



Image left: Julie Dowling, *Melbin*, 1999, acrylic, red ochre and plastic on canvas, 122 x 100cm
 Courtesy of the artist and VISOCOPY

LOOK. LOOK AGAIN
CAMPUS PARTNER

OUTSKIRTS

Outskirts: feminisms along the edge is a feminist cultural studies journal produced through the discipline of Gender Studies at UWA. Published twice yearly, the journal presents new and challenging critical material from a range of disciplinary perspectives and feminist topics, to discuss and contest contemporary and historical issues involving women and feminisms. An initiative of postgraduate students at UWA, *Outskirts* began as a printed magazine in 1996 before going online in 1998 under the editorship of Delys Bird and then Alison Bartlett since 2006. *Outskirts* will be publishing selected papers from the symposium *Are we there yet?* in 2013.

GENDER STUDIES

Gender Studies is an interdisciplinary area that examines the history and politics of gender relations. Academic staff teach units about the history of ideas of gender, intersections with race, class and sexuality, and the operations of social power. They are also engaged in a range of scholarly research activities around the history and politics of gender relations, sexualities, cinema, maternity, witchcraft, masculinities, activism, intersections of race, class and gender, feminist theory and the body. While some graduates have gone on to specialise in gender-related areas such as equity and diversity, policy development, social justice and workplace relations, most apply their skills in the broader fields of communications, education, public service, research occupations and professional practice. Gender Studies staff are participating in the public programs and symposium associated with this exhibition.

LOOK. LOOK AGAIN

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Felicity Johnston, Curator, Cruthers Collection of Women's Art.



Above: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Untitled [Self portrait of Prudencia]*, 2009
 felt, glass beads, sequins, cotton, 88 x 40 cm
 Courtesy of the artist

Cover: Nora Heysen, *Gladioli*, 1933, oil on canvas, 63 x 48.5 cm
 Courtesy of the artist's estate

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Lawrence Wilson
 Art Gallery



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CRUTHERS COLLECTION
 OF WOMEN'S ART

20 OCTOBER -
 15 DECEMBER 2012

Nora Heysen, 1933



Freda Roberts, *Standing Nude [self-portrait]*, 1944, oil on board, 110.6 x 71 cm
 Courtesy of the artist's estate

LOOK. LOOK AGAIN: Cruthers Collection of Women's Art

The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art had its origin in my family's diverse collection of Australian art. My parents, Jim and Sheila Cruthers, and I began collecting in 1974. Each of us had different interests that were reflected in purchasing from the outset. My father preferred mid 20th century modern art by artists like Sali Herman, Lloyd Rees and Guy Grey-Smith, while I was interested in contemporary art and my mother collected women's self-portraits.

When asked why paintings by women, Sheila would always reply, "Because I was drawn to them". Family photos of Sheila in the late 1940s suggest another possible reason. The stylishly dressed and confident legal secretary they depict was a modern woman who had achieved something against the odds, having been forced by family need to leave school in 1939, aged 14. No doubt she felt a kinship with the young women depicted in their self-portraits. Like Sheila they were stylish and confident of their ability and vocation, but well aware of the struggles required to achieve and maintain their position.

Very quickly Sheila extended her collecting area from self-portraits to other examples of the artists' works. She called this theme "the artist and her work", and from that point the women's collection was displayed in this way. She also began buying contemporary art by younger artists such as Miriam Stannage and Mary Moore. Sheila's personal relationships with young artists were an important part of the collecting process. Besides buying art, she often commissioned artworks, particularly self-portraits.

The women's collection continued to grow within the broader family collection until 1995. In that year we were invited to exhibit our women's art at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts as part of a nation-wide survey called the *National Women's Art Exhibition*. The resulting exhibition, *In the Company of Women*, was a revelation. The focus on self-portraits and a small set of themes gave the collection unity and effectively linked disparate women's art across more than a century. Public responses were overwhelmingly positive and we realised the collection was unique and potentially of national significance. From 1995 we focused exclusively on women's art. The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art was born.

In 2002 we decided the Collection was worth keeping intact. After considering a range of possibilities for a home for the collection, we decided on The University of Western Australia and a deed of gift was signed in June 2007. We also started a small family foundation to support the Collection at the University and to fund a range of research and scholarship activities related to women's art.

LOOK. LOOK AGAIN is the first major exhibition of the Collection since the gift, and aims to launch the Collection nationally. It is accompanied by the symposium *Are We There Yet?* and *Into the Light*, a book on the Collection published by UWA Publishing.

The exhibition aims to showcase the range of the Collection across 125 years. It mixes iconic works by household names with intriguing works by little known artists to provide an alternative frame of reference for engaging with Australian history and culture. Presented chronologically, the exhibition represents three periods, 1890 - 1970, 1970 - 2000, and 2000 to the present, across the three galleries.

