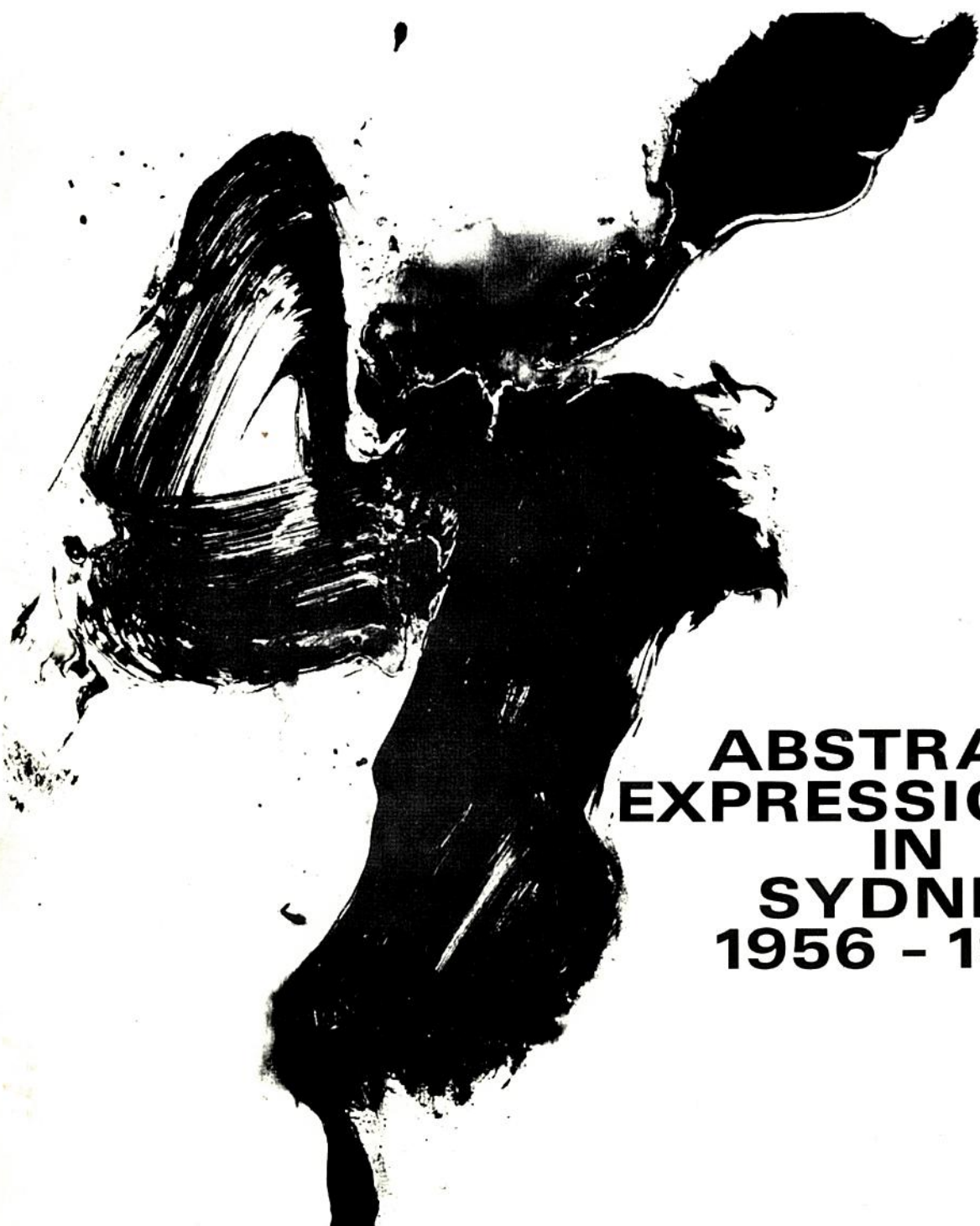




**ABSTRACT
EXPRESSIONISM
IN
SYDNEY
1956 - 1964**

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ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM IN SYDNEY 1956 - 1964

TEXT BY PETER PINSON

Exhibition: 7th October – 24th October, 1980.

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IVAN DOUGHERTY GALLERY

ALEXANDER MACKIE COLLEGE OF ADVANCED EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Abstract expressionism, well into its third decade, remains a viable and compelling art form. Despite the development and proliferation of styles and attitudes in recent years, many of the foremost early abstract expressionists have maintained this form of painting as a relevant means of expression and communication.

The continuing interest in abstract expressionism is particularly noticeable amongst painting students in art schools where, at least for a period, they become involved in the exploration of the very substance of painting: the paint itself.

With this in mind and considering the gallery's function as a teaching resource within the Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education, it seems an appropriate time to look at the establishment of the abstract expressionist movement in Australia, to consider its relationships both historically and to current developments in the visual arts.

This exhibition represents the work of those artists who, considered avant garde at the time, established abstract expressionism in Australia. We saw for the first time in a hitherto "figurative" oriented culture, the general acceptance of purely abstract art. Other, earlier non-figurative schools, the Futurists and Constructivists, for example, enjoyed no such broad based popularity.

It is interesting to note, however, that the movement was locally based in Sydney and did not spread to other centres for some years. So strictly regional was it that students undertaking the school leaving certificate examination were asked to... "examine the differences between Sydney and Melbourne art". (Melbourne at the time being the home of the Antipodean "Figurative Mythmakers" — Nolan, Boyd, Tucker and company.)

It is clear that this is a relatively small exhibition considering the importance of the movement and the enormous number of works which exist. One would readily admit that it is merely a start and much remains to be done to achieve a definitive survey of this period.

However, the exhibition does contain excellent examples from some of the best artists working in Sydney at that time. There are curiosities too, and indeed, surprises.

A few individual painters included in this exhibition have continued to work in the style, Rapotec for example, while others have moved on to other forms of painting; John Coburn to a preoccupation with colour, and Eric Smith to landscapes and figures. One at least has undertaken an entirely different career.

It is hoped the exhibition will be of interest to students, historians, artists and art lovers in general.

We extend our gratitude to those artists and collectors who have made available works from their private collections and to the Directors and staff of the following Institutions for not only lending works but also for their co-operation in helping to put this exhibition together:

The Art Gallery of New South Wales
The Newcastle Regional Gallery
The Sydney Teachers' College
The University of N.S.W. Union
The Loretto Convent, Normanhurst

Our thanks go also to Peter Pinson who instigated the exhibition and compiled this catalogue.



Christopher Gentle
Gallery Director.

October, 1980.

In February, 1957, eleven years after Robert Coates used the term "abstract expressionism" to describe a tendency in American post-war painting, a long article by Paul Haeffliger was published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. It was titled "New Art Movement 'Arrives' in Australia", and sought to describe the abstract expressionist characteristics which Haeffliger saw emerging in Sydney painting in late 1956. They were characteristics which would dominate Sydney painting for the next eight years.

