

An abstract painting by Robert Hirschmann titled 'Past Night'. The artwork is a square composition dominated by white and light grey tones, with a central circular motif. This central circle is rendered in a pale, pinkish-white hue and is surrounded by a thick, textured ring of yellow and ochre. The background is a complex, layered texture of white paint, with numerous fine, dark lines and speckles scattered throughout. The edges of the painting are heavily textured and show signs of wear, with dark, almost black, areas appearing at the corners and along the sides, suggesting a rough, aged surface. The overall effect is one of intense, tactile energy and a sense of a long, dark night.

Robert Hirschmann Past Night



King Street Gallery
on William



Robert Hirschmann

Past Night

6 September – 1 October 2022

10am – 6pm Tuesday – Saturday
177-185 William St Darlinghurst NSW 2010 Australia
T: 61 2 9360 9727 E: art@kingstreetgallery.com
www.kingstreetgallery.com.au

Opposite: Portland Studio, NSW
Image: Silversalt Photography
Front cover: *Past Night XIX* 2009-2022 oil on linen on board 120 x 120 cm
Artwork photography: Silversalt Photography



Past Night I 2010-2022 oil on linen 122x122cm

A Good Painting of the Moon Quentin Sprague

I struggle to think of a good painting of the moon. Perhaps this is because the moon is so dominant a motif – one that all of us are familiar with, and one already weighted by so much myth and narrative. Or, put another way, the moon has become hard to represent without calling forth all kinds of associated imagery, intended or not: gothic fables and modern horror, dreams of transcendence and light. But what is it, really? What does it spark in us? What causes us to look up at the night sky, hoping to glimpse its illuminated face?

I think about the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans, and enter his name into Google, along with 'moon'. He seems to me, in his celebrated capacity to strip even the most charged images of their cultural baggage, a likely candidate for a successful painting of the moon. And there one is: *Three moons*, from 2007.

The image – which shows a large moon shadowed by two much smaller planetary pin-pricks – is all light. The big moon is a flare of white, almost as if it has been bleached onto the canvas in an act of subtraction rather than addition. The sky is a uniform grey, gauze-like; a translucent blind pulled down before our eyes. The scene is wintry; the moons are moons of the kind one sees on a clear afternoon, a sight that always fills me with a slightly mournful feeling, but also a sense, no matter how many times I see it, of mild wonder.

Tuymans's image pictures what was in 2007 unproven science: that the earth has not one but three moons –

the one we know, and two far smaller orbiting bodies consisting entirely of miniscule dust particles. Google tells me this: In 1961, Kazimierz Kordylewski, a Polish scientist had observed these moons for the first time and they were later named after him as Kordylewski Dust Clouds (KDCs). But their existence has been questioned by astronomers for the past six decades and not many accurate models or simulations of these objects are available.

Is Tuymans's painting an accurate model or simulation? Well, that depends on what you mean by accurate. But what it does is sidestep all the moon's baggage, and picture it anew.

The painter Robert Hirschmann sent me another painting of a moon not long ago via text message: Albert Pinkham Ryder's *Moonlight Marine* (1870-1890).

What a painting!

It shows a double-sailed skiff leaning with the wind as it flies through dark water. The moon shines through equally dark clouds. It fills the broken sections of clear sky – sections that appear as gaps between the puzzle pieces of black clouds– with its waxen light. Whereas Tuymans's image is thin and gauze-like (which at first seems the only correct treatment of moonlight, which is weightless and runs like water), Ryder's is heavy and layered. Compared to Tuymans's apparent subtraction, Ryder's painting is all addition: one layer of thick oil painted over another until the surface of the painting has accrued like coral or tree-rings. One looks at it,

and thinks, incredulously, Did he work on it for twenty years?

Although it seems deeply counterintuitive to picture moonlight as a weighted substance, Ryder's painting makes just as much sense as Tuymans's. He applied so many layers of unstable paint that the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where the painting resides, notes: Ryder's habit of applying pigment in many thick layers has caused changes in the contours of certain forms—clouds, sails, and the boat's hull—since this painting was completed.