AME Bale, *Self-portrait*, c1906, oil on board, 48 x 34.8 cm



Roseline Gascoigne, *Parrot lady*, c1974, assemblage, 51 x 44 x 24 cm
Courtesy of Roslyn Oxley 9 Gallery and VISCOPIY



Dorothy Braund, *Barbara Brash*, 1967
oil on composite board, 61.5 x 122 cm
Courtesy of the artist



The first section could be called the modernist enterprise; modernism being a major interest of the Collection. In the first gallery the exhibition begins with a small selection of works from the pre-modern period, 1890 - 1920. Focused purchasing since 2006 has built this area, adding works by early plein air landscape painters such as Mabel Hookey and Isabel McWhannell, in addition to still-lives and portraits. There are also works by Marie Tuck, Maud Sherwood (a New Zealand-born artist who arrived in Sydney in 1913) and Janet Cumbrae Stewart that represent the experience of Australian artists who travelled overseas to study and paint.

In *Self-portrait*, c1907, AME Bale takes on mid-1890s portraiture by Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts. Painted on a wooden panel, the work has a painterly vigour and disregard for pictorial finish, typical of Australian impressionism. It also conveys a deliberate message. The artist is dressed formally in a full-length black dress with collar and cuffs, hair up. But she purposefully grasps her palette in one hand and just out of frame her brush in the other. She is a lady *and* an artist. Bale's direct gaze presents an implicit challenge to the (presumably) male viewer comparable to Freda Robertshaw in her *Standing nude [self-portrait]* 1944. This directness continued in later life, as indicated by modernist Adrian Lawlor, who "paid tribute to her intellectual astuteness, saying that Australian art politics in the 1930s would be livelier were there more 'Miss Bales in the opposite trench'".

Born in 1887, Janet Cumbrae Stewart spent seventeen years overseas. Her work was favourably received by critics and collectors, including Queen Mary. Although best known for her pastel studies of young women, often nude, she also produced urban views whose austere geometry revealed an interest in modernism. *View from a window, London* 1926 is an essay in flatness and depth, built around the arresting contrast between the building jutting in on the extreme left and the receding street immediately next to it. Employing a wintry palette with flecks of warmer colours, it crackles with energy and anticipation.

Not all young artists had the opportunity to travel overseas. A dutiful daughter, Clarice Beckett remained at home to care for her ill parents. She painted on the kitchen table and from the local bayside landscape in the hours she could cadge at the start and end of each day. *Portrait study Hilda* 1918 is one of only two known extant portraits. Hilda was the artist's older sister who, after Clarice's premature death from pneumonia in 1935, preserved her works until she believed the time was right for them to be reconsidered, in 1970.

Australian modernism is characterised by still-life painting. As Margaret Preston famously said, "Why there are so many tables of still-life in modern paintings is because they are really laboratory tables on which aesthetic problems can be solved". Within the Cruthers Collection a group of works, ranging from Bessie Davidson and Kate O'Connor, through Nora Heysen to Sybil Craig, Alison Rehfish, Helen Stewart, Eveline Syme, Margaret Preston and Grace Crowley, reveal the gradual progression of the genre towards stylisation and abstraction.

Nora Heysen's *Gladioli* 1933 was painted when the artist was 22. It is a remarkable example of technique in the service of close observation to produce a cool but exquisite still-life, almost a moment of frozen time. It has been suggested that Heysen's early work was painted under the influence of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement current in Germany in the 1920s. Another artist whose work shows this influence is Freda Robertshaw. Apprenticed to Sydney artist and mural painter Charles Meere, she assisted in his iconic work *Australian beach pattern*. Later, Robertshaw painted her own version of this work. She painted *Standing nude [self-portrait]* as part of her entry for the 1944 New South Wales Travelling Art Scholarship. Entrants were required to submit a nude, a still life and a genre painting. Unable to afford a model, Robertshaw painted herself nude in what must have been a provocative, even confronting, act. The scholarship was won by Anne Weinhold.



Fiona Foley, *Native Blood*, 1994,
type C photographs (set of 3), 50 x 41cm
Courtesy the artist and
Niagara Galleries, Melbourne

The art of Joy Hester is notable for its consistent focus on the inner life of women. *Girl in corner*, 1957, is from a late series exploring the figure of 'the girl'.

Her location in an enclosed room recalls earlier images of girls and women from the forties, and again in *Figure with doll*, set in claustrophobic spaces, often with small doors or indications of prison bars. In this later work however, there is not so much the tension of entrapment as a pervasive mood of quiet, contemplative resignation. Like other works from this period, she appears to take refuge from the outside world of human activity, although now without the props of animals or books but rather in a world of her dreams.¹

Working in Melbourne at the same time as Hester, Dorothy Braund also produced many images of women. Her portrait of Barbara Brash was painted in 1967 for the Portia Geach Memorial Award, a prize for women's portraiture.

