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Christopher Allen

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A reunion of the old school

The overall impression of this show is a positive one, because of the human experience present in most of the work.

By [CHRISTOPHER ALLEN](#)



Detail from Garry Shead's *The Resurrection of Ern* (2018). Picture: Peter Morgan. Images from exhibition *National Art: Part One*, National Art School Gallery.

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Art training has changed significantly, although perhaps not as radically as we may imagine, across the past five or six centuries. The most powerful factor for continuity is that any activity requiring the mastery of a craft or acquisition of technical skill is best taught by direct instruction, demonstration and correction. Books, websites, even video clips, useful as they are, cannot explain the action to be performed as accurately and as easily as a master taking the brush or chisel from your hand and showing you how to hold it and use it.

Apprenticeship remains the most effective way to impart many forms of knowledge, including intangibles such as the ethos and culture that underlie a practice and give it purpose. This was how art was taught for centuries: boys were apprenticed to masters, lived in their houses and assimilated a way of life as well as technical and theoretical knowledge. They began as pupils, progressed to being assistants and, on completing their apprenticeship, reached the status of journeymen — from the French *journee*— which meant they were paid wages by the day. Coincidentally, however, although the word journeyman was related to journey only by a common etymology, it did become customary for journeymen to spend time travelling and working for and learning from different masters. In German, the three years traditionally spent in this way are called *wanderjahre*.

Eventually, like all other craftsmen, a young artist could apply to the guild to be considered a master, which meant he could set up his own workshop and begin to train apprentices in his turn. He had to prove his ability by presenting the guild with a “masterpiece”.

The same system applied to all crafts, but not to the sciences, music or the arts of language, rhetoric and poetry, which fell under the liberal arts system taught at school and university, and seven in number, as so often in medieval systems. A liberal education began with grammar, logic and rhetoric — in effect learning Latin, then cogent reasoning, then the art of persuasion; followed by arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy.

From the Renaissance onwards, artists increasingly aspired to be considered as practitioners of liberal arts, and that is why painting was so often compared to poetry. In antiquity, the analogy tends to be used in the opposite direction: Aristotle and Horace cite painting as a way of explaining something about poetry.

It was in this context that art academies began to appear. At first, in the 16th century, they were places where artists met to talk about the history and theory of art but were not yet schools in any sense. The first modern academy was set up in Paris in 1648, in direct opposition to the guild of painters, which previously enforced its monopoly over the practice of painting in the city. Royal protection, greatly increased from the 1660s onwards under Louis XIV, allowed the academicians to operate freely and eventually achieve a monopoly over all royal commissions.

The academy took on an important role in the training of young artists through its evening life drawing classes, overseen on a monthly roster by senior academicians.

There were also lessons in anatomy and perspective and lectures in art history.

Tim Storrier, *The Grand Impedimenta* (2016). Picture: Peter Morgan

At the end of their training, young artists sat arduous practical examinations, and the winners were sent to Rome for postgraduate study at the academy's branch in that city. Finally, when they were ready to apply to become members, they had to produce a work that demonstrated outstanding ability: the *morceau de reception*, the academic equivalent of the guild's *chef d'oeuvre*, or masterpiece.

But contrary to what is generally assumed, the academy did not replace the apprenticeship system, and young artists continued to learn the practice of their specific arts — painting, sculpture, printmaking — in the studio of their master until the second half of the 19th century. It was only in 1863 that a radical reform was instigated by Napoleon III, extending the curriculum of the academy to classes in the practical aspects of the various arts.

This was really the start of the modern art school, with state-regulated systems and curricula; it was intended to modernise, liberalise and improve the standard of instruction but, like all government-sponsored education initiatives, produced its own kind of mediocrity and conformity. Perhaps the most damaging effect in the long run was that the art of painting, for example, was now taught from bland and arbitrary exercises, instead of within the studio of an artist working on particular projects and commissions.

It is interesting to reflect, in this perspective, that when the National Gallery School was founded in Melbourne in 1870 as a modern academy it was following a model that had been reformed only a few years earlier. But the National Art School in Sydney is older still, tracing its origins back to lectures and lessons in the 1840s and 50s, originally under the aegis of the Sydney Mechanics' Institute.

Detail from Graham McCarter's Tim Storrier, Gas Works Studio, Waverton (1976).