The term "abstract expressionism" had probably first appeared in critical literature in Australia in Elwyn Lynn's essay "The Motif in Painting", in the Contemporary Art Society *Broadsheet* of March 1956. Lynn, then a school teacher of English, had become editor of the *Broadsheet* in April 1955. He transformed it into a vehicle for promoting discussion and inquiry into current international art theories and movements. At a time when few artists subscribed to international art magazines, Lynn's role in promoting an understanding of abstract expressionist premises was of prime importance. Most of Lynn's familiarity with overseas art came through *Art News*, to which he began subscribing in about 1950. He also read *L'Oeil*. Joanna Coleman noted that he possessed T. B. Hess's *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*, but Lynn's copy has the year 1958 inscribed inside, and it seems unlikely that he was aware of Hess's writings when he prepared his crucial 1956 and early 1957 *Broadsheet* essays on abstract expressionism. Nor did he become aware of the writings of Rosenberg or Greenberg on the movement until about 1960.¹

In the August 1956 *Broadsheet*, Lynn drew distinctions between work (mainly French) which fell under critic Estienne's label "tachist", and work better described as "abstract expressionist". Tachism he saw as favouring forms parallel to the frame, vertical and horizontal. It was marked, he wrote, by irregular patchiness, usually accompanied by impasto. Tachists allowed planes "to melt and flow in pearly lusciousness or shallow flatness". In comparison, abstract expressionism was more linear, more restless, more emphatic. It

avoided verticality and horizontality, and favoured fluidity and involution of form. If one accepts these distinctions, one might say that Sydney adopted a mid-Atlantic position, with painters drawing from both camps (with one or two glances towards Japan).

In the March 1957 *Bulletin*, in an essay "Some Notes on the New Expression", he added that looseness of technique was not of itself expressionism. Rather, it seemed that abstract expressionists were

- "(a) *symbolically* expressing the more violent or anguished emotions, and
- (b) not abstracting from real life, but finding forms and shapes *analogous* to situations, feelings and sounds in experience."

In his 1957 article, Paul Haeffliger wrote of the abstract expressionist artist seeking to project an "inner reality":

"Here a new world is discovered and externalised, using the accidental as a means of freeing the subconscious; not 'thinking' but 'feeling'; using abstract forms only in order that the atmosphere created — the emotional and spiritual experience suggested by those shapes — will not be obscured by a resemblance to nature".²

But the gap between his interpretation of abstract expressionism and the current understanding of the term is revealed in his nominating Morris Graves as a practitioner, and Mondrian as imposing his personality on the style's later development.

He seems to have considered Direction I, an exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries in December 1956, as the first totally abstract expressionist exhibition in Sydney. Direction I comprised painters John Passmore, two of his former pupils at the Ashton Art School, John Olsen and Bill Rose, Eric Smith, and sculptor Robert Klippel. The exhibition presented a radical alternative to the intimism, the literary allegories, and the figurative romanticism that permeated the Sydney Group. But, as Klippel

has explained, the show did not represent a group commitment to abstract expressionism.

"What united us at the time was just friendship — being able to throw ideas around — nothing about abstract expressionism, but just about art."³

Of the five, only Klippel had first hand contact with abstract expressionism or tachism. He had returned from Paris in 1950 with two small Riopelle paintings, which he showed to friends, including Balson, Olsen and Lynn. In the early 1950's, Klippel produced drawings and paintings (1 and 2) whose informality anticipated much of the painting to emerge in Sydney from 1956. But they were not exhibited; these were the private paintings of a sculptor. On the other hand, the sculptures he exhibited in *Direction 1* were structural rather than informal. Indeed, a structural attitude to picturemaking was the exhibition's common seam. This undoubtedly contributed towards the favorable review Haefliger gave the exhibition, in which he expressed the view that:

"(all) art requires a certain structure within its own idiom which gives concrete evidence of its aim. Emotion alone cannot carry a work; emotional intensity requires structure and it is through structure and spatial relationships that it gains in intensity".⁴

The significance of *Direction 1* then, lay in its demonstrating that abstraction, or near abstraction, was a vital force. The participants were not, as Haefliger wrote, "leaders of abstract expressionism";⁵ the exhibition had not, as Bernard Smith wrote, "launched abstract expressionism on the scene in Sydney".⁶ If a particular exhibition is to be accorded that role, it should probably be the Contemporary Art Society exhibition of November 1956.

Although this exhibition included work by Kenneth Hood, Judy Cassab and Maximilian Feuerring which did not display affinities with abstract expressionism, it included paintings by Margo Lewers, Carl Plate, Ian Sime, Tom Gleghorn and

Elwyn Lynn which did. Haefliger's review grumbled "that the bandwagon of abstract expressionism is filling nicely".⁷ Lynn's painting was "Torrid Day at Tachismo".⁽³⁾

Lynn had seen the 1953 "French Painting Today" exhibition which included de Stael, Hartung, Soulages, and was particularly impressed by Andre Marchand. But the prime influence behind "Torrid Day at Tachismo" was Hans Hofmann. While it does not resemble a Hofmann, it employs his intense colour. In this, the picture is remarkable. Probably the only other Sydney abstract expressionist who would equally take chances with colour was Ron Lambert; elsewhere line or tone were the overriding elements.

Over the next eight years, the emerging abstract expressionists in Sydney formed no school in any manifesto-producing, programmatic sense. Rather they represented a "circle". Some were teaching colleagues at East Sydney Technical College or the University of New South Wales, and virtually all were members of the Contemporary Art Society whose meetings, lectures and exhibitions represented a clearing house for ideas.

Their work rejected the notion of the painting as a filtered description of a perceived world. Their work was marked by a constellation of informal characteristics including: masses that spread and fuse rather than separate, profiled, circumscribed shapes; energetic, brusque paint handling which leaves clear traces of the passage of the knife or brush; the employment of automaticism, or at least a substantial degree of spontaneity; broken colour, often deliberately dirtied to avoid becoming ingratiating.

In addition to the painters who will be noted in fuller detail, some painters adopted abstract expressionism briefly, including John Olsen (about 1960), Ken Reinhard (about 1962), Desiderius Orban and Ian van Wieringen. Others fused aspects of abstract expressionism with a firmer sense of structure, including Nancy Borlase, Peter Laverty, Strom Gould and John Passmore.

Ralph Balson alone had already produced enough work of quality to ensure a place in Australian art history when, in 1960, aged seventy, he adopted a style which was related to abstract expressionism. A degree of painterliness had emerged in his 1957 exhibition at David Jones. Paintings like "Painting" 1957 (4) consist of an all-over field of brush dabs or touches. Succeeding these were paintings in which the dabs became more uniform in size and direction and more considered in placement. The breakthrough followed Balson's 1960 trip to Europe, where he was struck by the work of the European matter painters, including Alberto Burri, Jean Dubuffet and Antoni Tàpies. The work of these painters bore evocative associations, recalling the undulations of cooled or solidified lava for example, or the cracks and maculations of an old wall. The works seemed to be emblematic of legends of growth and decay. Balson's interest was not in the metaphors embedded in their use of marble dust, putty, plaster and sacking, but simply in the way they exploited the natural qualities or behaviour of these materials; the manner putty cracks when drying or tears when placed under stress, for example.

Between 1960 and 1963 his pictures similarly sought to explore the characteristics of paint, usually synthetic enamels. Generally Balson abrogated compositional control. Paint was poured and allowed to spread, to bleed, to clot, to cluster and to wrinkle. Many paintings were restricted to black and white paint, which threw attention onto the tonal subtleties of the intermingling greys.

