

# The Seventies and Australian Painting: A Dialogue of Styles

QUT Art Museum 2 August – 29 September 2002



**Richard Larter**  
*Farbwirbel I* 1976  
Synthetic polymer paint and gesso on canvas  
Purchased 1978 with the assistance of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council

## Education Resource

'The Seventies and Australian Painting: A Dialogue of Styles' presents works drawn from the QUT Art Collection by many well-known Australian artists. It represents a unique opportunity to view paintings from an era when social, political and individual boundaries were being challenged, a situation that is reflected in the visual art produced at the time.

In this exhibition students can examine the development of signature styles through individual artist's works, the camaraderie found within groups who gravitated towards each other seeking similar goals, and the challenge to the prevailing hegemony of oil paint on canvas through works that embrace alternative materials and techniques.

This education resource looks at six themes: 'Making your mark', 'Series and multiples', 'The figure', 'Abstraction', 'Landscape' and 'Assemblage'. A timeline has also been included. Through investigating these themes, students will not only engage with several of the works on display, but gain a clear understanding of artistic intent through the paintings of the seventies.

# Making your mark

Just as your signature is an expression of your own identity, so an artist's unique way of applying paint – their brushmark – can be an expression of his or her individuality. In the 1950s the American Abstract expressionists took this concept to an extreme, with artists such as Jackson Pollock boldly slashing and dripping paint, creating a readily identifiable style, which also acted as 'evidence' of the action of painting having taken place.

In the seventies, artists utilised an expressive, action-packed approach for different reasons. Many artists sought to create an individual mark that also referred to other artists, cultures or ways of communicating. They understood that individual expression does not necessarily erupt in isolation out of nowhere but, like our own personalities, is a combination of who we are, where and when we live and what we know from our experiences.

## Ian Fairweather

Born in the United Kingdom, Ian Fairweather lived in China, Indonesia and the Philippines before finally settling north of Brisbane on Bribie Island, where he lived until his death in 1974. His paintings combine lots of different elements within a readily identifiable 'signature' style. In his paintings, he makes references to cubism, Chinese calligraphy and traditional Indigenous Australian designs from bark paintings.

Look at *Row of figures* 1971-72. Circle three words from the list below that you think best describes his way of painting:

scratchy dry bold linear confusing finished liquid soft colourful  
slow earthy natural abstract realistic calligraphic fast flowing unfinished

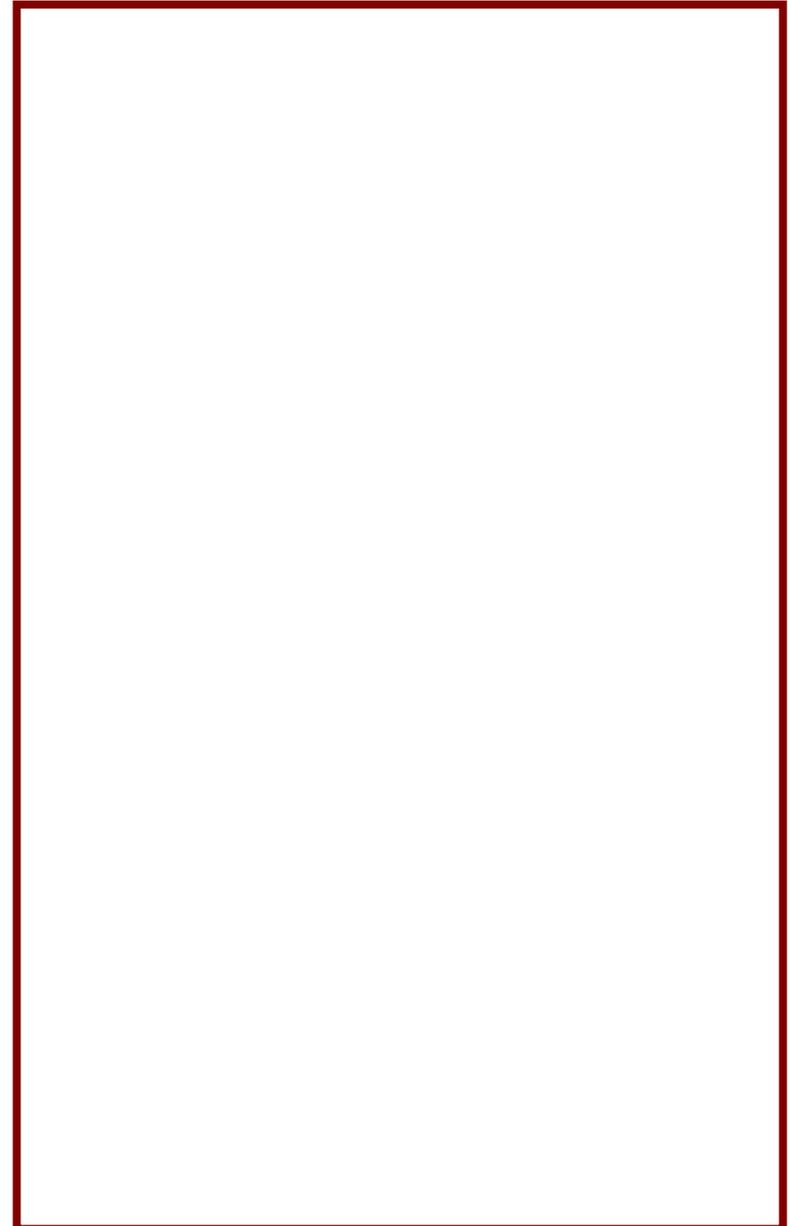
Explain your choices

- 1.....
2. ....
- 3.....