So although the paint is heavy, the shapes it depicts have changed infinitesimally over time: in Ryder's hands, the moonlight has slowly distorted the forms it illuminates. This too seems like a perfect representation of the subject.

And so, we arrive at Robert Hirschmann's own paintings of the moon. What is the moon for him? Firstly, it is a compositional device, and a particularly brave one at that. I say brave, because to place a circle alone on a flat ground (a ground without a horizon or a landscape – or seascape as per Ryder – against which it might sit in context) is to drastically circumvent one's options to create a picture. Add a line or geometric form to balance the circle, and the circle also becomes a geometric form: the painting becomes abstract. Add a horizon, or a tree, or a cloud, or a figure, and it unavoidably becomes figurative. Although the examples used above are both of figurative paintings of the moon – Tuymans's most likely a painting of a pre-existing

image simulation of the moon and its two attendant celestial dust bodies, and Ryder's a painting of New York's Hudson River port, which he would obsessively visit at night to observe the changing quality of moonlight– Hirschmann wants to have it both ways. His paintings intend to hang between abstraction and figuration. Yes, they depict the moon, but they also want us to see the moon as pure form, something that pulls back and forth, as an abstract painting so often does, between positive and negative.

Hirschmann knows what he's doing here in the mid-zone between one thing and another. As with Ryder, he has chosen to layer his paintings with thick coats of oil paint; as with Ryder, the surface accrues a deep crust of paint. This treatment only adds to the play between positive and negative, between figure (the moon) and ground (the night sky). Look at the sky as solid, and the moon becomes an aperture: surrounded by darkness, we see a tunnel with a light illuminating the distant exit. Do we stay where we are, or do we move towards it?

It's tempting to follow this thought towards a meditation on the nature and struggle of creativity, particularly the kind of creativity – the solo artist labouring alone in a studio kind of creativity – that underpins Hirschmann's work. This provides one path through these paintings: follow it and we might come to understand they are about a struggle in which a painting must somehow be made not to represent something but to capture the energies of something without being explicit about what that something is.

But there's another path through these paintings, one opened by following ideas about time instead. For what are Hirschmann's paintings about if not time? There are the obvious references to the way the moon keeps time: the way in which it rises and falls, waxes and wanes; the way it draws the tides in and out. These rhythms were a key part of what led humans to understand the passing of time long before we achieved the means to otherwise measure it. But time is also an ideal way to try and understand painting itself. Often time is the only thing that will make a painting work: time spent between the artist and the painting, time spent looking (if not actually working), time spent actively ignoring the painting, time spent trying to see it anew. In fact, when we talk about painting as a material thing – as marks made in paint upon a substrate like canvas or linen or board – we often forget that time is just as essential a part of it as anything else.

