victoria, 1972. **Photo:** National Library of Australia.



**BRUSH STROKES:** Words, 2001 (above) and No's Doorway, 1997 (right).