

RETICULATION

A MULTI-AUTHORED SURVEY OF THE USU ART COLLECTION

Curated by Esther Rolfe & Julian Woods
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VERGE GALLERY



PROVIDED BY
UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY UNION

ARTISTS

Susan Andrews

Robert Campbell Jnr

Norman Carter

George Gittoes

Bill Henson

Craig Judd

Vergil Lo Schiavo

Terry Ngamandarra

Trent Parke

Sir Arthur Streeton

Imants Tillers

Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri

Robin White



SELECTORS

Euan Macleod

Alistair Cowie

Dr Ann Stephen

Suzanne Archer

Bethany Cannan

Nick Vickers

Dr Greg Shapley

Siân McIntyre

Esther Rolfe & Julian Woods

Anna McMahon

Bartholomew Oswald

Hannah Kothe

Anne Ferran



CATALOGUE ESSAY



RETICULATION

A MULTI-AUTHORED SURVEY OF THE USU ART COLLECTION

In 1913 the University of Sydney Union began acquiring art with the view to simultaneously enrich the student experience and develop a valuable asset for the Union. Since its foundation in 1926 the USU Art Collection has evolved to become an impressive and intriguing collection that is characterised by an eclectic range of styles and subject matter. Throughout its history the USU Art Collection has been shaped by numerous groups, key individuals, and an ever-changing student body, all of whom have brought with them diverse perspectives on how the Collection should be used, and what trajectory its development should follow. Despite the shifting guidelines and ideologies that have shaped the USU Art Collection throughout its history, it has continued to maintain a close connection to the student body, and to the growing community of individuals that has developed around it.



From the 1970s through to 2005 the USU Art Collection's profile in the Sydney and Australian art scene grew considerably as the Collection expanded both in regards to the number and range of works. The 1990s was perhaps the most exciting and prolific era in the Collection's history. During this time the USU established a permanent art gallery, the Sir Herman Black Gallery and Sculpture Terrace. The Art Collection Committee was also formed to oversee and promote the development of the Collection. The curator of the USU Art Collection and director of the Sir Herman Black Gallery at this time was Nick Vickers. Under his guidance the Art Collection Committee began to form collection policies that have greatly shaped the Collection by successfully creating a sense of cohesion and purpose that had until that point been lacking.

The four main collection principles established were to:

- Build on the existing Collection
- Collect works by Indigenous Australian artists
- Collect works of a political nature
- Support emerging artists



The 2014 Annual USU Art Collection exhibition 'Reticulation: A multi-authored survey of the USU Art Collection', reflects both the remarkable breadth of artistic style represented in the Collection and its continued connection to the student body and the broader USU community. Each work has been selected by an individual who is either presently involved with the Collection, or has been so in the past.

The diversity in background and artistic taste of the selectors has culminated in an exhibition of works that exemplifies the broad scope and eclectic nature of the USU Art Collection.

'Reticulation', celebrates the evolution of the USU Art Collection, as well as the expanding community of individuals that guide and foster the continuing growth and development of this remarkable collection.

Esther Rolfe & Julian Woods

SELECTORS' STATEMENTS



Susan Andrews
'Untitled', 2000

The main reasons for choosing Susan Andrew's painting 'Untitled', are personal. This however doesn't detract from the fact I see it as a beautifully resolved work and an important part of the USU Art Collection.

I have shared 2 studios with Susan over the years including the time when this work was painted. I remember watching these works ever so slowly develop as subsequent layers were washed on. The contrast to my work was and is huge; thick, dark and vigorous compared to Susan's soft, pale and incredibly subtle works of this period. Slowly and naturally developing like some form of growth or something seen only through a microscope. While the contrasts in our painting are obvious there are shared interests in the attempt to transform paint into something alive. Exploring both the surface and what lies beneath it.

I'm sure Susan shares my pleasure in being included in this collection which is special in its focus on supporting developing artists. It's great to see an interest taken in the Collection's rebirth.

Euan Macleod

Euan Macleod is an artist represented in the USU Art Collection. His work 'Bathurst (light right corner)', 1992, is featured in 'Reticulation'.



