

QUARTERLY JOURNAL A\$17.50 (INCL. GST) US\$12

# art & australia

Quark Lewis

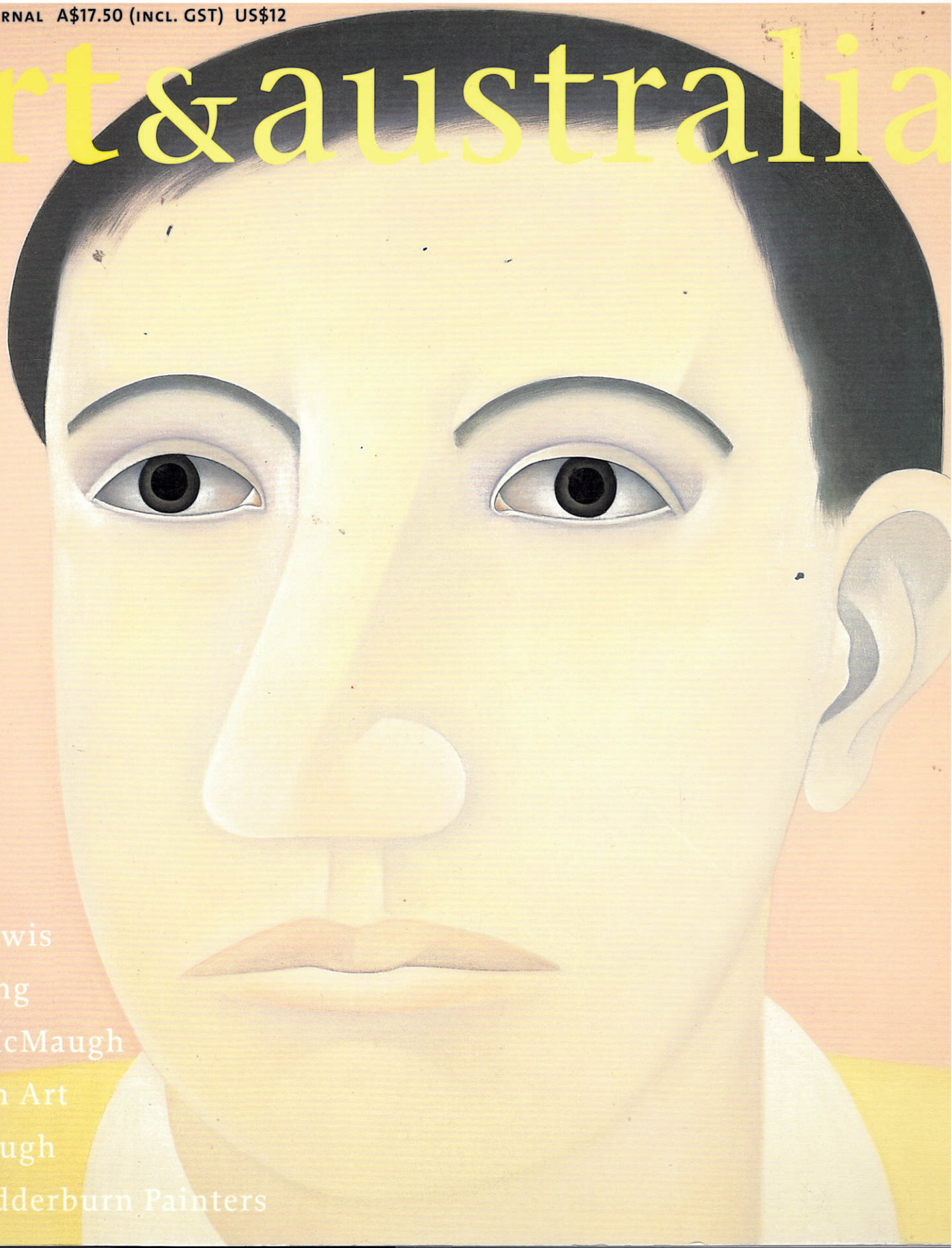
Juan Heng

Elison McMaugh