Balson's objective seems not to have been the expressionist's outward demonstration of feelings, and Daniel Thomas has correctly pointed out that, on the contrary, allowing the paint to spread and congeal with little manipulative intervention by the artist "is anti-individualistic and anti-subjective, as are all his previous constructive manners".⁸ Rather, Balson's impressionistic grasp of the theory of relativity and of principles of indeterminacy encouraged him to adopt a chance-exploiting technique to portray his view of a world of flux, ceaseless movement, and continuous change.

At the time of Direction I, Eric Smith (b. Melbourne 1919) had little knowledge of the New York School. He knew nothing of de Kooning who also combined skirmishing brushstrokes with figural reference. The key influence on his work of the middle 1950's was probably Manessier — like Smith a colourist, a manipulator of juicy paint, a Catholic and a painter who attempted to address religious experience through abstract or near-abstract form. Like Coburn, Smith had seen Manessier's work in the 1953 French Exhibition, and later in reproduction. Smith's attention was first drawn to tachism when Elwyn Lynn, probably noting Smith's floating, arbitrary pats of colour, described his work as "sometimes an example of tachism" in the Contemporary Art Society *Broadsheet* of August 1956.

Olsen, and to a lesser extent Passmore, were interested in depicting the visual cacophony of the harbour or the landscape: flapping birds, meandering paths, roistering animals and troll-people were packed into an incident-laden ensemble. Like a Pieter Brueghel village scene, the unfiltered gamut of jostling sights, crises and impressions was enacted. A different sense of simultaneity ran through much of Smith's work including the pictures with which he won the 1962 Helena Rubinstein Scholarship. Here Christ is conceived as interpenetrating the landscape, as a metaphor for Christ's presence in the world. Each part of the sky and soil reflects the rhythms of this figure.

The flashing, stabbing line of the Rubinstein suite reflected his increasing familiarity with Pollock and de Kooning. But with these works nearly finished, Smith considered them too diffuse and fragmented, and by overpainting he reasserted a firmer degree of structure. The closest he came to relinquishing pictorial structure and residual representation was in the works he undertook in the year following his return from Europe in late 1963. In these, the script became cursive and the colour higher in key. They were closer to the bouyancy of late Monet than to the ferocity of de Kooning, but again Smith concluded that the compositions were too informal, the elements too

scattered. Most were subsequently overpainted out of existence. By 1964, Eric Smith was returning to more literal images of the figure and the landscape.

From the 1930's, Margo Lewers (1908-1979) and her husband Gerald Lewers, had moved in the circle of Frank and Margel Hinder, Grace Crowley, Rah Fizelle and Ralph Balson. Work of the early 1950's, such as "Translucent" (c.1954, A.G.N.S.W.), mirrored the constructivist principles of this group, and could be related to the work of Frank Hinder. Some vestiges of this formalism linger in her paintings of the late 1950's. These works were quite fluent and loose in their handling. But the vertical and horizontal patches and their supportive lines still testified to her interest in the architecture of the picture. Maria Vieira Da Silva seems to have been influential on these paintings. Margo Lewers had been impressed by the 1953 French Exhibition, and especially by Da Silva's work, of which she purchased two examples. Da Silva's paintings were less frontal than hers, but their work shared a narrow colour range from which tonal variations were drawn, and a line/patch matrix which evoked cityscapes, girders and scaffolding.

In the early 1960's, her painting relinquished much of its remaining formality. She began to drag paint over a ground richly textured by anterior painting. Her colour adopted a new resonance, and her masses, although still sitting patly within the rectangular shape of the support, began to slope and press against each other. Her line, too, became more exuberant, charting courses at least partly independent of the masses with which they cohabited.

In the late 1960's, her work returned to a less impulsive mode: the execution became less painterly, the colour less modulated, the shape-pattern more critical. It was a stylistic reorientation which was being paralleled in the painting of her brother Carl Plate.

Peter Upward (b. Melbourne 1932) had studied in the life class of John Passmore, after stoically

enduring the plaster model class at Ashton's for two years. But when he left Sydney in 1955 his style was still figurative.

He toured Northern Australia and then settled in Melbourne where a small family legacy allowed him to paint for a year, working through and beyond his academic/classical training. His 1959 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art was of abstract, turbulent, and swiftly executed paintings. But it was not until after he fled the unsympathetic critical establishment of Melbourne to Sydney the next year (bringing Clement Meadmore with him) that his work broke into its own authoritative stride.

Two central influences bore on his mature work: Eastern culture (especially Zen and the Zen arts), and jazz. Upward came to Eastern thought through Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's writings on Zen, and Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1953). Zen offered a philosophical support for an extempore, expressionist style. A Zen act should typically be spontaneous, an immediate response to the circumstantial environment, committed without calculating gain, value, merit or consequence. Hesitate, and Zen is irrevocably lost. Suzuki wrote of grasping, or rather identifying with, "life in the midst of its flow"; apart from the "here, now and this (of the) unquestionable present", all is illusion. Similarly, Herrigel wrote of the Zen painter immediately putting down an image of "what hesitates before the mind's eye"⁹ without intercolating consideration.

Upward was also drawn to be-bop jazz, to Charlie Parker and his successors. He valued jazz's informality, its engagement of irregular elements like vibrato, geisse and other non-notated components. He saw his paintings paralleling jazz's "inspired solo bursts . . . trying to reach beyond (one's) experience"¹⁰ where the performer creates by hazard, by improvisation. Allied to this affection for jazz was an interest in the American Beat Generation writers, especially Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Kerouac wrote of the procedural essentials of spontaneous prose as involving the "undisturbed flow from the mind of personal, secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on the subject of image".¹¹

Similarly, Upward's paintings of his 1960-62 Sydney period are spontaneously executed. He did not undertake preliminary studies, nor would pictures be "corrected" by overpainting. Where a picture lacked a natural rhythmic flow, where his gestures were marred by awkward turns, unfelicitous edges or unconvincing convulsions, he would hose the paint off. Consequently most works were painted on an already wet surface. This allowed the edges of his strokes, painted in water-soluble polyvinyl acetate, to suffuse into thin tonal veils. The mark thereby "lost its formality" and the spreading wash served to integrate it with the white ground.

Of the Sydney abstract expressionists, Upward's work was the most immune from the intrusion of metaphor, associations or allusions. The subject of a picture was simply the dynamics of its execution. In 1962, still only thirty years old, he left Sydney for London.

The other key gestural painter of the period was Stanislaus Rapotec (b. Trieste, 1912; arr. Australia, 1949). His marks, too, were generally rendered in dark P.V.A. paint on a light ground. But differences remain. Upward's line is breathing and organic: it swells, hesitates, scatters and ebbs. It is a line which seems to determine its destination, as if capriciously, as it progresses. Conversely, Rapotec's line is decisive, and usually aggressive. His lines generally describe circles, ellipses, or rods which shear into or surge beyond each other. Where Upward throws himself at the mercy of chance (and then hoses off the result if chance proves unmerciful), Rapotec considers compositional and structural factors, often in sketches, before he begins to paint.¹²

Rapotec's work achieved maturity in his Tension and Disturbance Series of the late 1950's. In 1960-61 his paintings began to refer obliquely to the landscape. Rapotec's military service took him to Luxor, and this exposure to Egyptian architecture has been credited with giving him a feeling for emphatic form. Certainly it was the elemental tensions of the landscape, its most momentous rhythms, that he was drawn to.