Robert Campbell Jnr
'Charlie Perkins', 1986

When I was a student I met Charles Perkins in the Main Quad. It was night-time and as I was standing in the transept gazing up at the stars I became aware of someone next to me – also gawking open-mouthed at the sky.

"Not bad, is it?" He asked.

"No," I replied. "Not bad at all!"

He turned and threw me a wink.

We laughed, he patted me on the shoulder and we went our separate ways.

Astronomy can do terrible things to your ego! Tiny, insignificant humans staring at something impossibly huge billions of miles away. Still we all do it because we need to feel that no matter how insignificant we are or how far away the stars may be we're somehow connected – part of the same thing or plan or scheme.

But stargazing with Charlie made me feel a million feet tall. Sure, he never knew my name. And I have no idea if he knew that I recognised him. We were strangers and I passed out of his life only moments after I fluked my way into it. But for a moment we shared the universe and that surely made us mates for ever.

Alistair Cowie

Alistair Cowie is the Sales and Marketing Director of the USU.



Norman Carter

'Sketch for lost mural for reading room', c.1912

A century ago male students could step into an Edwardian vision of the nation in their grand new Union Reading Room. If they gazed beyond the gums, they could follow the course of a river flowing into the harbor, and daydream about their place in building a future. Blue shadows of late afternoon light are punctuated by the elongated art nouveau trunks that fuse foreground to distant bands of water, mountains and sky. The sun would set forever on such utopian pastoral visions with the Great War.

Today only these two watercolours survive from an eight panel panoramic mural commissioned by the Union for the Reading Room in new Holme Building.

Dr Ann Stephen

Dr Ann Stephen is the Senior Curator of the University Art Gallery and Art Collection.



George Gittoes

'The Legless Bike', 1993

When I was shown a list of the Union Collection it was the name George Gittoes that instantly engaged me. Gittoes is represented in the Collection by a number of drawings and photographs.

My memory of his pencil drawings with their column of text down the side of each image which documents the accompanying story has always amazed me how both text and image integrate visually. Gittoes' drawings are confronting and without compromise. They are not concerned with beauty, the decorative or pleasing. They appear disturbingly honest and compassionate, recording his emotive response to people in war zones. The power of the drawings is in the touch of the artist's hand and the knowledge that they were drawn under such devastating circumstances.

I have chosen the drawing 'The Legless Bike', that seems at once confronting and reassuring. Here is the owner depicted with a sense of pride who through his innovative and creative abilities has built a bike that he could power and steer with his hands.

Suzanne Archer

Suzanne Archer is an artist represented in the USU Art Collection. Her work 'Study for execution', 1994, is featured in 'Reticulation'.



Bill Henson

'Untitled (Adam)', 1980-1982

'Adam', emerges from a collection of photographs Henson composed in Germany early in his career in the 1980s. From memory, 'Adam', is the only figure in the collection to be provided a Christian name. And not simply a Christian name, but the Christian name – the first name to be bestowed on man, and Adam the first representation of all humanity.

In this photograph, 'Adam', materialises as a youth on the cusp of adulthood. His figure is delineated by a luminous glow isolating him from his nebulous surroundings. Henson's use of soft focus imbues the subject with an ethereal quality. His discernible eye, near the centre of the frame, is fixed on the viewer. Henson modernises the classical image through the medium of photography and his subject's attire: the white collar of his shirt, the texture of his corduroy jacket and the delicate strands of hair caught in the light. Furthermore, 'Adam', manifests Henson's engagement with Renaissance art. Henson appropriates religious iconography (consider works by Michelangelo and Raphael) and the craftsmanship of the Baroque through his use of chiaroscuro (similar to Rubens and Caravaggio). This photograph provides an entry point to understanding Henson's later body of work.

Bethany Cannan

Bethany Cannan is a former USU Art Collection Officer.