Colour in Art

Raig Gough

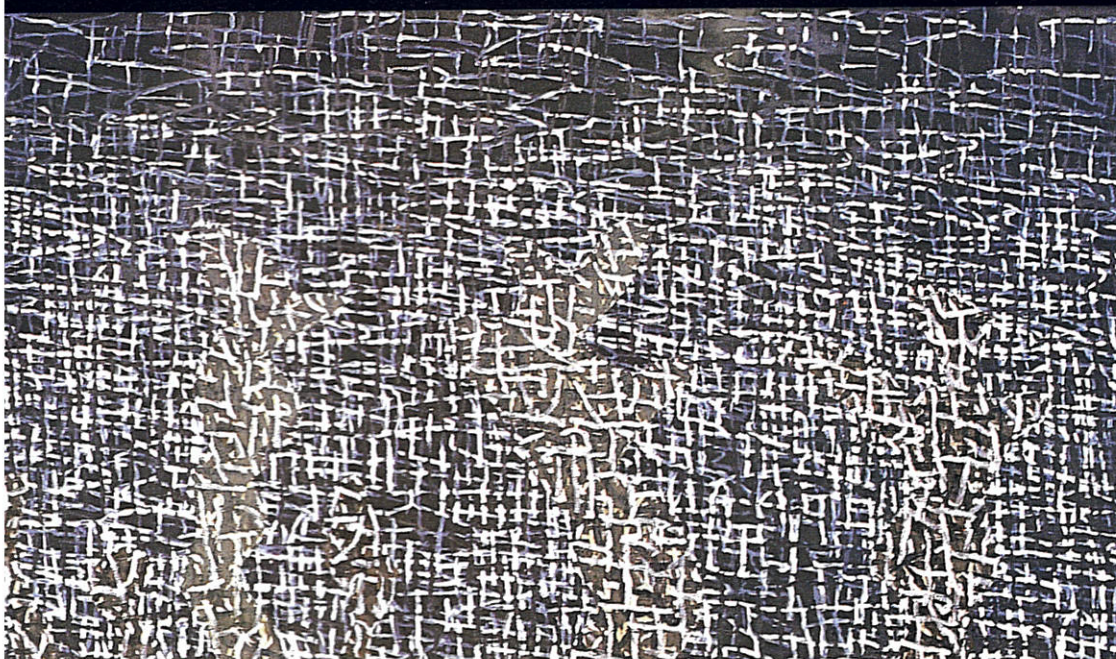
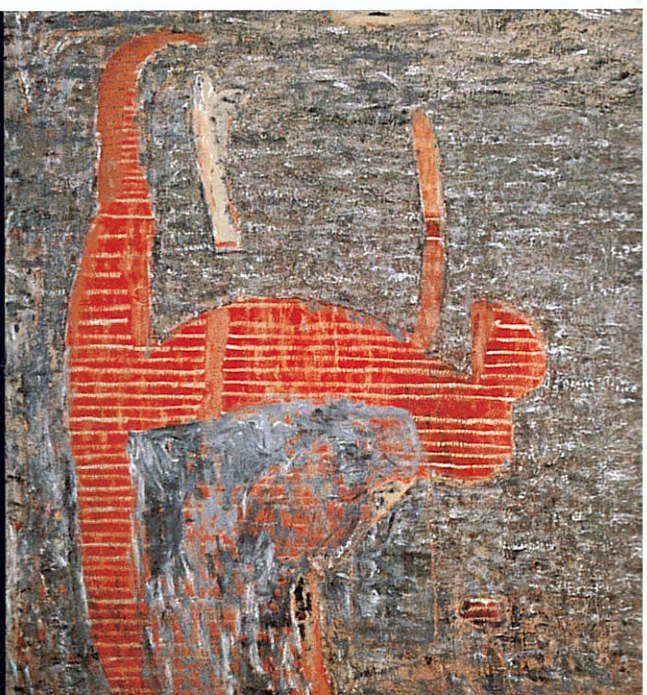
Four Wedderburn Painters