"Experience in Newcastle" 1964 (9), provoked by a short visit to that city, is such a work.

Line was also the pivotal element in the painting of Leonard Hessing (b. Roumania, 1931). Hessing had studied in Paris between 1950-1951, under Leger. Later in 1951 he came to Australia and studied architecture.

Where Rapotec's paintings tended to become one thundering climax from end to end, Hessing's works from 1959 are a brilliantly stage-managed field of abundant detail. He orchestrates his lines with a range and fluency probably only equalled, in recent Australian art, by Whiteley. As with Plate, Hessing's French connection seems to have left him with an insistence on finish, with a finesse of 'touch'. But his work retains a 'bite'; it suggests impending or just enacted magical, even menacing, encounters.

"Illusion of Place No. 3", alternatively titled "Brown August" is one of the Illusion of Place Series worked on between 1960 and 1962. The series coincided with his abandonment of traditional oil paints and his adoption of synthetic enamels and industrial paints. Such landscape connotations as the work possesses derive from his concurrent Middle Cove Series of charcoal drawings from nature. (He lived at 5 Greenfield Avenue, Middle Cove at the time.) He has described the painting as addressing (as does all his painting of the period) the "conjunction of 'sign' (calligraphy) and 'image'".¹³

Daryl Hill's two most familiar forms, his slightly squared circles and the bars that link or cross them, might recall the key devices in Rapotec's repertoire. But there the resemblance ends. Rapotec's marks are firm and decisive, jousting in front of a distant ground. Especially in his watercolours, Hill's marks and his grounds tend to fuse. By painting, at least partly, into a wet surface, his lines dilate and haemorrhage into the backgrounds. Where Rapotec presents high drama, Hill evokes atmosphere.

The early career of Frank Hodgkinson (b. Sydney, 1919) included an academic training, and a term in 1945 as an Official War Artist in Borneo. Between 1947 and 1953 he lived in England, and each year he made pilgrimages to Spain to pay homage to the bleak, black, late paintings of Goya. So although he admired Afro, and much of French tachism, it was really Goya who initiated his interest in expressionism and also perhaps, his interest in tragedy as a theme. His familiarity with American abstract expressionists was limited, but he felt that they lacked much of the finish and coherence of their European equivalents.

In 1958 he won the first Helena Rubinstein Scholarship, and the following year he returned to Majorca. During his two years there he met Tapies and Millares and other Spanish matter painters, and was invited to exhibit with them in Madrid. His already thick paint now further thickened into pastes. The surfaces were then torn, cut and fissured. Hodgkinson found in Spain, certainly in the dryer central area around Madrid and Toledo, a landscape whose burnt form, whose climate and quality of light recalled Australia. But if the area shared with the Australian landscape the furrows and wounds of antique geomorphic upheavals, it also seemed to bear the scar tissue of catastrophies and martyrdoms born of religious and political passions. Although essentially abstract, these themes of disruption, pain and sacrifice ran through his Spanish paintings.

After his return to Australia, his paintings quoted more directly from the landscape. Tree trunks, carrying etched traces of parasites and predators, and with their sap cauterized by fire, still told of agony and survival. Yet Hodgkinson also saw intimations of carnality in the curves of branches and the junctions of limb and trunk. "Time of the Last Cicada", a work of this period, was painted while Hodgkinson was living at Pittwater. Here, he wandered through the bush, collected bark which had wrinkled marvellously in death, and took photographs of the angophoras and scribbly gums. The picture was painted in the closing days of the summer of 1963. It had been a period of personal upheaval for Hodgkinson, and appropriately the

painting was about decay: the dying cry of summer's herald — the cicada — and the surrender of summer itself.

In 1963 Hodgkinson returned to Spain.

Tom Gleghorn (b. Durham, England 1925, arriv. Aust. 1928) established himself in 1958 with a series of paintings which followed a visit to the Nullarbor Desert. Blackened, spiky marks sliced across encrusted grounds, or gathered into intimidating masses. The Nullarbor was not unlike the landscape of *Voss*, and it was to be expected that Gleghorn should find *Voss* "marvellous". His Nullarbor works recall Voss's response to the Jildra landscape:

"For a moment everything was distinct. In the foreground some dead trees, restored to life by the absence of hate, were glowing with flesh of rosy light."

His work became increasingly gestural. Gleghorn did not pay too much attention to the international art magazines, so it was very possibly his close contact with Henry Salkauskas which influenced this reorientation. In 1961 he won the Helena Rubinstein Travelling Scholarship, and travelled through Europe in 1962-63. His encyclopaedic familiarity with materials and media played a more prominent role after his return, and his work of 1964-65 combined more emphatic form with evocatively textured surfaces.

Henry Salkauskas (b. 1925, arriv. Aust. 1949, d. 1979) and Eva Kubbos (b. 1928, arriv. Aust. 1952) were both born in Lithuania, and were conscious of that country's tradition in the black and white graphic arts. Both studied in Germany: Salkauskas at Frieberg University and L'Ecole des Arts et Mettiers, Frieberg between 1946 and 1949; Miss Kubbos at the Hochschule fur angewandte Kunst, Berlin between 1945 and 1950. In both instances, their training reflected the German expressionist tradition.

Salkauskas brought this expressionist demeanour to Australia; a black and white portrait of 1949,

although figurative, was rendered in swift and strong strokes. He came to abstraction in the late 1950's via calligraphic paintings and monoprints. Miss Kubbos came to Sydney from Melbourne in 1960, momentarily frustrated by the technical rigors of woodcuts on which she had been working. She was introduced to Salkauskas, and they began painting together. She had already been impressed by Pollock's explosive force, and by Rothko's colour ponds, but it was Salkauskas' example which led her to abstract expressionist watercolours.

As watercolour offers less scope for modifying a composition by overpainting, both undertook preliminary studies. Salkauskas used miniature notations in which he would plot the location of simple masses; Miss Kubbos would typically begin with black and white miniatures, and develop these into ¼ size colour studies before commencing the final work. Having largely predetermined the disposition of forms, they did not have to be tentative and exploratory about the act of execution.

Both painters, but especially Salkauskas, retain remnants of the landscape in their work. Most of his work between 1961 and 1964 suggested groundlines or sea surfaces, suns or radiating moons, and forces heaving beneath the earth's crust.

Essentially, both are tonalists, and their tonal nuances evoke murmurs, atmospheres and innuendoes. Critics have rightly perceived ominous or melancholy presentiments in their work, but there is elation too, as in "Xmas 1963",¹⁴ painted in circumstances of personal buoyancy. Both employ biting lines, drawn in charcoal, crayon or pastels, to catch the edges of forms and add tension to the pulsating tonal veils. Solid black brushstrokes also increase the dramatic temperature of their works as they collide with the softer fields. There are, of course, differences in their work: Salkauskas seeks elemental, emphatic masses; Miss Kubbos is the more speculative with colour. Together, their abstract expressionism injected an unprecedented toughness into Sydney watercolour painting.¹⁴

The early paintings of John Coburn (b. Ingham, Queensland, 1925) were marked by poise, balance and formality. His adoption of a rough, painterly manner was only for a short period, between 1962 and 1963.