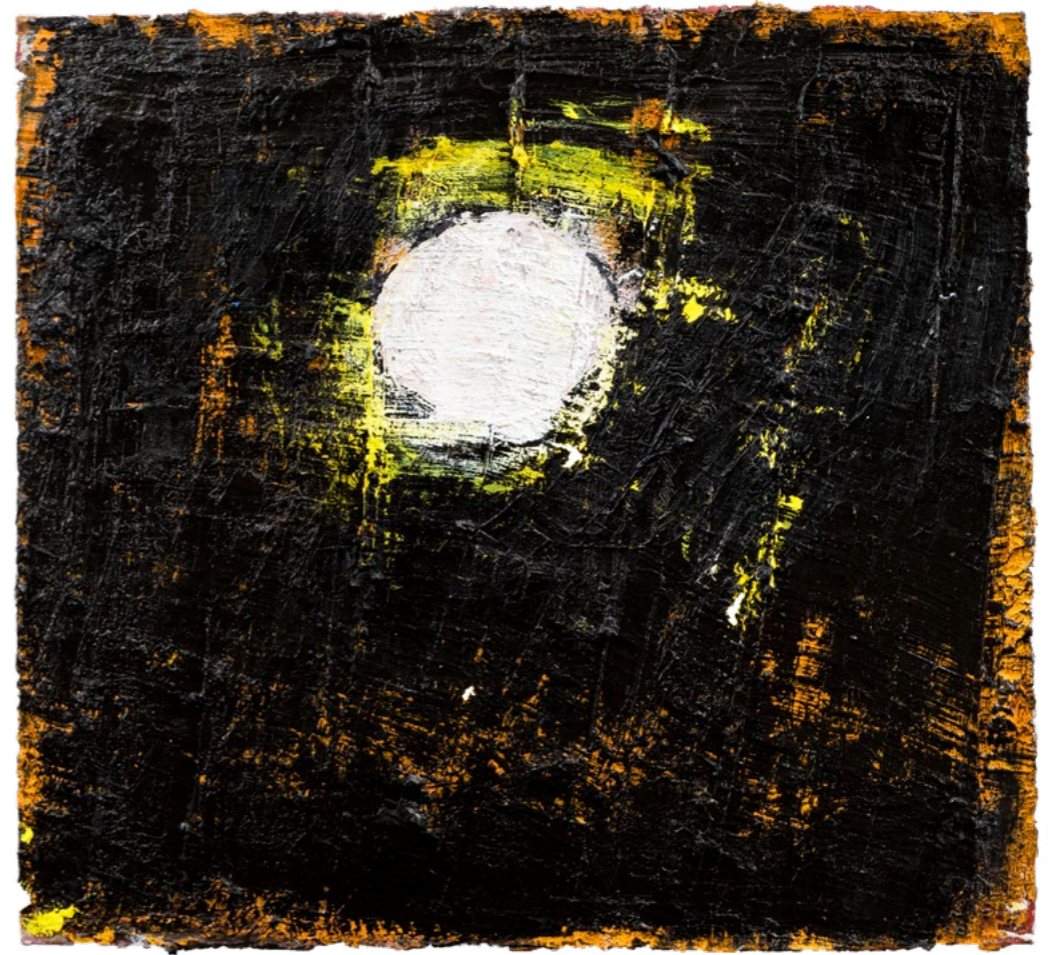
This is one thing that Hirschmann's paintings show us: the slow accretion of time itself. And as with Ryder's painting of the moonlit skiff, of the moonlight catching dark forms from between slow-moving clouds, Hirschmann's paintings may also continue to change, ever so slightly, just as the moon itself waxes and wanes.

Quentin Sprague is a writer based in Geelong on Wadawurrong country.

This essay was commissioned by Bathurst Regional Art Gallery (BRAG)