COMINGS  
ELISABETH  
PEART JOHN  
ARCHER SUZANNE  
FAIRBAIRN DAVID

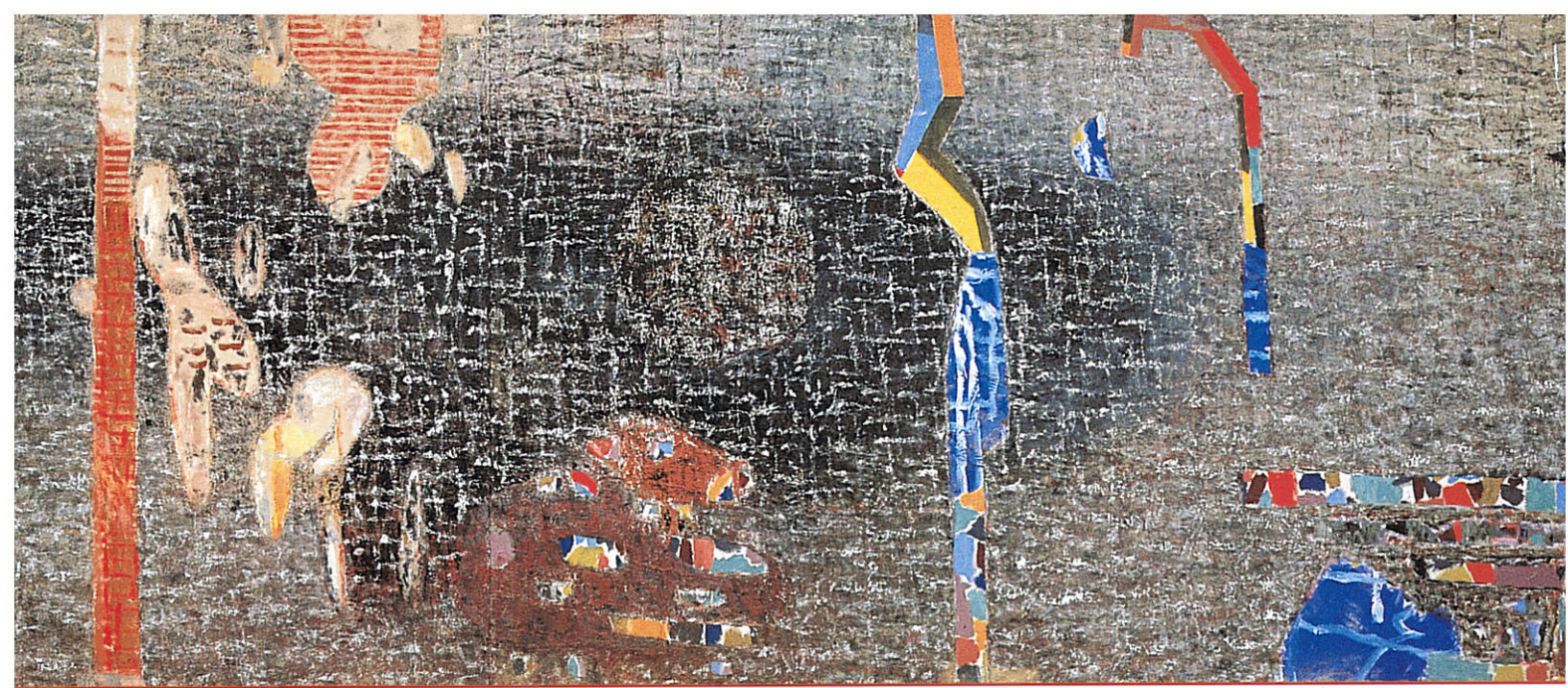
COMMON GROUND

Four Wedderburn painters



*left:* JOHN PEART, *Ashscape*, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 175 x 291 cm, collection the artist.

