

RAW: Wedderburn

July 5, 2018



Roy Jackson, 'Untitled (Allegro) II' (1975-77)

There is no fixed definition of an 'artists' colony' although there are numerous examples spread across the globe. Some are run like businesses, others are no more than clusters of like-minded Bohemians. The prototype of the modern artists' colony is probably Worpswede, 28 kms from Bremen in northern Germany, which has been a haven for creative types since the 1880s.

Australia's best established example is Montsalvat on the outskirts of Melbourne, started by Justus Jørgensen in 1934. Second in line is Dunmoochin, at Cottles Bridge, 50 kms from Melbourne, set up by Clifton Pugh in 1951. Today the property is administered by a foundation that offers residencies for artists and environmentalists.

In Sydney, if we discount the artists' camps on the north shore, where Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton once resided, the most notable artists' colony is Wedderburn, situated in bushland near Campbelltown. It began in the late 1970s, when Barbara and Nick Romalis gifted four hectares of land to artist friends in need of living and working spaces.

Elisabeth Cummings was the first to move in, pitching a tent until her bush cottage was built. Others would follow, including Joan Brassil, Fred Braat, Roy Jackson, John Peart, Su Archer, David Fairbairn and David Hawkes, not to mention an ever-changing cast of part-time residents, students and fellow-travellers.

A full Wedderburn retrospective would be a very large undertaking. The survey, RAW Wedderburn, at Delmar Gallery takes a more selective approach, looking at the works of only six artists: long-term residents, Archer, Cummings, Jackson and Peart; and two younger artists, Robert Hirschmann and Ildiko Kovacs, who were introduced to the group through their studies at the National Art School.

The earliest pieces in this show are a pair of energetic abstractions by Roy Jackson – Untitled (Allegro) I & II (1975-77). Over the course of forty years most artists will work their way through many different styles and subjects, so curator, Sioux Garside, has isolated only one aspect of the École de Wedderburn: the painterly gesture. Or, in her own words: "paint and tactility, and impulse and improvisation on the surface of the canvas."

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Every movement of the artist's brush or palette knife may be unique, but the shared ethos makes this a tremendously consistent display.

As seen in his posthumous retrospective of 2015, Jackson was a relentless 'seeker after the truth' who went through frequent changes of direction while maintaining the same singleness of purpose. Peart was possibly even more of a lifelong experimentalist. It was a blow to the Wedderburn colony, and to Australian art, that both men died in 2013 before either had turned 70.



Roy Jackson, 'Worktable 6-8/9/89' (1989)

In looking at Jackson and Peart solely as mark-makers, we see them cultivating a freedom of expression that fed back into their more deliberate works. Jackson's *Worktable 6-8/9/89* (1989) is a spontaneous transcription of the movements of objects on a table over three consecutive days. The very loose, linear approach renders the picture a mass of tangled squiggles through which one still notes the presence of actual things.

Peart's *Untitled* (2000) is even bolder in its pursuit of pure gesture – a mesh of black paint strokes on a white surface, with some of the marks partially erased by smears of white. It's a mesmerizing painting that keeps tripping up the viewer's gaze, as clarity jostles against uncertainty. A simple pattern breaks down into a visual minefield.

This is very different in both form and intent to Cummings's works, which identify as landscapes and interiors no matter how abstract they become. The stand-out is *Lake Mungo* (1996), a painting that captures the feel, rather than the appearance, of a distinctive place. The longer one looks the more one becomes aware of the varieties of colour concealed in this pale, muddy vista. The surface has gone through so many different operations we could be looking at the dry bones of the earth itself.

Of all the artists in the show, Su Archer clings most doggedly to figuration and narrative in three works on paper, although the content remains strictly personal. Her *Big, Bad Banksia Man* (1993) and *Utango* (1992), are more abstract in form, with touches of high-keyed colour punctuating a dark, dramatic palette. While Peart creates paintings in which each gesture floats in its own bubble of space, Archer's forms wrestle each other for supremacy.



Suzanne Archer, 'Utango' (1992)

I was surprised by the sheer power of Robert Hirschmann's explosive *Boilerwood Shadow* (2002), and *The Dawn's Debility* (1992), where oil paint has been built up into a dense mass on the canvas. It's remarkable that each picture seems to emanate light when these volcanic encrustations might be expected to be as inert as stone.

Two works by Ildiko Kovacs dating from 1983-84 are much looser than anything she would paint in later years. They are the explorations of an artist in her early twenties who is still finding her feet. By 1995 Kovacs was producing pictures such as *Mt. Warning*, in which a luminous green line roams, serpent-like, across a black canvas. The irresolute nature of the early pictures has been dispelled in the most decisive fashion.

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Ildiko Kovacs, 'Mt. Warning' (1995)

Decisiveness is a quality not much in evidence in this show, in which most artists seem to value the process of painting as much as the result. But without that blend of pictorial intelligence and intuition we call a 'sensibility' – to lay such emphasis on the gesture is to risk simply making a mess. With even the clumsiest piece of figurative art the subject provides the viewer with an anchoring point. Abstract art is a leap without a safety net: a painting either succeeds or fails.

There will always be viewers who are blind or insensible to abstraction but that's where the challenge lies. An artist has to induce his or her audience to put aside the natural impulse to look for a subject and accept that a painting can convey just as much by means of gesture, line and colour. One could theorise endlessly but such primordial visual sensations can never be adequately captured by language. The abiding message is that whether one is making art or simply looking at it, explanation is a poor substitute for first-hand experience.

RAW Wedderburn
Delmar Gallery, Trinity Grammar School,
23 June – 5 August, 2018

Published in the Sydney Morning Herald, 7 July, 2018

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