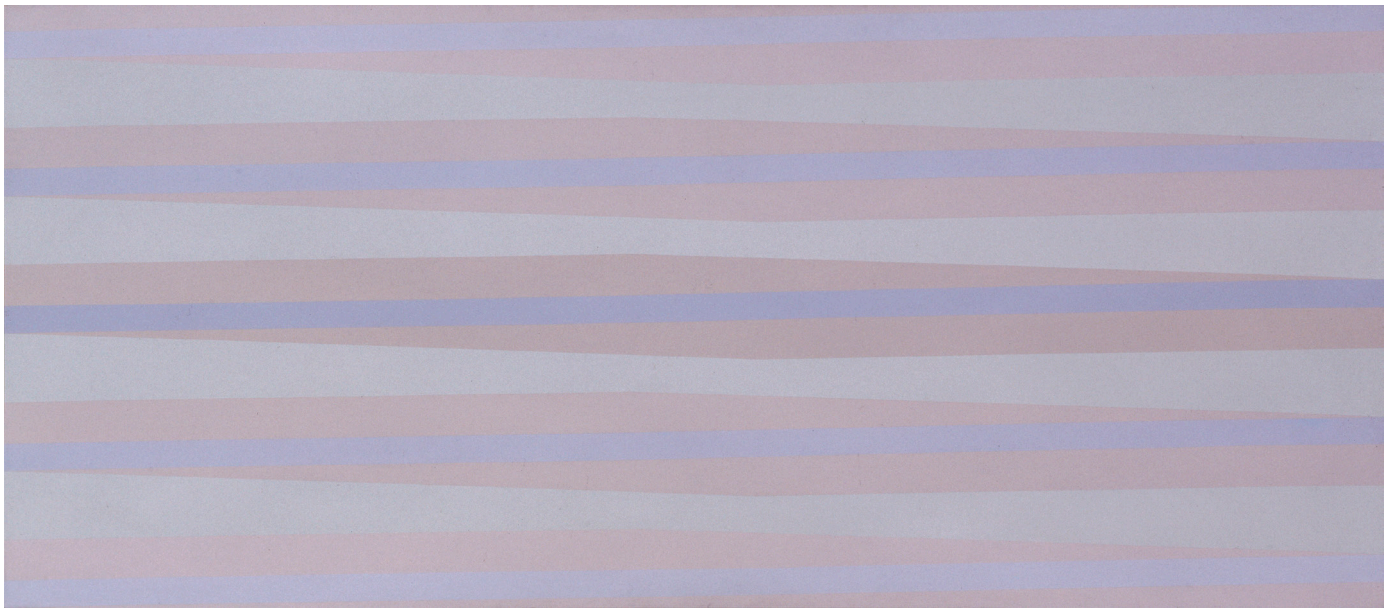


Women, *The Field* and Colour Field Painting

To celebrate its launch, the Sheila Foundation has secured three important colour field paintings made by Australian women artists in the late 1960s.



Virginia Coventry, *Solid Blue Silence*, 1969, acrylic on cotton duck, in original aluminum frame, 106.5 x 244.0cm. Courtesy the artist and Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.



Janet Dawson, *Over the Rainbow*, 1968, acrylic on board, 93.5 x 214.0cm. Courtesy the artist and Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.

The Field was the opening exhibition for the new National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) building on St Kilda Road, Melbourne, in 1968. It marked the first comprehensive look at colour field painting and abstract sculpture in Australia. Influenced by American geometric abstraction popular at the time, *The Field* included hard edge, colour, and flat abstraction by 40 artists. Public and critical reception of the exhibition was contentious. Rather than focussing on the past achievements of Australian artists, the exhibition positioned the NGV as dedicated to avant-garde art and emerging artists. *The Field* helped to launch the careers of many of the artists exhibited, 18 of whom were under the age of 30.

Fifty years later, the exhibition was restaged as *The Field Revisited*, which mirrored the precise content and curation of the original exhibition. Restaging *The Field* in a contemporary setting illuminated one glaring issue: a lack of women artists. Only three out of the 40 artists in the exhibition were women. These low numbers were not indicative of the lack of practicing women artists innovating in this area, but rather of the failure of Australian art institutions and curators to represent them. The Sheila Foundation's securing of three works—one each by Lesley Dumbrell, Virginia Coventry and Janet Dawson—is a way to counterbalance the under-representation of women artists in the original exhibition and to reinsert important figures into the narrative of Australian art history. While Dawson was one of the three women included in *The Field*, Dumbrell and Coventry were also significant artists working in the same style yet were omitted from this defining exhibition.

Lesley Dumbrell (b 1941) has an ongoing art practice based in geometric abstraction, with works exploring optical illusions, grid systems, colour and light. Despite now being recognised as a leading figure in Australian abstraction, she was not included in *The Field*. Dumbrell has long been an active exponent of women's art. In 1975 she co-founded the Women's Art Register, a resource for archiving women's art practices, and from 1979 to 1980, she was a member of the feminist arts journal *Lip* (1976–84). Her

artworks have been exhibited internationally and are held by most major Australian institutions. *Promontories* 1968 was included in her first solo exhibition in 1969.

Virginia Coventry (b 1941) studied fine art at RMIT in Melbourne and later at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London. Through a body of work that ranges from painting and drawing to photography, she explores the connection between space, light and colour. Coventry was overseas during the time in which *The Field* was organised, so despite her eligibility for the exhibition she was not included. *Solid Blue Silence* 1969 displays a comparable aesthetic and use of flat spaces and colours to many works in *The Field*.

Janet Dawson (b 1935) is renowned for both her abstract and figurative works. After graduating from the NGV School in 1956, Dawson studied and worked in London, Italy and France. She returned to Melbourne in 1961 and worked at Gallery A, and later ran the Gallery A print shop in Sydney. In 1973 Dawson won the Archibald Portrait Prize and she has been widely exhibited across the country. *Over the Rainbow* was first exhibited in 1968 in a solo show at Gallery A, Sydney. Working in a large, well-lit studio space, Dawson was inspired to explore the properties of composition board and acrylic paint to create one of her first flat-surface, brightly coloured abstract paintings. In the same year, two paintings by Dawson—*Wall II* 1968 and *Rollscape* 2 1968—were included in *The Field*.

For more information on how to support acquisitions for the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, please contact:

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Research and text: Eliza Burton
Front, Lesley Dumbrell, *Promontories*, 1968, liquitex on canvas, 213.5 x 213.5cm.
Courtesy the artist and Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.