*above:* JOHN PEART, *Nandi moon*, 1997, acrylic and oil on canvas, 170 x 580 cm, collection the artist. Awarded Wynne Prize 1997.



In February 2001, Suzanne Archer, Elisabeth Cummings, David Fairbairn and John Peart exhibited at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in Sydney. They called the exhibition 'Common Ground'. This was an allusion to the Wedderburn landscape (immediately south of Campbelltown, on the south-western edge of Sydney), where all four live. The exhibition title also referred to their shared commitment to protecting the ecosystem of the area, which is important as the headwaters of the Georges River and as the habitat for an array of endangered indigenous wildlife. (To this end, they established a small environmental group called the Georges River Environmental Action Team.) Finally, they share, to varying degrees, a tendency towards a loose expressionism in which gestural line and a subdued palette often play a central role.

There is a precariousness about life in the Wedderburn bushland. Violent fires periodically shear through the valleys and gullies. The 1991 and 1994 fires swept with

blitzkrieg irresistibility along the silver cord of O'Hares Creek, exhausting themselves at the very brink of the painters' houses. During the 1994 conflagration, Elisabeth Cummings's storeroom and auxiliary studio, only metres from her house, was engulfed (together with the paintings it contained).

Elisabeth Cummings built her mud-brick studio/house at Wedderburn in 1975, and moved there permanently in 1990. John Peart, who had formerly lived in Paddington, arrived in 1980. Suzanne Archer and David Fairbairn moved to Wedderburn from Balmain in 1987.

Like many artists of her generation, Elisabeth Cummings fell somewhat under the spell of Paul Cézanne while a student at the National Art School, Sydney, in the

**PETER PINSON**

mid-1950s. In 1961, while in Europe on a New South Wales Travelling Art Scholarship, Cummings studied in Salzburg with Oskar Kokoschka. As influences, Cézanne and Kokoschka seem almost entirely incompatible. Yet around 1990, coinciding with her final move from Glebe to Wedderburn, Cummings's work successfully annealed aspects of Cézanne's structural organisation of form to Kokoschka's high viewpoint for his landscapes and his lyrically flailing brushstroke.

Cummings's abstractions may derive from a landscape where the moderate illumination of early morning or the gentle light of dusk rakes across motifs, dissolving their solidity and dissembling their forms. There is in her paintings much of the unfocused untidiness of the Wedderburn land-

CUMMINGS REVELS IN THE SUCCULENCE AND FLUIDITY OF PAINT. SHE STAINS WITH, CURDLES, SCRAPES AND MANIPULATES OIL PAINT WITH UNSTUDIED IMMEDIACY, AND WITH MASTERLY FINESSE.

scape, but there is also something of the rectilinear patterning of the interior. Cummings revels in the succulence and fluidity of paint. She stains with, curdles, scrapes and manipulates oil paint with unstudied immediacy, and with masterly finesse. Yet for all this expressive painterliness, her harmonic tones and her tempered world are those of an intimist.

Cummings admires the paintings of Ken Whisson. She enjoys their unlaboured quality, and she particularly admires the way he juxtaposes odd and awkward motifs. She found a similar cacophony of irregular and discordant forms in the Australian bush. Frequently she seeks comparable passages of disputation in her paintings by, for example, purposefully disrupting the flow of a composition with the insertion of a roughly drawn geometric shape, or dislodging the unity of an essentially brown painting with a tart chord of sage or green.

The forms in her paintings are not moored; they flow and sweep. Cummings's house is surrounded by a rocky basin. The soil is dry, sandy and impoverished. This is not a landscape of comfort or fecundity. There are wattles and some fragile native flowers, but in the main the plants seem to her to be spiky and struggling for life. Until the rain. Then the folds and clefts in the gently falling hillsides around her become aggressively flowing channels. Abruptly, there is movement, growth and change. After rain, all is flux. Her paintings, ultimately, are about that flux and liquescence.