Past Night VI 2022 ink and charcoal on paper 70x100cm



Past Night V 1994-2022 oil on canvas 70x70cm



Top: *Past Night II* 2015-2021 oil on linen 90x90cm

Right: *Past Night XX* 2010-2022 oil on linen 183x183cm



Past Night XI 2018-2022 oil on canvas 183x183cm



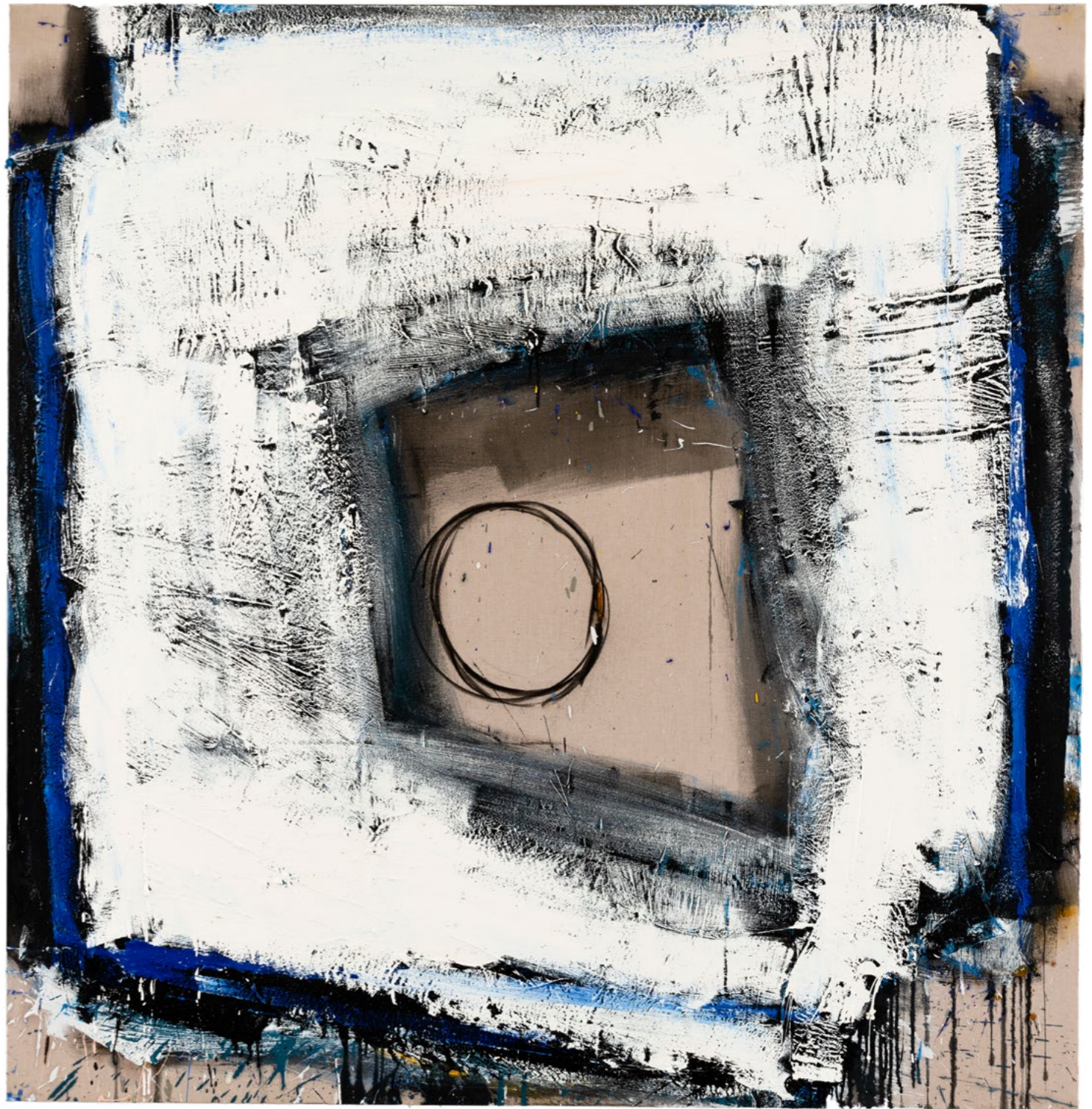
Past Night XXII 2018-2022 oil on canvas 183x183cm



