

A museum of one's own: Look. Look Again

A major new exhibition invites viewers to take a closer look at the marginalised history of art made by Australian women. By **Sheridan Coleman**.



"She is looking you dead in the eye saying 'I am not a poetic muse. I am controlling my image and I defy you to try and frame me differently,'" say Lee Kinsella. The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art curator is describing Freda Robertshaw's nude self-portrait, part of an upcoming exhibition, *Look. Look Again*, at Lawrence Wilson Gallery.

Look. Look Again aims to partially redress the underexamined history of 120 years of art made by Australian women. Female artists' self-portraits are the key to the exhibition, which draws on Australia's largest specialist collection of women's art. The Cruthers family, guided by the legacy of Lady Sheila Cruthers, nickname their acquisition model "the artist and her work": a self-portrait sits alongside pieces reflecting each artist's

Above: Dorothy Braund, *Barbara Brash*, 1967, oil on composite board. Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. Courtesy of the artist and the artist's family.

signature style. Accordingly, these intimate self-representations of women artists become prologues to their work.

The resulting collection – which takes in painting, sculpture, textiles, video and more – is a complex and comprehensive repository of impressions about the experience of being a female artist in Australia. The exhibition follows the 2007 gifting of the collection to the University of Western Australia, and invites a serious examination of the role such collections play in restoring and promoting the history of Australian women artists.

Historically, women are better known as muses than artists, playing deities, virgins, odalisques and seductresses. Without self-portraiture, the reality of the woman artist might have remained unknown, her work falling outside the canon as a domestic foil to grander, masculine artforms.

Particular female artists can sometimes be elusive. In its efforts to locate forgotten pieces, the Cruthers Collection underscores the chronic cultural amnesia that can exist around the history of women's art. When artist Clarice Beckett (1887–1935) died at 35, her prolific 2000-work catalogue was stored in a barn, to be eaten by possums and rained on until her sister Hilda reclaimed 700 neglected works. Decades later, the Cruthers hung Beckett alongside Alma Figuerola, another long-lost artist she'd have known very well. "We were able to reunite them," beams John Cruthers, curatorial advisor and son of Lady Sheila. "It's an act of historical recuperation for generations of women artists whose work never found its way into the museums."

The recuperative process not only mends historical oversights, it also indicates a host of subjects alternative to those found in mainstream histories. "The great narratives of Australian art were constructed by people like Bernard Smith," Cruthers says. "They had a vision of heroic male artists such as Nolan, Boyd and Tucker, populating the mythic landscape with Kelly, Burke and Wills. Women didn't do that. A lot of the time they were interested in the conditions people actually experienced. Their work spoke of lives." This perhaps suggests that women artists found notoriety and well-developed personae (famously

enjoyed by the likes of Norman Lindsay and Brett Whiteley) superfluous to artmaking.