John Peart does not draw from the bush, or from the geology surrounding his house, but their presence and forms insinuate themselves into much of his painting. As he puts it: 'While I don't specifically paint from the bush, it finds its way in. It catches me unawares.' Peart's *Ashscape*, 1994, is one of his most direct responses to the landscape. It was painted in the immediate





right: ELISABETH CUMMINGS, *Across the gully*, 1996, oil on canvas, 114 x 149 cm, private collection.

opposite page: ELISABETH CUMMINGS, *Red 1*, 1994, oil on canvas, 119 x 142 cm, private collection.

aftermath of a wide front of fire that had swept through Wedderburn. In this painting, Peart is drawn to that moment when the awesome fire has passed, and the charred residue has cooled. There is silence, for the fauna has either fled or perished. This was genuine ground zero, when everything was up for grabs. At play was more than the cycle of death and regeneration. At stake here were questions of extinction, and the looming fierce battles for lebensraum by returning and invading plants, animals, birds and insects.

The painting is an all-over palisade of bone-pale and fragile vertical and horizontal lines. Discernible, but only barely, are a small number of ochre forms. They are fugitive and wraith-like. They recall the strange 'presences' that D. H. Lawrence had sensed in the Darlington bush, near Perth, seventy-two years earlier. For Lawrence,

the presences evoked terror. For Peart, the ochre forms represent a complexity, an ambiguity. Peart enjoys equivocality. His paintings often deal with paradoxical figure-ground relationships and spatial relativities, and with the chameleon-like capacity of abstract calligraphic marks to evoke sensations that relate to his environment.

*Nandi moon*, 1997, which was awarded the Wynne Prize, displays Peart's formal inventiveness, and his disinclination to be confined to one manner of abstraction, even within the one painting. It is a huge



*above:* SUZANNE ARCHER, *Waratahs - Wedderburn*, 1994, oil on canvas, 240 x 242 cm, Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery, Sydney.

*opposite page:* SUZANNE ARCHER, *Black horse*, 1996, oil on plywood, 240 x 240 cm, collection the artist.

painting, 580 centimetres in width and, like a scroll or the elusive landscape itself, it changes in its moods, rhythms, motifs and even in the nature of its representation as one traverses its length. Forms successively gather, subside, proclaim, quieten, tower and huddle, become sharply edged and then soften, as if in an extended narrative.

Peart might feel some sympathy for Godfrey Miller's view that Australia's greatest wealth lay 'not in the wool clip, but in Australia's closeness to India'. Miller found in some Indian traditions attitudes to unity that paralleled his own. Peart has been twice to India and is interested in Indian art (including Tantric diagrams, Mogul miniatures and Ajanta murals) and in Indian philosophy (Kashmir Shaivism and Vedanta). He found in some Indian traditions an encouragement to embrace untried solutions, and a liberation from constrictive notions of stylistic homogeneity.

Suzanne Archer established her reputation in the mid-1960s with paintings that combined calligraphic marks with collaged fragments of typography. This collage sensibility remains at the root of much of her painting. Her *Waratahs – Wedderburn*, 1994, which won the Wynne Prize in 1994, is characteristic. Its exuberant melee of shapes and patterns jostle together. Like the fragments of a collage, her shapes bear forthright ornamentations – rough grids, lustily drawn bars, tesserae in unstable alignments – and her paint is applied in a variety of manners, with each area assertively proclaiming its difference from its neighbours. There may be a unity of palette or tempo, but there is also a saturation of incident and a clamour of numerous climaxes. There is rawness, but there is also often wit, playfulness and energetic impulsiveness. Paul Klee spoke of taking a line for a walk; Archer takes a line on a reckless, intoxicated spree.

*Waratahs – Wedderburn* was painted in the aftermath of the 1991 fire. Archer watched the bush gradually regenerate, and was astonished to find waratahs appearing in the gorge for the first time within memory.