Craig Judd
'The Diagnosis', 1993

Craig Judd was riding a left hand break in the surf that encapsulated the Sydney art scene in the early 1990s. Hard on the heels of the recession that saw the collapse of the Australian art market in the late 1980s, the leaden door of opportunity seemed to creak open to reveal the next generation of artists in the shared studios of the inner city suburbs of Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Chippendale. Judd's images were potent, raw and laden with a symbolism that nobody else was, at that time, daring to explore. His mix of an odd form of chaotic Hellenistic classicism seemed to bare witness to the decline of a contemporary neo-socialist punk movement. This resulted in a visual and political body of work that was set against a backdrop of a myriad of emblematic figures and references to the axis of Central Europe. The artist's choice of a central figure, prone on a hospital trolley, is deliberately placed to create confusion, scepticism and a sense of insecurity which is further compounded by the expressive reaction of the secondary figure in the composition.

My suggestion to the USU Board of that time was based on the fact that Craig Judd fitted two categories from the Collection curatorial policy; he was not particularly well known and was therefore emerging, he was working with heavily laden political imagery, but most of all he was introducing a carefully chosen lexicon of images and materials that creates a highly contemplative work that will intrigue future generations of the student community of the University of Sydney.

Nick Vickers

Nick Vickers is the former curator of the USU Art Collection.



Vergil Lo Schiavo
'Sketch for Dickens mural', c. 1945

Schiavo's sketch for the Charles Dickens mural is, of course, significant to the USU (the mural, itself, prominently displayed in the Holme Building). I chose the sketch though, for a very different reason. As an artwork removed from its context (a work that cannot, or at least should not exist separate from the mural) it is mysterious, or even slightly absurd. The negative space goes unexplained. It simply appears to be missing a piece although the composition makes perfect sense. This missing piece joins forces with the ocean of white surrounding the sketch to isolate it (in stark contrast to the mural itself which dominates its space). I see it almost as a work within a competing, minimalist work.

Dr Greg Shapley

Dr Greg Shapley is the former Verge Gallery Manager.



Terry Ngamandarra
'Waterlilies', c.1990

After flicking through a range of canvasses in the USU Art Collection storage room, I climbed up a ladder and carefully extracted a box on the very top of the storage shelves. Inside that box was Terry Ngamandarra's 'Waterlilies'. The organic fragility of the fine crosshatching on the surface of the bark is immediately engaging – the line work is bold yet subtle – layered – with lines meeting and missing, rhythmically connecting and dispersing across the surface.

I have worked in Papunya for short periods since 2007, so while the Central Desert painting style is immediately familiar, work from Arnhem Land is an exciting contrast to the styles and stories I have learnt to recognise. The difference between these two styles, and indeed, painting styles throughout Australia, never fails to remind me of incredibly diverse living histories, cultures, people and vast landscapes that enrich and nourish this ancient land.

Siân McIntyre

Siân McIntyre is the Verge Gallery Manager.



Trent Parke

'Untitled (from Dream Life series)', 2000

Trent Parke is a significant figure in the world of photography. He is the first and only Australian to become a full member of the Magnum Photos cooperative, and is internationally regarded as one of the most dynamic and innovative photographers of his generation. In his practice Parke moves beyond traditional documentary photography, creating poetic and dramatic images that capture beauty in the banal.

We were both immediately drawn to the strange beauty and pervading stillness of 'Untitled (from Dream Life series)'. The familiar street corner captured in the midst of a storm evokes something akin to déjà vu. Raindrops and footsteps frozen before us recall that frenzied moment of encountering a sudden, drenching downpour on the city streets and waiting to dash across the road. Captured in grainy black and white, the mysterious, faceless figure on the rainy street corner imbues the image with a distinct film noir aesthetic. 'Untitled (from Dream Life series)', is deceptively simplistic, appearing at first to be merely a candid photograph or chance snap. You quickly realise though that Parke has created an intriguing and arresting image that draws you into a scene that is both familiar and dreamlike.

Esther Rolfe & Julian Woods

Esther Rolfe & Julian Woods are the USU Art Collection Officers.



Sir Arthur Streeton
'Corfe Castle', 1909

I have chosen 'Corfe Castle', by Arthur Streeton, as my selected artwork from the University of Sydney Union Art Collection. I find this painting, and its accompanying frame to be an object of great beauty. I remember when I first saw the painting I greatly admired Streeton's ability to convey a sense of the dreary, weather beaten coastline of England - whilst also creating a sense of romance and action with the addition of striking, but reserved use of various tones of red, green and blue.