By 1960, Coburn was aware of American abstract expressionism, through the international magazines available in the library of East Sydney Technical College, where he taught. More influential were his friends in the Contemporary Art Society who were associated, in varying degrees, with abstract expressionism: Hessing, Olsen, Rapotec and Salkauskas. In this company, his formal work made him feel "odd man out".

Rightly or wrongly, he sensed a "pressure to conform to the prevailing style".¹⁵

Improved accommodation facilitated the transition to a looser style, too. In 1962 he left a small flat in Rose Bay, where he had to work in the lounge room, and purchased a house in Macedon Place, Warriewood. Here he had his own studio and, prosaic as it may seem, he no longer had to be cautious about marking the furnishings.

His abstract expressionist paintings generally adopt a frontal dark silhouette form, stretching almost entirely across the picture. This was punctuated by apertures, through which the light ground presses forward. Parts of the silhouette were over-painted with warmer strokes, allowing it to pulsate. Many, such as "Garden of Gethsemane" (18), seek to express religious feeling through the near-abstract landscape.

Works from about 1960 had incorporated sand with the paint. Now he mixed pigments with aquadhere or bondcrete, to formulas suggested by Tom Gleghorn, who also taught at East Sydney Technical College. Some paintings were developed from preliminary sketches, but most were brusquely painted directly onto the board. Coburn had been reading Jung, and wanted his archetypal imagery to flow from the subconscious as unimpededly as possible. In late 1963 Coburn abandoned improvisation and returned to the

poised shape-making in which he felt his natural powers lay.

Beneath their animated brushstroking, a number of Sydney painters, especially Charles Reddington (b. Chicago 1929) and Robert Hughes (b. Sydney 1938) hinted simultaneously at landscape formations and at erotic encounters.

Charles Reddington was thirty years old when he arrived in Australia in 1959. The following year he moved to Adelaide to teach. By the time he relocated to Sydney in 1963 his abstract expressionist style was fully formed.

Just as the swelling, breast-like hillocks between Bathurst and Orange found reflection in the imagery of Lloyd Rees and Brett Whiteley, so the body-like undulations of the Cormanandel Valley, where Reddington lived, found reflection in his imagery. The rhythmically unfurling contours in his compositions equally suggest thighs or boulders. Darker, straighter passages, which tend to gather around the edges of the pictures, recall crevices, cliff profiles or fault lines, and the warm palette of red, white, black and pink emphasises the flesh/stony desert duality.

One of the Sydney painters who was most familiar with the literature on European and American developments was Carl Plate (1909-1977). It was, after all, his business. Plate had opened the Notanda Gallery in 1940 soon after returning from Europe. Here he sold books and reproductions, especially of 20th Century art. His original objective had been to make available an awareness of contemporary international trends which had not been accessible when he had been a student in the early 1930's. Nevertheless, Plate's movement towards abstract expressionism was not provoked by these sources, but came about through stylistic evolution.

With hindsight, there appears a natural, inexorable development from Plate's semi-abstractation of the 1950's to his abstract works of 1958-59. In the mid 1950's, a key theme was the horse, usually in motion, sometimes throwing its rider. To depict its

movement, lines flick and bend about the subject, fragmenting it into the shapes which would recur in his abstract expressionist work of the early 1960's.

By 1959-60, Plate had turned altogether from the motif. Unlike Rapotec, Coburn and Hughes, whose works drew upon the rhythms, tensions and anatomy of the landscape, Plate now held that reliance on superficial appearances and recognisable symbols was cosy, but restrictive.¹⁶ Consequently, he avoided any alignment of forms which might suggest horizon lines, and he frequently placed the greatest weights of the composition in the upper half of the picture to repudiate landscape references.

While his forms freed themselves from natural appearances, his colour became more restrained: chastened greens, mellow browns and bleached greys. This palette led critics to liken him to Braque, a simile which exasperated him.¹⁷ But indeed he did share with Braque an unerring sense of tone, generally restrained within the middle registers, and a discriminating feeling for placement and balance. His massed areas press and strain against each other. Over them, lines catch and define edges, confirm points of stress, or serve to lock areas together. "Harmony within conflict" was an apt phrase he used to describe his work.¹⁸

Another descriptive term he used, and one which he also employed in his titles, was "paradox". To an extent his work played with spatial paradoxes, with blurred or ambiguous figure-ground relationships. On a more fundamental level he had long been attracted to surrealism, and seems to have dwelt on the paradoxical nature of surrealist imagery, where forms may yield multiple and contradictory significances. The process of conjuring with such paradoxes, Plate suggested, offered a chance "to expose a glint of the unknown".¹⁹

Hector Gilliland (b. 1911) was two years younger than Plate. Since childhood, Gilliland had sensed a strong affinity with nature, and this had been

reflected in his landscape watercolours of the middle 1950's. He would contemplate his subject for a considerable time, and then make analytical studies which teased out the structures which underpinned nature's deceptively undisciplined facades. For all its apparent freshness of execution, a water-colour might take a week to complete.

By 1961 he felt his work lacked something of the vitality which he saw in much Sydney painting. He gave up painting and concentrated on drawing (especially charcoal drawing) in which the physical act of spontaneous execution supplanted analysis of the motif. Olsen and Hessing (who were his teaching colleagues at the University of New South Wales School of Architecture) and Carl Plate were supportive influences. Now, too, the dormant influence of Alan Davie came into play. Gilliland had had contact with Davie at the Abbey Arts Centre, where they both had studios. Gilliland saw Davie's work as demonstrating that abstract shapes could encapsulate human emotional experience. The other underlying influence was Nicholas de Stael, whose work he had seen in Paris between 1953 and 1954. De Stael's pictures, with their thickly trowelled paint slabs, seemed to reconcile successfully the tension between a brutality of execution and a sensitivity of form.

When he resumed painting, it was in an abstract expressionist style. "Untitled" (25) is characteristic. It began with an informal, frontal division of the picture. This suggested succeeding shapes, lines and bars. Paint runs and flecks testify to the volatile rendering.

Increasingly, between 1965 and 1970, Gilliland came to sense a flaccidity about abstract expressionism. He came to the view that it was excessively idiosyncratic as a style; works too much resembled an emotional or psychological case history. His University lecturing also contributed to his move from abstract expressionism. In his classes in Graphic Communications he had architecture students dealing with the role of line, shape, and colour value as decisive formal ingredients, and gradually his own work came to involve itself with these elements in structural contexts.

Michael Taylor returned to Australia in 1963 after winning the New South Wales Travelling Art Scholarship in 1960. The title of some of his works, such as "Down the River" (26), suggest sources in the tilting planes and exuberant foliage of the landscape. But at bottom, the works of 1963-1964 trace the sweeps, jabs and flourishes of his painting arm, while the enamel paints seep, bubble and crinkle as they coagulate.

Although he worked at an axis of the Sydney art scene, as Deputy Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the paintings of Tony Tuckson (b. Ismailia, Egypt 1921, arrived Aust. 1942, d. 1973) were virtually unknown between 1956 and 1964. Indeed he only exhibited one work (in the 1962 Contemporary Art Society exhibition) between 1957 and his first solo exhibition in 1970.