*Black horse*, 1996, comes from a series which reinterprets the traditional equestrian subject. Archer transforms the staid grandiosity of the equestrian genre into essentially abstract paintings that express raucousness and the theatricality of horseracing under floodlights. These paintings conjure with the resplendent colour of the

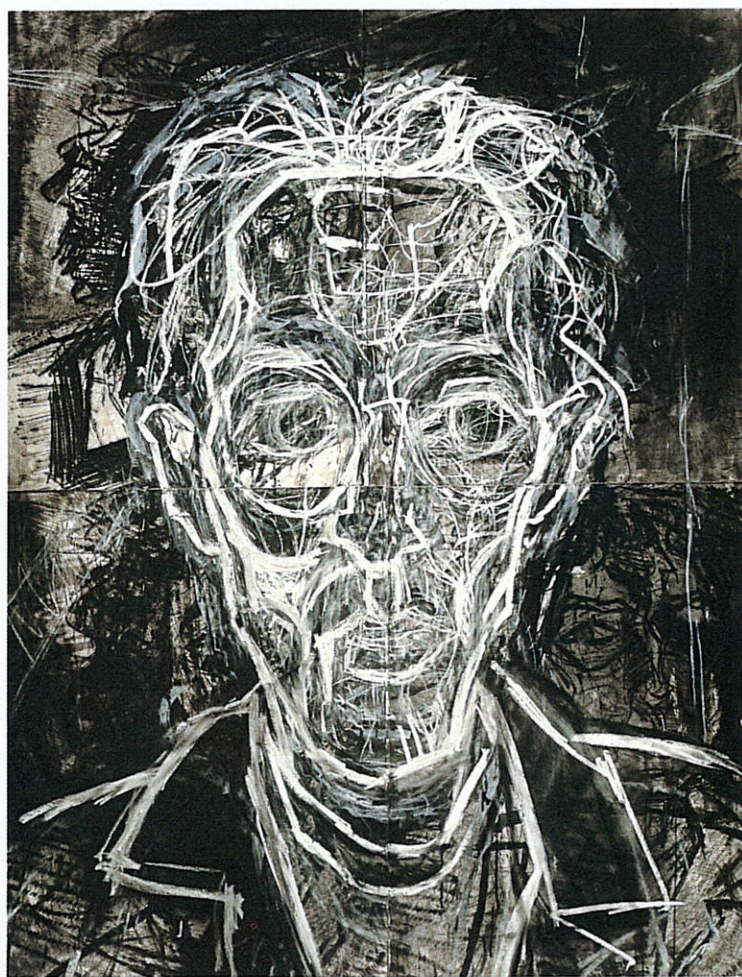
jockeys' silks, with shapes that are disjointed through movement and, above all, with the desperate hunger for victory. For Archer, horseracing is like Paolo Uccello's *Battle of San Romano*, but without the calming straightjacket of perspective.

Of these four Wedderburn artists, Archer responds most directly to her environment and, in her recent paintings, to the Wedderburn bush wilderness. For Archer, a walk in the bush is an act of immersion: 'close-focus, no horizon, not a distant observation, but an intimate personal contact'. Of course, she is drawn to the grandeur of the massive and tilting rock shelves and the serpentine rhythms of the angophoras near her house. However, she is at least equally attentive to the scattered remains that accumulate on the ground,



some of which she collects and installs in her studio for further study. Archer finds this material very evocative: fallen foliage whose colour has become in death the soft brown of the earth; banksia leaves whose serrated edges are scimitar-sharp; carcasses that tell of fierce battles with predators; skeletons that suggest tales of sly and sinister stalking; deformed flora that has fallen prey to insidious parasites. In 1994 Archer revisited Spain and reacquainted herself with the late bleak paintings of Francisco de Goya. She possesses photographs of the Mexican Day of the Dead. The black, uneasy or macabre mood of these sources

HIS OVERLAYING OF LINES – SOME AS FRAGILE AND TENTATIVE AS NATIVE GRASSES, BUT MOST AS SHARP AND ABRUPTLY ANGLED AS FALLEN AND BRITTLE BRANCHES – HAS THE COMPLEXITY OF THE DEBRIS-CARPETED FLOOR OF THE WEDDERBURN BUSH.



is reflected in the strange, small tragedies of nature's cycles that she finds in the detritus of the bush.