It was done in her Malvern studio from drawings and long familiarity with her subject, whose life and career have been closely linked with her own. Brash is presented in a reclining, almost feline pose, resting on her elbows with paw-like hands and feet tucked away, against a neutral background. The tension between the masses of the upper and lower body is accentuated by the opposition of black and white.²

The modernist period ends with the advent of hard-edge abstraction around 1970. The second part of the exhibition begins with the arrival in the 1970s of the women's movement and second wave feminism, another important focus for the Collection. Rosalie Gascoigne's art flourished in the liberal atmosphere of 1970s feminism. *Parrot lady*, c1974, is an example of the box constructions Gascoigne developed out of her interest in sculpture made using materials scavenged from the landscape. She comments: "This was a wonderful head I found under the station at Captains Flat. That woman had been through something: she was very fraught, her hair was grey. She was lovely. That was an important piece to me, the Parrot Lady".³

Lived experience is characteristic of many post-1970 works in the Collection. Mary Moore's *First face*, 2002, explores the theory that small babies learn to recognise faces through observing their mother's torso, their first face. But the first face in this case is adorned with cabbage leaves, used to relieve mastitis.

The female body is also the subject of Fiona Foley's *Native blood*, 1996. In this series Foley restages historical images of Batjala women taken by 'ethnographic' photographers in the late-nineteenth century, but circulated as exotic soft-core pornography. By using herself as the subject Foley reverses the male gaze and challenges the viewer to regard her in the traditional sex object role.

Another work which focuses on the female body is Julie Dowling's iconic painting *Melbin*, 2000. Melbin was the artist's great-great-grandmother, a Badimia woman who lived tribally until she was married to a white man, who took her to England and displayed her as a carnival curiosity. As Sally Quin writes:

There is an overwhelming condition of powerless-ness expressed through the constriction of Melbin's body in nineteenth-century costume. She is encased, covered from the neck down and particular attention is given to the voluminous and dynamic nature of her dress, with its exaggerated hoop skirt and billowing sleeves. Her hands are posed formally and her left arm bears a tag indicating her name and revealing her subjugation.... Melbin is simultaneously without voice but powerfully bearing witness to her history.⁴

The exhibition's final section features works acquired since the decision to gift the Collection to UWA. With adequate display space available, they are not constrained by the same practical considerations as earlier purchases, which had to exist within the domestic confines of the Cruthers family home. Michelle Nikou's *No vacancy*, 2010, for example is a sculpture made using a 1960s Parker dining room table, of the kind the artist grew up with. Nikou has added nine cast ceramic vessels to the table top, each carrying a neon letter to spell out the phrase 'no vacancy', a rueful reflection on the fact that after having children she had very little time left in her life for making art.

The local environment is also the subject of Rima Zabaneh's work. As a recent migrant from Jordan to Perth, Zabaneh studied art at the same time as she tried to fit in to her new environment. *Street directory*, 2002, is the end result of a two-year project in which the artist painstakingly cut out the areas between every street on every page in the entire Perth street directory. The resulting object functions as a relic of a ritual or performance the artist carried out daily to achieve a sense of belonging.

The Collection's commitment to self-portraiture remains strong. A more recent commission is Sangeeta Sandrasegar's *Self-portrait of Prudence* 2008. Quin comments:

Sandrasegar presents herself in the allegorical guise of Prudence, the classical virtue associated with wisdom and good judgment, gazing into a mirror with a snake entwined around her arm. The artist connects the process of self-portraiture to the necessary attainment of self-knowledge, a characteristic embodied in the figure of Prudence. Perhaps fittingly then the portrait does not rely on the physical likeness of the artist (she is presented as a dark silhouette) but is rather associated with her broader personal and intellectual interests.⁵

LOOK. LOOK AGAIN offers a journey through Australian art from an alternative perspective, one, which will hopefully educate, inspire and delight audiences. It also provides a fascinating snapshot of the lives and experiences of Australian women over more than a century, and reveals the extent to which women's concerns as artists have remained consistent over that time. It includes some artists who may be unfamiliar to viewers, which is in keeping with two of the Collection's primary aims - to bring neglected or overlooked artists back into the light, and to showcase the work of newer and younger artists. Finally, the exhibition celebrates women's creativity, which has often been achieved against significant odds.

John Cruthers
October 2012

1. Juliette Peers in *Into the Light: the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art*, UWA Publishing, Perth, 2012, p. 26
2. Margaret Preston, *Aphorism 46*, 1929
3. Deborah Hart, *Joy Hester and Friends*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2001, pp. 114-115
4. Felicity St John Moore, *Classical modernism: the George Bell circle*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1992, p. 104
5. Vici MacDonald, *Rosalie Gascoigne*, Regaro, Paddington, 1998, p. 25
6. Sally Quin, *Into the Light: the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art*, UWA Publishing, Perth, 2012, p. 30
7. Quin, p. 32

Michelle Nikou, *No vacancy*, 2010, mixed media, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

