



**Still Life with Sea Shells and Bowls of Flowers (1955) by Margaret Preston, in the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery's Look. Look Again exhibition from the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art**

# Sheila's sheilas

A unique art collection was born when a son took his mum gallery-hopping, writes Victoria Laurie

If Sheila Cruthers were still alive, she would have relished seeing her women's art collection, or "Sheila's sheilas" as it was nicknamed, staring down from the walls of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia.

The tiny, always dapperly dressed figure would have lingered before familiar faces, portraits of artists that she and her son John collected for more than three decades. Elise Blumann's amused gaze from under a perky brown hat; Jacqueline Hick's intelligent face half-lit by strong sunlight; Ann Newmarch's quizzical look, her held camera pointing at us; a silhouette self-portrait in felt by Sangeeta Sandrasegar, clasping a sequined serpent.

And then there's a portrait of Sheila herself, painted by her friend Julie Dowling: a resolute figure in a utilitarian plastic chair, capable hands folded over, work done.

"She would have been delighted to see all of her ladies lined up along the wall," John Cruthers says of his mother, who died aged 86 on December 31 last year. She would have liked the companionable hanging of modernists, such as Nora Heysen, Dorothy Braund and Grace Crowley, in the first gallery space, followed by postmodern and feminist artists such as Jenny Watson and Narelle Jubelin in the second.

"She'd probably have looked at some works and said, 'Oh bloody hell, John's gone and bought stuff that'll never fit in the house,'" John Cruthers says. He gestures around UWA's gallery. "But it doesn't need to fit there now that the collection has an institutional home. There were 250 works hung inside Mum and Dad's house — there were paintings hanging behind the toilet door, it was ridiculous."

Look. Look Again displays an impressive 140 artworks from the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art. The entire collection is even more substantial, more than 600 items that form the largest single body of women's art in the nation. If you've never heard of it, it's because this private collection is only now venturing into the public domain. It had one previous outing in 1995, during a nationwide series of women's art exhibitions initiated by Sydney academic Joan Kerr.

The present Cruthers show is billed as "a unique survey exhibition of historic and contemporary works of art made by women" that "presents a significant record of female creativity in Australia over the past 125 years". Another claim is that it offers "an alternative frame of reference for engaging with Australian history and culture".

The statements provoke a flood of questions about an arbitrary "frame of reference" that views Australian art through the prism of women artists only. Why the need for such a collection? And don't a few female artists

reject such gender-bound categorisation? Far from shying away from such debates, the Cruthers Art Foundation is funding a series of talks and seminars, entitled *Are We There Yet?*, to accompany this exhibition. And there is a catalogue in which art historian Juliette Peers wades into the debate by describing the Cruthers Collection as "a dissonance, a resistance" to other public collections and their orthodox ways of collecting and narrating the nation's art history.

Peers says the Cruthers family, while acquiring outstanding works by modernist figures such as Clarice Beckett, Grace Cossington Smith and Margaret Preston, have been important in collecting dozens of little-known artists from the past such as Ada May Plante and Helen Stewart, and dozens more emerging ones. Importantly, says Peers, the collection assiduously has collected work by female artists from South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, in contrast to major art gallery collections that historically were focused on the eastern seaboard.

Heated ideological debates about the merit and content of women's art made little impact on Sheila Cruthers. Sharp, brusque and charming (when she wanted to be), this singular West Australian woman simply loved the courage, wit and artistry of the women artists she encountered.

Perhaps her empathy came from origins far removed from the comfortable wealth she enjoyed in later years. The ninth child of Italian rural migrants, she was cared for by siblings and distant relatives while her parents ran hotels in WA's mining towns. Then her father, Giovanni, died, leaving his widow to rear her children in the Depression, including five-year-old Sheila.

At school, she topped her class, but at 14 Sheila was removed from school by her mother; she needed her to earn money for the family. Secretarial work in a law firm led to a senior paralegal job; the money she saved went on stylish clothes and outings with beaux, including a young newspaper journalist called James Cruthers. Much like the post-war female artists she later came to admire, she relished her hard-won independence.

Then she married, had two children with James and supported his career as an executive for TVW Channel Seven, Perth's first television station. Cultural outings consisted of visits to the ballet and play opening nights, and there was little art in the house — until son John began an arts degree at UWA.

"My family's involvement in art began with

contemporary work. Dad liked mid-20th-century artists such as Sali Herman, Lloyd Rees and Guy Grey-Smith, and Mum was drawn to women's art. She would instinctively know whether it was a woman's picture or not."

In time, Sheila's preference won out, her choices mediated by the discerning eye of her son (now a Sydney-based art consultant and curator). Affordability also came into it. Lesser-known artists, as women invariably were, were

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"... TAUT, BITING AND EXTREMELY FUNNY ..." THE AUSTRALIAN

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cheaper to collect. Two West Australians, Kate O'Connor and Elise Blumann, were among Sheila's early buys. "In 1976, she saw Blumann's self-portrait with a beautiful pillbox hat and said: 'I must have it,'" John recalls. "Within a couple of weeks, she bought a Kate O'Connor self-portrait, with her cloche pulled down over her head."

Then came purchases of key artists such as Crowley, Preston and Portia Geach. A love of the modern aesthetic and a flicker of recognition drew Sheila to them. "When you see photographs of Mum in the late 1940s, she was very stylishly dressed and perhaps she saw a reflection of herself. And she appreciated good design: the pictorial construction of still lifes and portraits by women modernists of the 1930s and 40s immediately clicked for her."