The cursive stylization of Ian Fairweather and the trailed mesh of Pollock seem to have been the influences which led him initially into abstract expressionism. (He owned a small Fairweather painting which, like much of his own work, held itself to black, white and grey.) In 1958 Tuckson went to Melville Island to supervise the transportation of a set of carved and painted aboriginal grave posts, which were being acquired by the Art Gallery. This provoked his intense interest in aboriginal art, and throughout, his writings on the subject, many descriptions of artefacts could equally be analyses of his own work. For example, he wrote of the aborigines' "simplification of form (and) organisation of space by line and colour".²⁰

He struck out on his own about 1958-59, in what might be termed his "Script Period", of which "No. 37: Black on White" (27) is a late example. Margaret Tuckson wryly, but perhaps acutely, describes this as his "Scribble Period": the works are generally black marks on a white ground; they appear hurried in execution, and apparently "careless" in composition; they include letters and numbers which have been scratched or scrawled, like graffiti.

Between 1963 and 1965, his work seemed to admit two other primary influences: Alan Davie (whose "Flag Dream No. 4" 1957 was acquired by the Art Gallery from the 1959 British Council exhibition) and Pop Art. Davie, like Tuckson, accepted the validity of automaticism to the inclusion of mistakes and flaws, referring to some of his paintings as "marvellously ugly"²¹; but more significant for Tuckson's new direction was Davie's use of flat, frontal shapes, which hint at iconic significances. Pop artists, too, often used simplified, assertive shapes and brash, even raucous colour, mimicking the characteristics employed by posters and advertisements to command attention and shriek their exhortations. Apparently following the example of Pop Art, Tuckson added a strident red to his black and white palette. "No 59: BB" (28) plays with the theme of ladies' underwear, a recurring theme of Pop artists.

Tuckson's most resolved, most personal work commenced in 1970. But his painting of 1957 to 1965 is notable for its dynamic, even brutal execution. Probably no Sydney abstract expressionist made so few concessions to elegance.

Ron Lambert (b. Sydney 1923) travelled through Europe between 1960 and 1961. At the Brussels' World Fair he saw the work of Dubuffet and Vasarely. At the Venice Biennale, Rothko. In London, he saw Bacon. Other painters who impressed him included Mondrian, Leger, John Bratby, Frank Auerbach, Riopelle and especially de Stael. This represented a broad portfolio of impressions, but one of two threads was common to their work: either an ability to compose with strong, flat pattern, or alternatively an expressionist demeanour allied with an interest in the physicality of paint. (What Lambert called "the power of the 'tactility' of oil paint".)

Lambert consolidated these two strands in his own work after his return to Australia. His first one man exhibition was in 1963 at Barry Stern's. The work was marked by a powerful, throbbing patchwork of jostling bands, crosses, rectangles, etc., and an energetic application of paint.

The oil paint of these works was kept malleable during execution by the addition of oil. If an area was not working it was scraped off, and repainted. Lambert did not overpaint. This lent the paintings the impression of having been carried out directly, and at speed. His succulent paint had a technical purpose: thick paint dried more slowly. The act of painting continued "until the picture finished itself, or the paint began to dry"²² (depending on the weather, up to three days).

These 1963 characteristics of aggressively applied impasto together with assertive pattern would remain the hallmarks of Lambert's painting into the 1970's.

In 1964, two years after his first solo exhibition, Rodney Milgate (b. Kyogle 1934) was invited to participate in the Helena Rubinstein Travelling Art Scholarship Competition. He submitted a group of paintings which tended to fall into two stylistic clusters. The first, in which some critics erroneously imagined an influence from Ian Fairweather²³, typically commenced with a skirmish of expressionist strokes. Lines were overpainted, developing an all-over, largely unfocussed net. Gradually images began to suggest themselves, and their identity was enhanced by blocking out passages of the calligraphic web.

The other cluster may appear to be closer to abstract expressionism. They are essentially abstract, and the powerful strokes undulate, pitch and swell with a barely repressed intensity. But the technique employed in these works precluded the extempore manner which was so central to abstract expressionism. Milgate's staining, sanding and burning permitted little overpainting and virtually no correction, and these works were carefully preconceived. James Gleeson wrote that Milgate's subtlety of surface, colour tone and form, and his delighting in intricacy, delicacy and refinement were at variance with the brutality and unharnessed vigour of the abstract expressionists, and it is correct that Milgate's sense of underlying harmonic organisation did distance him from them.

Between 1958 and 1963, the Rubinstein Scholarship had been dominated by painters associated with abstract expressionism. They won four Scholarships out of six. But in 1964 the prize was awarded to Colin Lanceley for a suite of assemblages constructed from modified, repainted ready made objects. Another exhibitor, Charles Reddington, presented work which was moving to a flatter, less painterly manner. Milgate's work, as has been noted, was developing a post-abstract expressionist idiom. Ron Lambert, Henry Salkauskas, Eva Kubbos and Stan Rapotec would pursue their abstract expressionist tendencies, but by late 1964 most of the painters discussed had left Australia, or had reoriented their styles. Abstract expressionism no longer represented the overwhelming dynamic of Sydney painting.

NOTES

1. Conversation with the writer, July 1980.
2. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6th February, 1957.
3. Q. Bruce Adams, *Robert Klippel*, Honours Year Discourse, Fine Arts Library, Sydney University, p. 9.
4. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4th December, 1956.
5. Op. cit.
6. Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1970*, O.U.P., Melbourne, 1971, p. 312.
7. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1st November, 1956.
8. Daniel Thomas, "Ralph Balson", *Art and Australia*, Vol. 2 No. 4, March 1965, p. 290.
9. Eugen Herrigil, *Zen and the Art of Archery*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953, p. 101.
10. Conversation with the writer, June 1980.
11. Jack Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose", *Evergreen Review*, Vol. 2 No. 5, 1958, pp. 72-73. Bracketed phrase is Kerouac's.
12. Laurie Thomas, "Stanislaus Rapotec", *Art and Australia*, Vol. 8 No. 2, Sept. 1970.
13. Letter to the Newcastle Regional Art Gallery, 11th March, 1971.
14. Their influence on Sydney watercolour painting is reflected in the fact that between 1960 and 1964 Salkauskas won twenty three art prizes, mostly for watercolours, and between 1963 and 1964 Miss Kubbos won seven.
15. Conversation with the writer, July 1980.
16. Q. John Reed, *New Painting 1952-1962*, Longmans, 1963, p. 38.
17. Mrs. J. Plate, in conversation with the writer, July 1980.
18. Q. John Reed, *ibid.*
19. Op. cit.
20. Tony Tuckson, "Australian Aboriginal Art" *Aboriginal Art in the Western World*, ed. Ronald M. Berndt, Ure Smith, 1964.
21. Q. Robert Melville, "The Unintentionalism of Alan Davie", *Quadrum* XV, 1963.
22. Letter to the writer, July 1980.
23. See Peter Pinson, Catalogue of Rodney Milgate Retrospective Exhibition, Macquarie Gallery, 1980 for rebuttal.