The roots of the NAS, from which the two schools that are now the Sydney College of the Arts (University of NSW) and the College of Fine Arts (University of Sydney) were hived off in 1974, thus precede the 1863 reforms. There is no doubt some conscious awareness of this in the school's assertion of its "atelier tradition", an expression that has been much debated through the years but essentially means that while the teaching of drawing and art history are centralised, that of specific practices is devolved to studios in which visiting artists have a great deal of freedom to teach as they see fit.

So the NAS, although ostensibly a modern art school comparable with other schools that have operated around the world during the past century or two and sharing many of the problems inherent to all art schools, bears in its genes some vestiges of the pre-reformed Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and a certain resistance to bureaucratic regularisation, just as it has strenuously fought, in recent decades, against being taken over by the other giant educational bureaucracy of the university system.

The NAS — where I taught art history for many years — has a remarkable list of alumni, and, because all the studio teachers are meant to be practising artists of some distinction, the most prominent of the alumni tend to return as instructors at some point in their careers.

The school has quite a significant collection of works by these individuals, ranging from life painting studies made for examination to mature works given to the school, and now it has the facilities to conserve and exhibit these collections.

This exhibition is a survey of part of the NAS collection, but what is really remarkable is that many of the pieces in it are recent gifts by the artists themselves, responding to an invitation to donate an example of their work to

make the collection a more comprehensive and accurate reflection of the many artists who have emerged from the school's teaching.

Detail from Bibbenluke garden snow pear trees (2009), by Lucy Culliton.
Picture: Penny Clay.

Not all the most famous and distinguished artists associated with the school are represented; one conspicuous absence is Ron Robertson-Swann, recently retired as head of sculpture and who, apart from his fame as a sculptor, was the most prominent representative of the school's tradition of anti-bureaucratic non-conformism.

But the range of artists, across two floors, is an interesting one, with several individually impressive works, although perhaps the most interesting are the youthful works — life drawings, for example — of artists who have gone on to make their name in some other style.

It is impossible, in any survey of this nature, not to be struck by some elements of arbitrariness, and to reflect on the disorientation of art teaching across the past 100 years.

The problem stems partly from the confusing effect of the successive waves of modernist fashion, eroding the belief in any central corpus of skills to be taught and mastered. What made matters worse was that each new generation was taught by people whose own taste had been formed — if not their development arrested — during the previous fashion.

At the same time, modern art teaching suffered from uncertainty about what purpose it was meant to serve. It was relatively easy to teach an apprentice when you knew more or less what kind of paintings or sculptures you were preparing them to make, even if styles evolved relatively quickly within the Renaissance and Baroque periods. It is much harder when you are not even sure what contemporary art is meant to look like.

Detail from Luke Sciberras's *The Road from Momba* (2017). Picture: Peter Morgan

Paradoxically, this kind of doubt has had the most deleterious effect on the teaching of painting. Video artists and others using new technology can learn their craft in a relatively traditional way, with a clear sense of what techniques need to be mastered and approximately what their work will look like.

Painting, however, as we see in the productions of all art schools, is white-anted with doubt and a lack of conviction.

Nonetheless, if the overall impression of this exhibition is a positive one, it is because of the sense of vitality and interest in the world of nature and of human experience that is present in most of the work, rather than a second-guessing of art-world trends with a sprinkling of conceptual games and political commentary.

Most important, perhaps, it is the engagement with materials — whether paint, charcoal, ceramic or metal — and the manifest origin of the work in practice and in the studio.

Art begins with making, and making in specific media: the distinctive kind of thinking that art embodies cannot be done in advance of these processes but arises out of discoveries in the act of making — ideas made of paint, of - images, of shapes in matter: intuitions untranslatable into words.

This commitment to the studio and to studio practice, even at times when some other parts of the curriculum were deficient, has always been the strength of the National Art School. As with other art schools, the work that has come out of its courses has not always been of the first rank, but unlike most other schools it has kept the studio tradition alive and fostered a variety of techniques, skills and practices.

This, in the end, is the only long-term strategy to ride out the fluctuation of fashion, and is why, despite everything, the school has produced or employed so many of the most prominent Australian artists of the past century. The atelier is the only seedbed of living art.

National Art: Part One

National Art School Gallery, Darlinghurst, Sydney. Until October 27.