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# The Sheila Foundation – Painting Women back into Australian Art History

*VAULT* spoke to Sheila Foundation Chair John Cruthers and Board Director Angela Goddard – also Director of Griffith University Art Museum, Brisbane – about the ambitions of Sheila and the hard work still to be done.

WRITTEN *by* ALISON KUBLER



The Australian slang term ‘sheila’, a derogatory term for a woman, is a relic of another, more sexist time. But, like other contested words, it has been reclaimed and reappropriated – in this case, for the name of the newly formed Sheila Foundation, which seeks to address the historical and continuing gender bias against women in Australian art. Sheila also takes its name from Sheila Cruthers, whose women artists’ work forms the basis of this new initiative. The Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art, housed at the University of Western Australia, comprises over 700 works, and is Australia’s largest standalone collection of women’s art. In 2007 Lady Sheila and her family set up a private foundation to support the Collection, which transitioned in 2017 to become the Sheila Foundation Ltd, a public foundation. Foundation Chair John Cruthers and Board Director Angela Goddard shared their vision with *VAULT*.

## John, can you tell us how the Sheila started?

**JOHN CRUTHERS** From the start of her collecting in 1974, my mother Sheila supported women artists one at a time. She met young artists, discussed their practice, sometimes opened their exhibitions and was often the first substantial collector to purchase their artworks. And she sought out neglected or lost women artists, seeking to recover their works and put them back into our art history through her own very idiosyncratic but cherished collection. The Sheila Foundation offers us the opportunity to support all of Australia’s contemporary women artists. We will also set up a national acquisition fund for early-stage artists modelled on Sheila’s own

collecting. Sheila is coming at exactly the right time to take advantage of this groundswell and deliver programs that address the issues of gender imbalance in contemporary visual arts, and paint many neglected and lost women artists back into our art history.

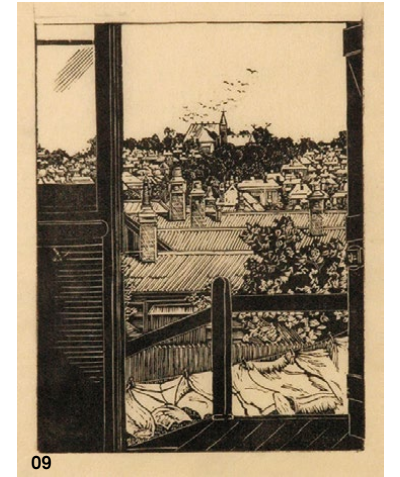
## What are the long-term goals for Sheila?

**jc** We believe that, given enough support, Sheila can increase public awareness of the existing gender imbalance in visual art and get a majority of people behind our programs and campaigns. We hope that the playing field facing contemporary women artists will be much closer to level in a decade, and that increasing numbers of artworks by women artists will be finding their way into our art museums and art history textbooks.

## Angela, you have worked in museums and galleries for many years. What do you see as the main impediments to correcting the gender imbalance in institutions?

**ANGELA GODDARD** Interestingly, because of the way that our art history is taught and displayed, those who visit art galleries more frequently have been found to be the most biased – because of what they see on those walls. Economists have conducted experiments where they established that participants are unable to accurately guess the gender of the artist by looking at a painting. However, artworks perceived to be painted by women were rated lower by participants who were male, affluent and who visit art galleries. In another experiment, the researchers showed 2000 people a painting with either a male or a female artist’s name randomly assigned and asked





them to rate the painting. Wealthy individuals who visit art galleries frequently gave the painting a lower rating when it was associated with a female name.

### How do we change this?

**AG** Our cultural institutions are a reflection of our society; we look to them for context and for inspiration. What are we saying to children, school groups, to everyone, when we give more prominence to male artists over female, in our institutions, in the market, and in media? Through Sheila, we want to overturn systemic bias and improve gender balance in all sectors so that women artists have equal opportunities to male artists to fulfil their talents and potential.

**Sheila aims to achieve an endowment fund of \$2 million, building on the Cruthers family's initial donation of \$600,000 to support three main program streams. Can you tell *VAULT* about these?**

**AG** There are three specific projects that most of our activities fall under. *Going Global – Taking the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art to the World* will initially make The Cruthers Collection the first public collection in WA online – and later will support touring exhibitions and scholarship. *Into the Light – Recovering Australia's lost women's artists 1870–1960* is about doing the detective work to bring to our attention artists who have been overlooked. This is an empirical research project that systematically gathers data on professional women artists working in every state and territory who may have slipped from view, and makes it available online. The third stream

**01 SUSAN NORRIE**  
*Model One/Chardin Study II (From Room For Error)*, 1993  
oil on plywood  
90 x 90 cm

**02 GRACE COSSINGTON SMITH**  
*Dawn Landing*, 1944  
oil on pulpboard  
69.5 x 54.3 cm

**03 JOYCE WINSLEY**  
*Granny Bass*, 1999  
Guildford grass stitched and moulded  
33 x 18 x 17 cm

**04 JULIE DOWLING**  
*Wudjula Yorgah (White Woman)*, 2005  
acrylic and red ochre on canvas  
120 x 100 cm

**05 RUBY BRILLIANT**  
*A cup of tea, a Bex and a good lie down*, 1995  
knitted wooden wall hanging  
145 x 117 cm

**06 MIRIAM STANNAGE**  
*Still Life*, 1974  
acrylic and objects on canvas  
147.3 x 147.3 cm

**07 NARELLE JUBELIN**  
*Self portrait*, 1990  
petit point embroidery in tramp art frame  
13 x 18 cm

**08 RIMA ZABANEH**  
*Street Directory*, 2005  
Street directory with cut-out pages  
30 x 23 x 3 cm

**09 EDITH TRETHOWAN**  
*View From Back Door*, 1928–29  
wood engraving  
13.5 x 10.2 cm

**10 ANN NEWMARCH**  
*Self portrait - 1/60th of a second*, 1981

**11 ELSIE LUBAMORE ROUGHSEY**  
*Five bush dolls*, 1972

**12 DOROTHY BRAUND**  
*The dinner party*, 1966  
oil on board  
54.5 x 90.1 cm

**13 JUDY WATSON**  
*fossil*, 1992–93  
mixed media,  
220 x 185 cm

is *Contemporary Women*. Sheila funds The Countess Report ([thecountessreport.com.au](http://thecountessreport.com.au)), which is a deep dive into gender parity in the visual arts industry that informs the organisation's goals. The foundation will seek to remedy this in three key ways: by purchasing and commissioning works; by providing scholarships for female art historians and curators; and by hosting an annual symposium on female Australian art. We feel that in a relatively short period of time, we can improve gender balance in the visual art sector. We would love to welcome more people as 'Sheila's sheilas'. **V**

*The Artist and Her Work* drawn from The Cruthers Collection of Women's Art is on at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth until December 7, 2019.

Donations to Sheila can be made at [sheila.org.au](http://sheila.org.au)  
[lwgallery.uwa.edu.au](http://lwgallery.uwa.edu.au)