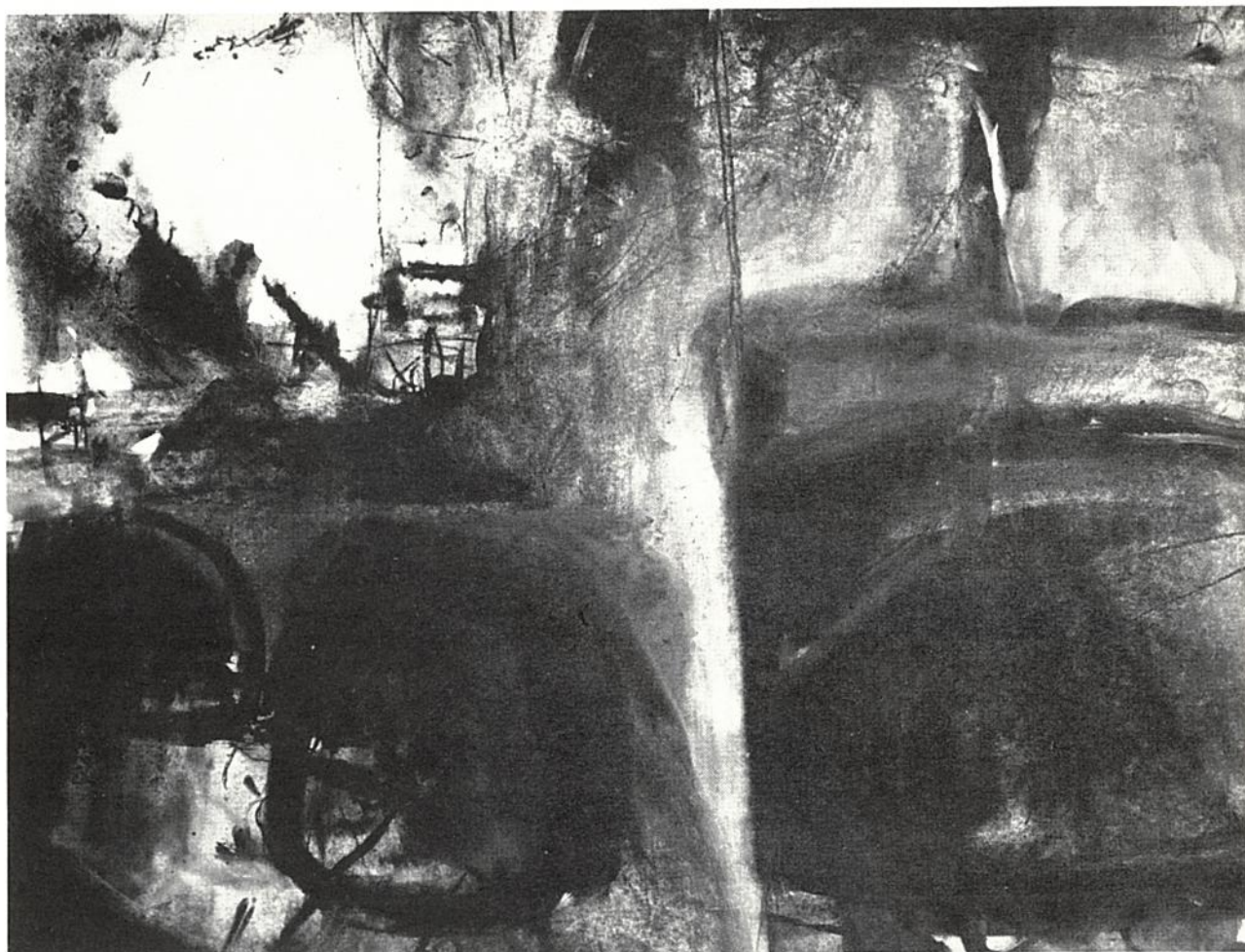
1. ROBERT KLIPPEL
"Untitled" 1953
Mixed media on paper, 55 x 76 cm
Private Collection
-



15. HENRY SALKAUSKAS
"Fortress" 1964
Mixed media on paper, 101 x 76 cm
Exh. Solo Exhibition, Hungry Horse Gallery 1964
Private Collection
-



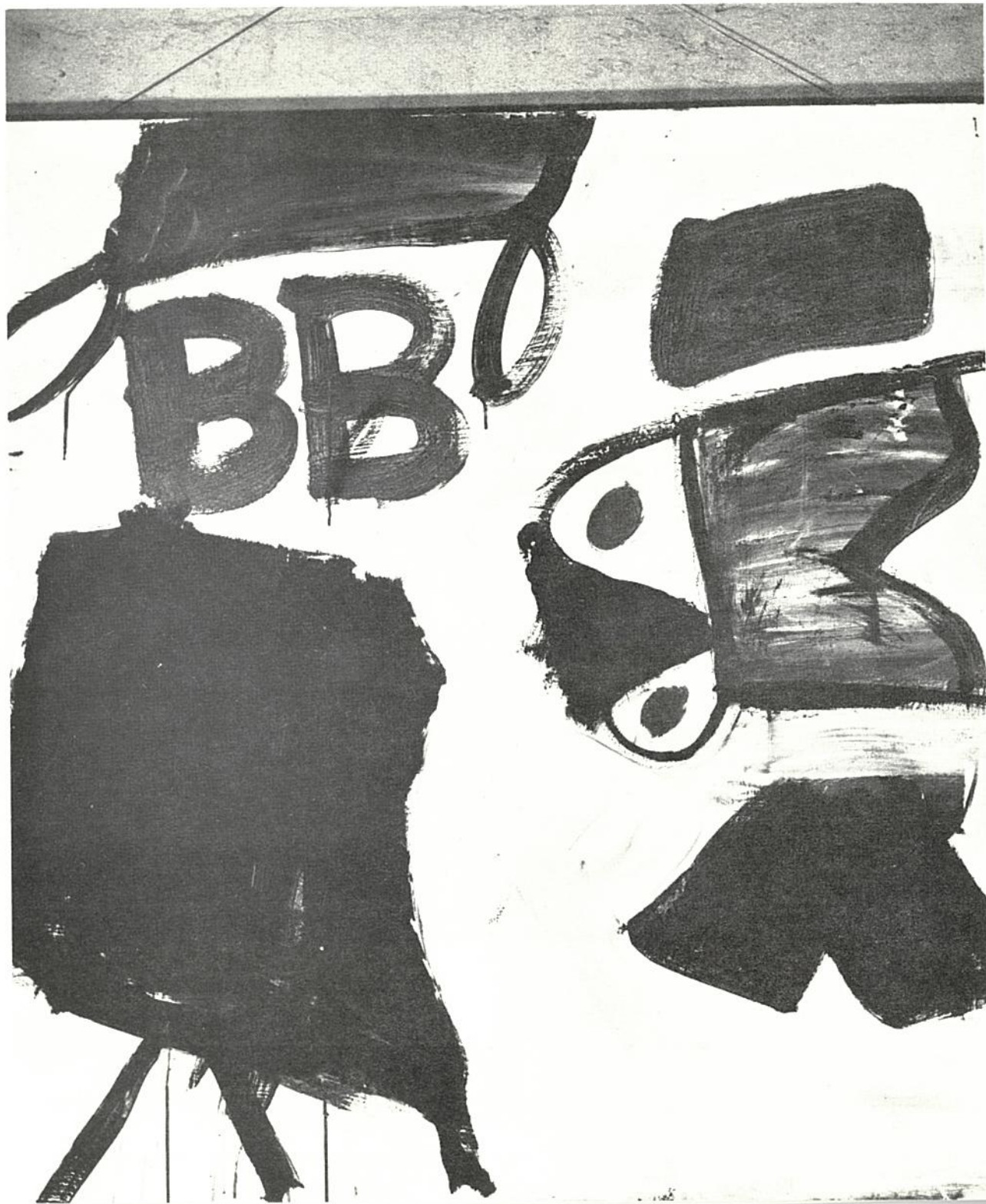
16. EVA KUBBOS
"Melting Trunks under the Yellow Sun" 1963
Watercolour on paper, 76.5 x 102 cm
Exh. Wynn Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1964
Awarded Trustees Watercolour Prize 1964
The Artist
-