For David Fairbairn (whose portrait of Suzanne Archer won the 2002 Doug Moran National Portrait Prize), a head represents a form to be scrutinised. His lines explore the swell of cheekbones, the pitch of the eyebrows, the facets of the forehead, the firm edges of the chin, and the collapsing concavities of the cheek. While his line is as dynamic and athletic as Archer's, it is not cursive like hers. His line is angular and constructive; it hacks, chisels and carves the decisive contours of the head.

In the early 1980s Fairbairn drew and painted fierce images of heads that were consumed by despair. Planes were splintered, eye sockets were black or unseeing, mouths grimaced with emotional pain. They were not so much representations of the stark bone beneath the subject's beguiling skin, as representations of the anguish beneath the subject's humanity. Elwyn Lynn described them as possessing a 'ravaging brutality'. Fairbairn's more recent subjects are rendered with less ferocity and pessimism but no less urgency of execution, and with an equal sense of presence.

Fairbairn's recent sitters are acquaintances of his, usually residents of the Macarthur region in which Wedderburn lies. But they are generally men and women without renown or high station. Their clothes proclaim no distinction. Their heads have a drawn, almost cadaverous gauntness. Their faces carry some of the lines of middle age – those corrugations that tell of experience and testing, but not yet exhaustion or capitulation. They generally gaze impassively, without smile and without grimace, but also without pretension or guile. They are the faces of survivors, of individuals who forge a life which may be denied ease, but which is



spared fear. Fairbairn's drawings of the head record a bold and unsentimental process of analysis. The initial exploratory lines, which probe, tease out and map the terrain of the faces, remain visible as they are successively over-inscribed with realignments and evolving passages of emphasis. The final skeins of white or black lines are the most powerful, stressing the defining facial edges and creases. The drawings, then, have undergone the same checks, adjustments and redirections as the lives of the sitters.

Fairbairn is not concerned with facile parlour-room psychoanalysis of his subjects. Nor do his drawings evoke empathy with the sitter. They retain a remoteness that resists our interpersonal engagement. His subjects recall T. S. Eliot's 'Hollow Men', constructed of: '[line] without form, shade without colour ... gesture without motion ... stone images ... waking alone'. Indeed, Fairbairn has said that his portraits are as much about the landscape as the people who live in it. His colours – the white-grey of ash, the rich black of a tree trunk burnt to charcoal, the grubby brown of the soil, or the red of ochre – are the pigmentations of the bush. His overlaying of lines – some as fragile and tentative as native grasses, but most as sharp and abruptly angled as fallen and brittle branches – has the complexity of the debris-carpeted floor of the Wedderburn bush.

William Blake observed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'Exuberance is Beauty'. It is a view that Archer, Cummings, Fairbairn and Peart wholeheartedly share.

Suzanne Archer is represented by BBA Gallery, Sydney; Elisabeth Cummings by King Street Gallery on Burton, Sydney; David Fairbairn by Stella Downer Fine Art, Sydney; and John Peart by Watters Gallery, Sydney.

below: DAVID FAIRBAIRN, *Portrait of Victoria Hahn, 1999*, mixed media on paper, 201 x 173 cm, collection the artist.

opposite page: DAVID FAIRBAIRN, *Portrait of Tao Tribels, 1999*, mixed media on paper, 201 x 173 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Awarded Dobell Drawing Prize 1999.



Peter Pinson is Professor, College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney.