



# INTO THE LIGHT

THE CRUTHERS  
COLLECTION OF  
WOMEN'S ART



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Edited by  
John Cruthers &  
Lee Kinsella

COVER Jacqueline Hick, *Self portrait* c1951, oil on plywood, 53 x 45.6 cm

FRONTISPIECE Rhonda and Susannah Hamlyn, *Chit chat* 1996, rug, wool and mohair over cotton, 95 x 100 cm

LEFT Julie Dowling, *Wudjula yorgah* (white woman) 2005, acrylic and red ochre on canvas, 120 x 100 cm





## REFOCUS <sup>1</sup>

THE CRUTHERS COLLECTION OF WOMEN'S ART

**Ted Snell**

## SHEILA'S SHEILAS <sup>5</sup>

A PRIVATE COLLECTION GOES PUBLIC

**John Cruthers**

## NO MAN'S LAND <sup>15</sup>

OR THE KING IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE QUEENS

**Juliette Peers**

## WE MUST RISK UNLEARNING <sup>27</sup>

1970–PRESENT

**Sally Quin**

## PLATES <sup>35</sup>

## LIST OF WORKS <sup>117</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS <sup>123</sup>



# REFOCUS

## THE CRUTHERS COLLECTION OF WOMEN'S ART

Ted Snell

The Cruthers family have always been passionate about collecting art. In the first few years of their growing addiction, Sir James and Lady Sheila Cruthers, together with their son John, bought widely across a number of periods and styles, but all collections need a focus and Sheila's eye for picking the work of women artists provided the lens through which future decisions were made. Any visit to a group exhibition or gallery would end with Sheila identifying her favourites, always by women. When this ability was tested by the curator of the Brooklyn Museum, who took her on a tour of his gallery and asked her to identify which works were painted by women, he had to admit that her empathy and intuitive understanding for the work of women artists was remarkable. Though won over, he remained querulous.

Their collection soon began to build a focus on women artists, although as Jim, in his most economic rationalist tone explained, "...they were also relatively inexpensive because the market hadn't picked up on them yet"<sup>1</sup>.

More importantly, as the collection began to grow the works they bought revealed the varied forms of practice that grew from the special circumstances of women working in the arts: not only the worlds they had to build for themselves to find the time and space to make art, but the domestic environments from which many drew inspiration. This process of refocusing the lens on Australian art revealed many artists who had previously flown under the radar, and soon the Cruthers Collection became well known across the country. For the next three decades the family laboured together to introduce into the pantheon of recognised artists more and then even more women whose work had previously been relegated to the second division, or worse, to the ranks of the amateur.

Two chance encounters provided an added impetus for the development of the collection. Sheila met a woman in Tasmania who suggested she look out for the work of a Western Australian painter named Kate O'Connor, and another acquaintance recommended Elise Blumann as someone whose work might interest her. The first two works she found were self portraits, a wonderful image of Kate O'Connor with her cloche pulled down over her head [page 2] and a sprightly portrait of a young Elise Blumann in a perky brimmed hat. These purchases provided another refocusing of their collecting strategy; not only work by women artists but their self portraits as well. That sequence of events was the catalyst for building an important collection of self portraits and paintings by Grace Cossington Smith, Margaret Preston, Grace Crowley, Cristina Asquith Baker, Freda Robertshaw, Julie Dowling, Nora Heysen and so many more.

A vital function of this reappraisal was to share the collection with others, because as Sheila explained "paintings are for everyone"<sup>2</sup>. The first major exhibition that brought

1 Interview with Sir James and Lady Cruthers with the author, 2001.

2 Lady Cruthers also served as a member of the Curtin University Art Advisory Committee and was on the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital Art Committee, where a large number of works from their collection were on display.



the collection to national and international attention was held at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA) in 1995<sup>3</sup>. *In the Company of Women* not only documented the family's activities in collecting the work of women artists but as John Cruthers wrote in the accompanying publication, "the collection has allowed us to contribute actively to the development of contemporary art and the debates around it, which constitute a significant element in the cultural life of the community"<sup>4</sup>.

To continue this initiative the family generously donated their collection to The University of Western Australia in 2007, to "promote Australian women's art and women artists by way of exhibition, research, teaching and publication, and through providing funds to achieve these goals"<sup>5</sup>. As a consequence the University now has a unique collection that provides a rich resource for investigation and interpretation.

Housed within the University the collection has become a catalyst for research. Staff, students and visiting scholars can engage with it and use it as a point of access to the work of very significant Australian artists. Located within UWA Museums it is not only in the custodial care of professional staff but the activity of protection and maintenance, of documentation and preparation for exhibition, has a wider educational remit. Student internships and practical curatorial projects enable the University to fulfil its special mission as both a contributor to the cultural life of the community and a centre of learning and training.

This publication and the exhibition that accompanies it are evidence of the collection's impact in generating scholarship that recalibrates our knowledge of Australian art. By refocusing our attention on the work of so many outstanding artists whose practice offers new insights into our understanding of the social and cultural experience of half the population, it is indeed an exceptional contribution to our cultural heritage and to our conception of what it means to be Australian.

Professor Ted Snell AM CitWA  
Director, Cultural Precinct  
The University of Western Australia  
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3 *In the Company of Women*, was part of the *National Women's Art Exhibition*, a simultaneous program of exhibitions in over 147 galleries, museums and libraries that refocused the art and broader community's interest in the work of women artists.

4 *In the Company of Women – 100 years of Australian women's art from the Cruthers Collection*, PICA Press, 1995.

5 Deed of Gift between the Cruthers family and The University of Western Australia 2007.