'Corfe Castle', was painted during Streeton's visit to England from 1898-1906. Although Streeton had considerable fame in Australia during this time, he was unable to achieve the same success abroad. It is fantastic that the USU was able to purchase this artwork and hence enrich the lives its students with a wonderful representation of Australian painting at the turn of the 19th Century.

Anna McMahon

Anna McMahon is a former USU Art Collection Officer.



Imants Tillers

'Yard 14 Glebe', c.1970

Imants Tillers' 'Yard 14', first grabbed my attention while I had to move artworks around in the small storage room the USU's Art Collection had at the time in the Fisher stacks. Big, heavy and somewhat awkward to move, however once unwrapped and in front of me they looked a lot like photographic test strips or photograms. Having studied photo media at SCA and spending a considerable amount of time in a dark room experimenting with photographic paper and light I felt instantly connected to the work and had many questions for Tillers. How did he create such large Triptychs? What did he use to get such a unique pattern? How long did he expose the paper?

I was fortunate to meet Tillers the same year I was a USU Art Collection Officer at a talk he gave for the University. Funnily enough Tillers thought we may have thrown them out or lost them. He said the Women's Union bought the work when he was in the early years of his studies at the architecture faculty. Considering the works Tillers is known for today I believe it is really special that the USU and University of Sydney has such a unique work as part of its cultural heritage. I only hope that someday soon it will be re-framed as currently it is a little warped and I find the colour a little distracting.

Bartholomew Oswald

Bartholomew Oswald is a former USU Art Collection Officer.



Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri **'Untitled', 1995**

Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri is a leading contemporary Central Desert artist painting with Papunya Tula Artists. Settled now in the community of Kiwirrkura, Tjapaltjarri is a skilled hunter and spear maker and gifted painter of gentle humour. He continues to tell stories through painting relating to traditional law, specifically the travels of Tingari men. Ancestral figures who transversed the landscape forming and shaping it as they travelled, Tingari men form a core part of secret sacred Tjukurpa (dreaming/law) for the Pintupi.

This early work, painted in October of 1995, is one such Tingari painting. Depicting the large swamp site of Tjuntulpul west of Kiwirrkura, the work shows the early development of a style for which the artist has since refined to dazzling effect. In ancestral times the Tingari men rested at Tjuntulpul before continuing their travels east and finally northeast towards the important salt lake site of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay). In more current works the artist has pared back his composition, refining the form to the simplest of elements: the curve painted line and connected strings of dots, creating parallel lines. The early development of his now highly successful composition can be seen in this work in the negative spaces between the joined concentric circles, the irregular, optically mesmerising spaces that curve and bend back on themselves.

Hannah Kothe

Hannah Kothe is a former USU Art Collection Officer.



Robin White

'Kam aki Iri (Let us go)', 1995

As an artist with a long history (both as student and staff) with Sydney University, it feels good to have work in the USU Collection. It was exciting for me to find two woodcuts there by Robin White, an artist I've long admired. A little research established that they are from a four-part series called 'Sainimele Goes Fishing', depicting Sainimele, a neighbour of White's on the island of Tarawa (she says, "a friend whom I admired for her intelligence, courage and audacity"), moving through the village on her way to go fishing.

Of the Collection's two prints, I chose 'Kam aki Iri' for the flowing beauty of the women's clothes, and for the presence in the corner of a small child reaching up to its mother. Most of my photograms are of women and children's clothing, often underclothes that were handed down through generations of the same family. (Like White, I know who those people were, though, unlike her, I did not know them personally).

As with all artworks, the transformation from reality to image allows new layers of meaning to emerge. The photogram process makes the effects of wear and tear in the bodice, changes wrought by time and circumstance, more visible than they are in the actual object. In the case of 'Kam aki Iri,' while its apparent subject is an everyday one, I know (my thanks to Robin for this information) that on a deeper level it is a work about change, a reflection on the mixed impact of new knowledge on traditional beliefs and patterns of behaviour.

Anne Ferran

Anne Ferran is an artist represented in the USU Art Collection. Her work 'Untitled (Bodice)', 1999, is featured in 'Reticulation'.