Sheila soon established a tradition of buying an artist's work and, where possible, their self-portrait, hanging them side by side in her house. Under John's tutelage, her collecting interests broadened from portraiture and identity, domestic and family life, to abstract works and themes ranging from colonisation and national identity to feminism.

"When I went to film school I was exposed to second-wave feminism in a big way and worked on feminist documentaries," he says. "One of my first purchases was a screen print by Ann Newmarch, titled *We Must Risk Unlearning All That Has Kept Us Alive for So Long*, about relinquishing what men want women to look like. It was being sold for \$10 a print 'for working-class women' and I got dirty looks for asking to buy one."

In the early 80s, after a knighthood for his TV and charity work, James Cruthers moved on to make international TV acquisitions for Rupert Murdoch's News Limited. When he and Sheila were asked to relocate to New York, she insisted on installing some of their Australian paintings in their plush Manhattan apartments, first in Trump Tower and later in a tower block above the Museum of Modern Art.

Her art collection became a comfort in a notoriously unfriendly city. Sheila later recalled the particular solace of Joy Hester's painting *Girl in a Corner*: "Each day, before I ventured out into the big city, I would sit down in front of the picture, put my head in my hands like the girl in the corner and say: 'Well Joy, here we go again. I hope I have a good day out there with those other eight million people.' Strangely, this ritual seemed to give me the strength to face New York, and after a couple of months I settled in quite well."

Art also offered an entree to New York society. Sheila lent her paintings to museum surveys of Australian art in several American states. She also noticed how few US galleries bought Australian art, so she and a group of female expatriates co-founded Aust Art as a fundraising body; they donated works to the Metropolitan Museum, the Guggenheim and Brooklyn Museum. The women were dubbed "Sheila's sheilas" by News Limited journalist Frank Devine; the term was later applied to Sheila's collection of women artists.

"The New York apartment gradually became a mecca for Australian artists, curators, gallery owners and collectors visiting America," John says. "As a result Sheila began to meet young Australian artists. Susan Norrie, Narelle Jubelin, Adrienne Gaba, Margaret Morgan and others became friends while in New York and were helped by her."

She loved meeting young artists and talking to them about their lives and art. They were young women trying to make their way in an often hostile world, and she had a powerful urge to help and encourage them. "A new generation of young, east coast artists joined the collection: Maria Cruz, Mikala Dwyer, Tracey Moffatt and Fiona Foley."

Back in Australia, John found the collection was able to afford a few major purchases. One was Grace Cossington Smith's *Dawn Landing*, modelled from press photographs of the D-day landing in France. "It's one of several



Clockwise from top, *Wudjula Yorgah (White Woman)* (2005) by Julie Dowling; *Fete III* (1987) by Susan Norrie; and *Portrait Study (Hilda)* (1918) by Clarice Beckett

## THE NEW YORK APARTMENT GRADUALLY BECAME A MECCA FOR AUSTRALIAN ARTISTS

JOHN CRUTHERS

undertaken to keep the collection intact and employ a dedicated curator, while the Cruthers Art Foundation administers a fund of \$100,000 annually to pay for upkeep, acquisitions and special projects.

"We want the collection to be used, and at UWA students from all sorts of disciplines can access it," John says. "For the first time ever, a public collection now exists that people can look at what women did achieve and ask: 'Why didn't they get bought?', 'Why aren't they in national collections?'"

UWA professor Ted Snell, also *The Australian's* Perth art critic, says the Cruthers family has "refocused the lens on Australian art" with its support for female artists. "This is certainly an idiosyncratic collection, a strongly organic creature," Snell says. "They've discovered people, they've gone off on tangents, they've had glitches."

Their collecting has been done under real constraints, he adds. "Unlike the Stokes or Holmes a Court collections, they haven't been able to just say, 'We need that, we're going to buy it.' They've had to sell things, save up, seek out works that fell into their price range."

Advocacy is still needed, says an unapologetic John Cruthers. "Historically there are many women whose work took a long time to find a place in art galleries because of the bias against them, like Clarice Beckett and Bessie Davidson. But if you look at the statistics about current purchasing, or look at their representation in major collections, or the number of articles or shows reviewed, women are still less prominent than men artists."

"[Yet] I think there's a persistent interest in art by women," he says. "As we come up to the 50th anniversary of the second wave of feminism in the early 1970s, I think there'll be more focus on that historical moment."

Recently, he was inspired by a visit to the National Museum of Women and the Arts in Washington, DC; it was the brainchild of Wilhelmina Cole Holladay, who — with her husband — started collecting women's art in almost the same year as the Cruthers family. "I'm now much more ambitious for our collection," Cruthers says. "It made me think it could be a focal point in linking up a national network of women's art, to increase visibility and provide the targeted support and scholarship it needs."

In 2001, Sheila Cruthers described her motivation for collecting women's art as "a love for the work and the joy of living with it". She told the *Modern Australian Women: Paintings and Prints 1925-45* symposium in Adelaide, where four Cruthers artworks were on tour, that she felt she'd joined a small, congenial club.

"While we might not have been all that professional, this small club carried the flag for years, and it was wonderful to have had it virtually to ourselves for so long," she said.

"But now, with this show touring the nation, it is obvious those days are over. Now without question the whole country will get to know just how good our women's art is. I am overjoyed this has happened and am pleased to have been part of it in my own small way."

**Look. Look Again: The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art.** Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth, October 20-December 15.