Past Night XXIII 2018-2022 oil on canvas 183x183cm



Past Night XXIV 2018-2022 oil on linen 183x183cm



Past Night XXV 2018-2022 oil on canvas 183x183cm



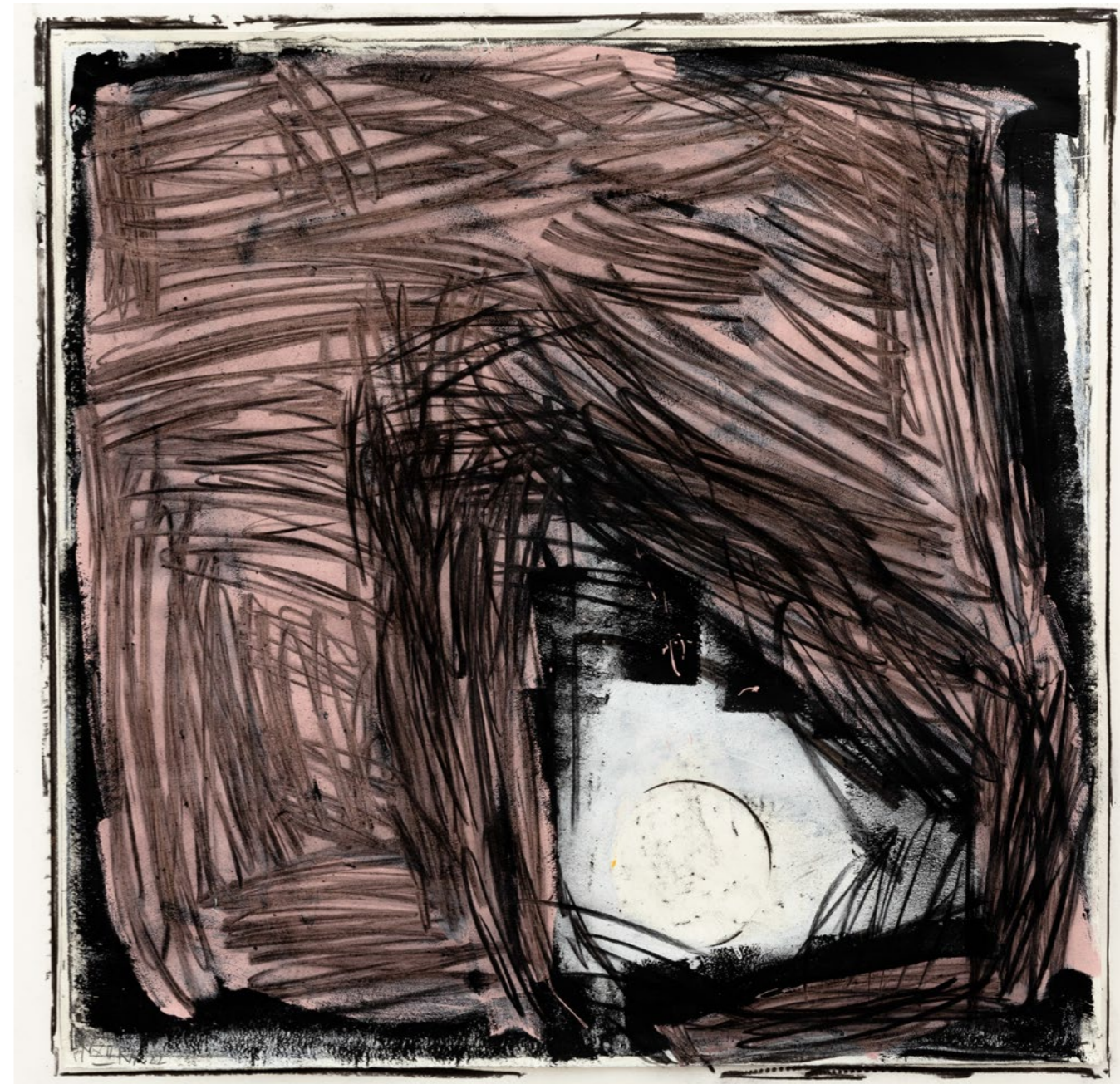
Past Night XXVI 2018-2022 oil on canvas 183x183cm



Past Night VII 2022 oil on linen 200x274cm



Past Night XII 2020-2022 mixed media on paper 120x119cm



Past Night X 2012-2022 mixed media on paper 97x104cm





Past Past Night 2022 mixed media on paper 79x106cm

Robert Hirschmann

Born

1968 Narembeen, WA

Education

1989-90 Diploma of Fine Arts, National Art School, Sydney
 1986-87 Certificate in Painting, Liverpool College of TAFE, Sydney

Solo Exhibitions

2022 *Past Night* King Street Gallery on William, Sydney
Past Night Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Bathurst, NSW
 2018 *SameSame...* King Street Gallery on William
 2014 *Doggo* King Street Gallery on William
 2011 *Paintings and Drawings* King Street Gallery on William
 2009 *Paintings* King Street Gallery on William
 2007 *Paintings* Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane
Paintings King Street Gallery on William
Paintings 1996-2008 @ silvershot, Melbourne
 2006 *Paintings* Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art @ silvershot, Melbourne
Paintings Booth's Taminick Cellars, Taminick
 2005 *Paintings* King Street Gallery on Burton, Sydney
Paintings Booth's Taminick Cellars
 2004 *Paintings* Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art, Span Galleries
 2003 *Paintings* King Street Gallery on Burton
 2001 *Paintings and Sculpture* King Street Gallery on Burton
 2000 *Paintings* Kalli Rolfe Contemporary Art
 1999 *Paintings* King Street Gallery on Burton
 1997 *Paintings, drawings & sculpture* King Street Gallery on Burton
 1995 *Drawings 1990-95'* Renwick Street Studios in association with King Street Gallery on Burton
 1994 *Paintings & drawings* King Street Gallery on Burton
 1992 *Paintings and drawings* King Street Gallery on Burton
 1991 *Drawings* King Street Gallery on Burton