24. CARL PLATE
"Painting" 1962
Oil on board 71 cm x 58 cm
Sydney Teachers' College
-



28. TONY TUCKSON
"No. 59: BB" 1964
P.V.A. on hardboard, 122 x 122 cm
Mrs. M. Tuckson



30. RON LAMBERT
"The Initiate" 1963
Oil on jute on masonite, 122 x 122 cm
Exh. Solo Exhibition, Barry Stern Gallery, 1963
The Artist
-



1. ROBERT KLIPPEL
"Untitled" 1953
Mixed media on paper, 55 x 76 cm
Private Collection
2. ROBERT KLIPPEL
"Untitled" 1953
Mixed media on paper, 55 x 76 cm
Private Collection
3. ELWYN LYNN
"Torrid Day at Tachismo" 1956
Oil on hardboard, 91.4 x 121.9 cm
Exh. Contemporary Art Society Exhibition, Sydney 1956
The Artist
4. RALPH BALSON
"Painting" 1957
Oil on hardboard, 68 x 6 x 91.5 cm
Exh. Solo Exhibition, David Jones Gallery, 1957
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Private Collection
5. RALPH BALSON
"Untitled" 1961
Oil and enamel on hardboard, 119.5 x 134.3 cm
Private Collection
6. ERIC SMITH
"Crucifixion" 1961-2
Oil 213 x 152 cm
Exh. Helena Rubinstein Scholarship 1962
Suite Awarded the Scholarship
Collection James E. Fairfax
7. MARGO LEWERS
"Untitled" Early 1960's
Oil on hardboard, 87 x 120 cm
Private Collection
8. PETER UPWARD
"January Seventh" 1961
P.V.A. on hardboard, 210 x 120 cm
Private Collection
9. STANISLAUS RAPOTEC
"Experience in Newcastle" 1964
P.V.A. on hardboard, 122 x 152.4 cm
Exh. Solo Exhibition, Hungry Horse Gallery, 1964
Newcastle Regional Art Gallery
10. LEONARD HESSING
"The Illusion of Place No. 3"
or *"Brown August"* 1962
Enamels on hardboard, 90.9 x 122.2 cm
Exh. Helena Rubinstein Travelling Scholarship 1961;
Robin Hood Competition 1962;
"New Influences" Exhibition,
Newcastle City Art Gallery, 1962.
Awarded the Robin Hood Prize.
Newcastle Regional Art Gallery.
11. TOM GLEGHORN
"Path of the White Bird" 1961
Mixed media on board 213 x 152cm
Exh. Helena Rubinstein Scholarship 1961
One of the Suite Awarded the Prize.
Mrs. Tom Gleghorn
12. DARYL HILL
"Untitled" 1962
Watercolour and ink on paper, 76 x 56 cm
Private Collection
13. DARYL HILL
"Evening Mirage" 1964
Watercolour on paper, 56 x 38 cm
Private Collection
14. HENRY SALKASKAS
"Xmas 1963" 1963
Mixed media on paper, 76 x 102 cm
Exh. Solo Exhibition, Hungry Horse Gallery 1964
Private Collection
15. HENRY SALKASKAS
"Fortress" 1964
Mixed media on paper, 101 x 76 cm
Exh. Solo Exhibition, Hungry Horse Gallery 1964
Private Collection
16. EVA KUBBOS
"Melting Trunks under the Yellow Sun" 1963
Watercolour on paper, 76.5 x 102 cm
Exh. Wynn Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1964
Awarded Trustees Watercolour Prize 1964
The Artist
17. EVA KUBBOS
"Refuge in the Landscape" 1963
Watercolour on paper, 74.5 x 95 cm
The Artist
18. JOHN COBURN
"Garden of Gethsemane" 1963
Acrylic on hardboard, 168 x 203 cm
Exh. Solo Exhibition, Hungry Horse Gallery, 1963;
Helena Rubinstein Travelling Scholarship Exhibition 1963
Loretto Convent, Normanhurst
19. JOHN COBURN
"Mount of Olives" 1963
Coloured inks on paper, 33 x 20 cms
The Artist

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20. CHARLES REDDINGTON
"Dream of Shoshan" 1963
 Oil on canvas 136.8 x 124.5 cm
 Exh. "Twelve", Hungry Horse Gallery, 1963;
 Newcastle Agricultural, Horticultural and Industrial
 Association Shows, 1964; selected in 1964 for
 "Young Australian Painters" Exhibition, Japan and Art
 Gallery of New South Wales, 1965. Reproduced
 "Twelve", calendar produced by Hungry Horse Gallery for
 1964.
 Newcastle Regional Art Gallery
 21. ROBERT HUGHES
"Scarecrow" 1961
 Mixed media on paper
 Art Gallery of New South Wales
 22. ROBERT HUGHES
"Summer Landscape" 1962
 Oil and P.V.A. on hardboard, 89.9 x 120.4 cm
 Exh. "Survey" Exhibition, Blaxland Gallery, 1962
 Newcastle Regional Art Gallery
 23. CARL PLATE
"Third Edge" 1961
 Acrylic on canvas, 182.7 x 121 cm
 Mrs. J. Plate
 24. CARL PLATE
"Painting" 1962
 Oil on board 71 cm x 58 cm
 Sydney Teachers' College
 25. HECTOR GILLILAND
"Untitled" 1963 or 1964
 Oil on board
 Exh. Transfield Competition, 1964; Maitland Competition,
 1964.
 Awarded the Maitland Prize, 1964
 Maitland City Collection
 26. MICHAEL TAYLOR
"Down the River" 1963
 Oil and enamels on canvas, 203 x 173 cm
 Art Gallery of New South Wales
 27. TONY TUCKSON
"No. 37: Black on White" 1962
 P.V.A. on hardboard, 98 x 91.5 cm
 Mrs. M. Tuckson
 28. TONY TUCKSON
"No. 59: B B" 1964
 P.V.A. on hardboard, 122 x 122 cm
 Mrs. M. Tuckson
 29. FRANK HODGKINSON
"Time of the Last Cicada" 1963
 Oil on canvas on three stretchers, 175 x 360 cm
 University Union, University of New South Wales.
 30. RON LAMBERT
"The Initiate" 1963
 Oil on jute on masonite, 122 x 122 cm
 Exh. Solo Exhibition, Barry Stern Gallery, 1963
 The Artist
 31. RODNEY MILGATE
"The Orchard" 1964
 Oil on hardboard, 120 x 180 cm
 The Artist
 32. BOB CURTIS
"Winter Landscape" 1963
 Oil and enamel on hardboard, 120 x 120 cm
 Exh. Contemporary Art Society Exhibition, David Jones
 Gallery, 1963; Von Bertouch Gallery, Newcastle, 1963;
 Crana Gallery, Wollongong, 1964; Workshop Arts Centre,
 1964
 Former Collection, Joy Ewatt; now, Collection of the artist.