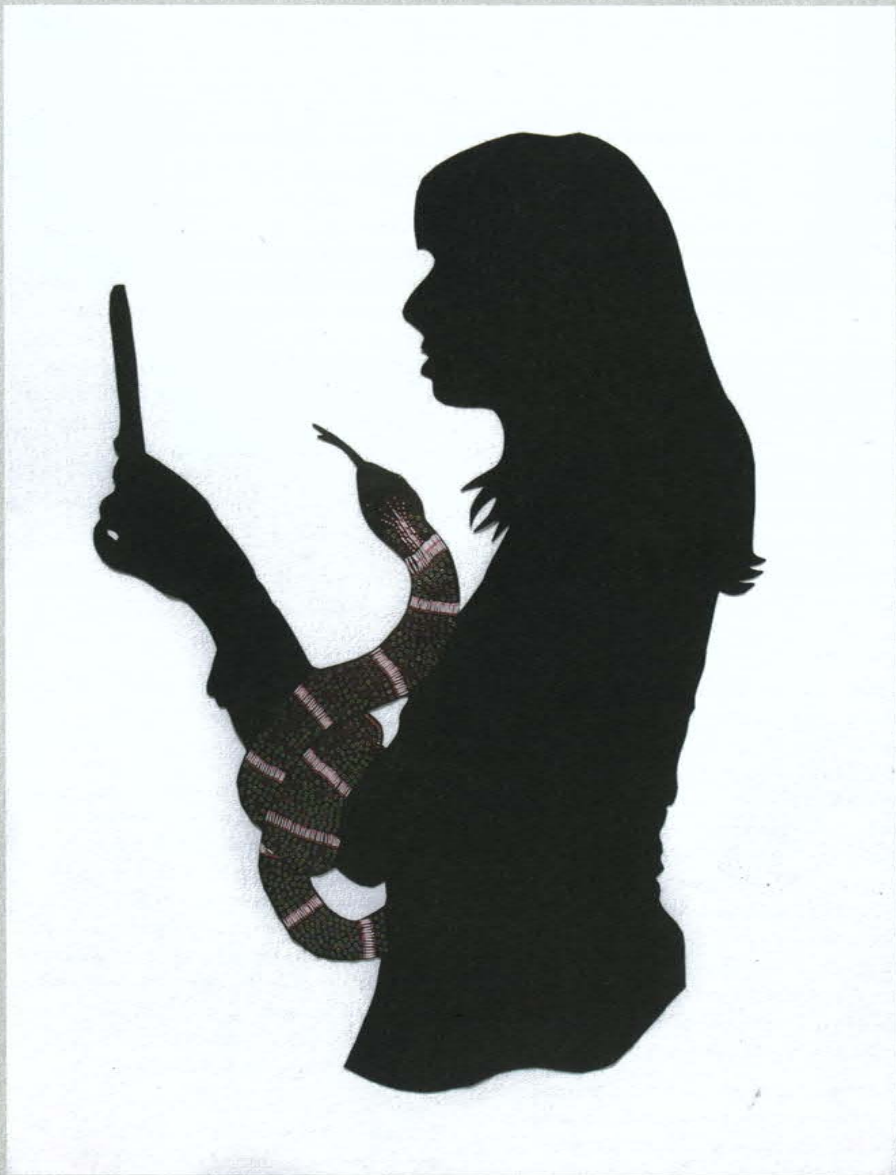
Certainly contemporary artist Lisa Wolfgramm eschews any kind of hubris, preferring rather to "get on with it". Wolfgramm envisages a future in which female artists aren't pressured to examine their gender in order to explain their artworks, methods or attitudes. Another collection artist, Susan Norrie, sees art as yet-adolescent in its gender equality; however, after years of developing her own unique perspective, it is the feminine, not feminism, that intrigues her. Such femininity is a "powerful, intuitive force" that allows women artists to "remind us of the unspeakable truths of our times".

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Further works in the collection include paintings by Julie Dowling, an artist dedicated to documenting her family and the Badimaya community she is part of. Others also make art based in lived experience: Danielle Freakley commemorates her break-ups by delivering accusatory sculptures to the doorsteps of ex-partners. One survives in the collection: a wretched, complex structure of jeweller's wax atop a pedestal that reads "I see you fucking her when I look at anything".

Commercial success or fame alone cannot determine women's places in art history, nor do they alone inspire artmaking. The mission for collectors such as Cruthers is not to bemoan the injustices of market popularity, but to rebalance art history by restoring to it figures who deserve to be there.

Such objectives will be discussed at the exhibition's two-day symposium *Are We There Yet?* alongside dialogues on feminism, post-feminism and funding. Though feminism is a topic integral to any discussion of "women's art", the "F-word" can be a tricky subject when



applied to a collection representing so many women. "For me the most interesting thing is that you actually can't generalise," says Kinsella. "It's a chorus of voices."

One such voice is that of Eveline Kotai, a painter of graceful abstractions. Kotai's experience of the Australian art scene has been one unmarked by gender bias, and healthy with female camaraderie. Kotai carefully manages her relationship to feminism: "This debate will continue to defer to biological distinction and cultural limitations but instead of engaging in battle I prefer to put my best energy into my work. My motto remains 'Art first, gender second.'" One might expect a collection of women's art to esteem gender politics or domesticity, however the truth is that women's art is equally driven by passion for materials, ideas and community.

Behind all this looms the extraordinary figure of Lady Sheila Cruthers. Her support of women artists helped create a clearer picture of women's art. "For her, it was about making real the personalities behind the work," explains

Kinsella. The Cruthers Art Foundation will carry on Lady Sheila's project at the symposium's plenum, calling for suggestions on funds allocation. "Here we are, in a position to help," Cruthers enthuses, "and so where's the need?"

For artists such as Kotai, Norrie and Wolfgramm, progress means nailing shut the coffin of under-representation with great art, and lots of it. John Cruthers recognises this gusto in a soon-to-be-gifted painting by Vivienne Shark-LeWitt. "It shows a woman in pink glasses and pith helmet, a cigar going through the flynet. She's the lady artist, about to go on her adventure," he says. The recuperation of women's art is not meant to leash women artists to a constant discussion of gender politics, but rather to equip and support them for their innumerable imminent adventures.

Look. Look Again is at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth, from 19 October to 15 December. A two-day symposium titled "Are We There Yet?" takes place 20–21 October. lwgallery.uwa.edu.au