Group Exhibitions [selected]

2020 *Kenwood Road* King Street Gallery on William, Sydney
20:20 Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA), Albury, NSW
 2019 *Rock, paper, scissors* Delmar Gallery, Trinity Grammar School, Sydney
Abstract 19' King Street Gallery on William
Inside/outside King Street Gallery on William
 2018 *Raw Wedderburn* [curated by Sioux Garside] Delmar Gallery, Trinity Grammar School, Sydney
 2014 *David Floyd's Paintbox* King Street Gallery on William
 2013 *Last but not Least* King Street Gallery on William
 2012 *Stand Up Close [remembering Ron Lambert]* Wollongong City Gallery, NSW
 2011 Kings School Art Prize Parramatta, NSW
 2010 *Ebb & Flow* Wangaratta Gallery, Vic
Unframed Sheffer Gallery, Sydney

2008 Laverty Collection Union Club, Sydney
 Fleurieu Biennale Art Prize South Australia
Abstraction 7 Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne
Contemporaneous Wangaratta Exhibitions Gallery
Outskirts Benalla Regional Art Gallery, Benalla, Vic
 Artists for Kids Cultural Trust Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne
 2007 *Afilla Landscapes* King Street Gallery on Burton
 2006 Artist's for Kids Culture Trust Jackman Gallery, Melbourne
The Year in Art S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
 2005 *Last Show of the Year* King Street Gallery on Burton
 2004 *Last Show of the Year* King Street Gallery on Burton
 2003 *A Silver Lining & a New Beginning* Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW, Sydney
 2002 *A Century of Collecting: 1901-2001* Ivan Dougherty Gallery
 2001 *Abstraction: Spirit, Light, Pure Form* (curated by Charlie Sheard) Tim Olsen Gallery, Sydney
 2000 *On the Brink: Abstraction of the 90's* Heide Museum of Modern Art, Heidelberg, Vic
Things of Wood King Street Gallery, Sydney
 1999 *Contemporary* (a selection of work from the Allen, Allen & Hemsley Collection), UTS Gallery
 1998 *Last Show of the Year* King Street Gallery on Burton
 1997 *A Fine Line* King Street Gallery
 1996 *Horizon line* (curated & exhibited with: John Adair, Jay Balbi, James Jones, Chris Langlois, Francesca Raft, Phillip Wolfhagen, Emma Walker), King Street Gallery
Abstraction Now Geelong Regional Art Gallery, Geelong, Vic
 1993 *Gallery Artists*, King Street Gallery on Burton
 1992 *Terracollaboratis* (curated & exhibited with: Elisabeth Cummings, Roy Jackson, James Jones, John Peart, Geoffrey Russell), King Street Gallery on Burton
 1991 *Microcosm* Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney
 1990 *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly Cell Block Theatre*, National Art School, Sydney
 1984 National Art Award, Civic Centre, Canberra, ACT

Awards

1990 The Gruner Landscape Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
 1985 Finalist, National Art Award, South Australian State Award
 1984 Winner, National Art Award, South Australian State Award

Collections

Art Gallery of New South Wales	La Trobe University Museum Gallery
Artbank	Macquarie University, NSW
Benalla Regional Art Gallery	Macquarie Bank, Australia
Campbelltown Bicentennial City Art Gallery	Maitland Regional Art Gallery
Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Qld	National Art School, Sydney
Clayton Utz Collection	University of Technology, Sydney
Hawkesbury Regional Art Gallery, NSW	University of Wollongong, NSW
Heide Museum of Modern Art, Vic	Wangaratta Exhibitions Gallery, Vic

For a full CV please visit www.kingstreetgallery.com.au



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always within.*

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