What other words could you use to describe this painting?

.....

**Draw a section of Fairweather's painting in the space below.**



# Series and multiples

## **i: series**

When working in a series, an artist takes the same subject and, through repetition and variation, depicts it in many ways. This gives the viewer (you) a greater understanding of the subject itself (what it is), and the artist's approach to the subject (how the artist has thought about it). Works in the same series are usually similar in scale and manner of approach, and have often been created around the same time. Most artists intend a series of works to be displayed together, but sometime they are split up and exhibited independently. A series could, in theory, have endless permutations, but in reality the number is usually finite.

## **Davida Allen**

In the 1970s, Davida Allen and her family moved to an area close by Amberley airbase, home to Australia's F111 fighter planes. Allen used the graceful but menacing image of the fighter plane in her *F111 series*. In it, she takes the same subject through thirteen different permutations, playing with multiple ideas and thoughts about both the physical presence of the planes and her various responses to them. Through this series, we glimpse not only a multi-faceted picture of the airplane, but also of the ambivalent attachment of the artist to her subject.

**Draw some images from this series or create your own, to give an idea of the different approaches that can be made to the same subject.**



## ii: multiples

Multiples are slightly different than series, and are usually considered to be a single work comprised of a specific number of units. For example, whereas Davida Allen's series can be displayed in different configurations and could have an endless number of paintings, Robert MacPherson's multiple *Trace no. 2* is a single work made up of multiple pieces displayed in the same way each time. Just to confuse things, *Trace no. 2* is one of a series of three works, all titled *Trace*.

### Robert MacPherson

MacPherson's *Trace no. 2* forms part of a series of three large multiple works that investigate the nature of painting. In this work, the artist considers the *process* of painting rather than focussing on the end-product. Comprising twenty-four small square monochrome (single colour) canvasses, arranged in a rectangular unit, each panel is stripped to its raw basics of pigment and surface. In several squares the paint is thinly and evenly applied, in others it is thick and impasto, especially in areas where MacPherson has seemingly printed it onto adjoining canvases, creating painted prints.

In this work, what do you think the artist means by 'trace'?

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### Make your own (mini) trace:


# The Figure

The human form has long been the focus of western painting and sculpture. As a vehicle for conveying passions and emotions and showing off an artist's creative abilities, the familiar human body is difficult to surpass. In the seventies, artists embraced performance art, happenings and installation, challenging the painted figure by working with real bodies in real time and space. Even though the painted form remained popular for artists, the way they approached it changed to reflect the ideas of the age. Other visual languages such as photography, performance and the mass media (images from magazines and tv), became as important to artists as attending 'life classes' or working from a model.

## Richard Larter

Pop art was described by its leading exponent British artist Richard Hamilton to be 'transient, expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky and glamorous'. Richard Larter's paintings are influenced by pop. In many of his paintings, his wife Pat appears alongside images of sexy pin-up girls, models and movie stars. Although each one has been meticulously painted, the figures appear to have been cut immediately from magazines and collaged onto the canvas in bizarre combinations. In Larter's paintings, surprise, shock and humour are displayed side-by-side.

Which of the words Richard Hamilton used above could also describe *Farbwirbel I*?

.....

.....

Draw a figure or a portrait using Larter's 'dot' style:



# Abstraction

When creating abstract paintings, many artists take as their starting point something they have seen, and then distort or change it. You may just be able to make out their original subject matter in their work, but it is secondary to the impact of the painting itself.

Other artists have different approaches. Some paintings may reflect a particular thought, or a mood or even another art form, such as music. These paintings often provoke an emotional response in the viewer: they make us feel happy, sad, or even confused.

Still other artists make paintings that don't look like anything seen in the outside world, but may be based on optical patterns or geometric shapes. With these paintings, visual stimulation through the use of colour or composition is important.

Compare two artists' works that you consider to be abstract, for example a painting by Lesley Dumbrell and John Firth-Smith.

Draw a sketch of each of their works in the boxes to the right.



Artist.....

Title.....

What do you like most about this work?

.....

What do you like least about this work?

.....

Describe how it makes you feel

.....

Artist.....

Title.....

What do you like most about this work?

.....

What do you like least about this work?

.....

Describe how it makes you feel

.....

# Landscape

The Australian landscape has long been a focus for artists from both Indigenous and Anglo-European backgrounds. While Indigenous artists associate the land with ancient stories and ancestral beings, many Anglo-European artists attempted to come to terms with the vastness of the Australian continent, picturing it as a great emptiness, teeming with life, or all manner of variations in between.

## John Olsen

‘Nowhere in Australia does one have the feeling of such emptiness . . . there is as you stand at the edge of the lake, a feeling that you are standing on the edge of the void.’

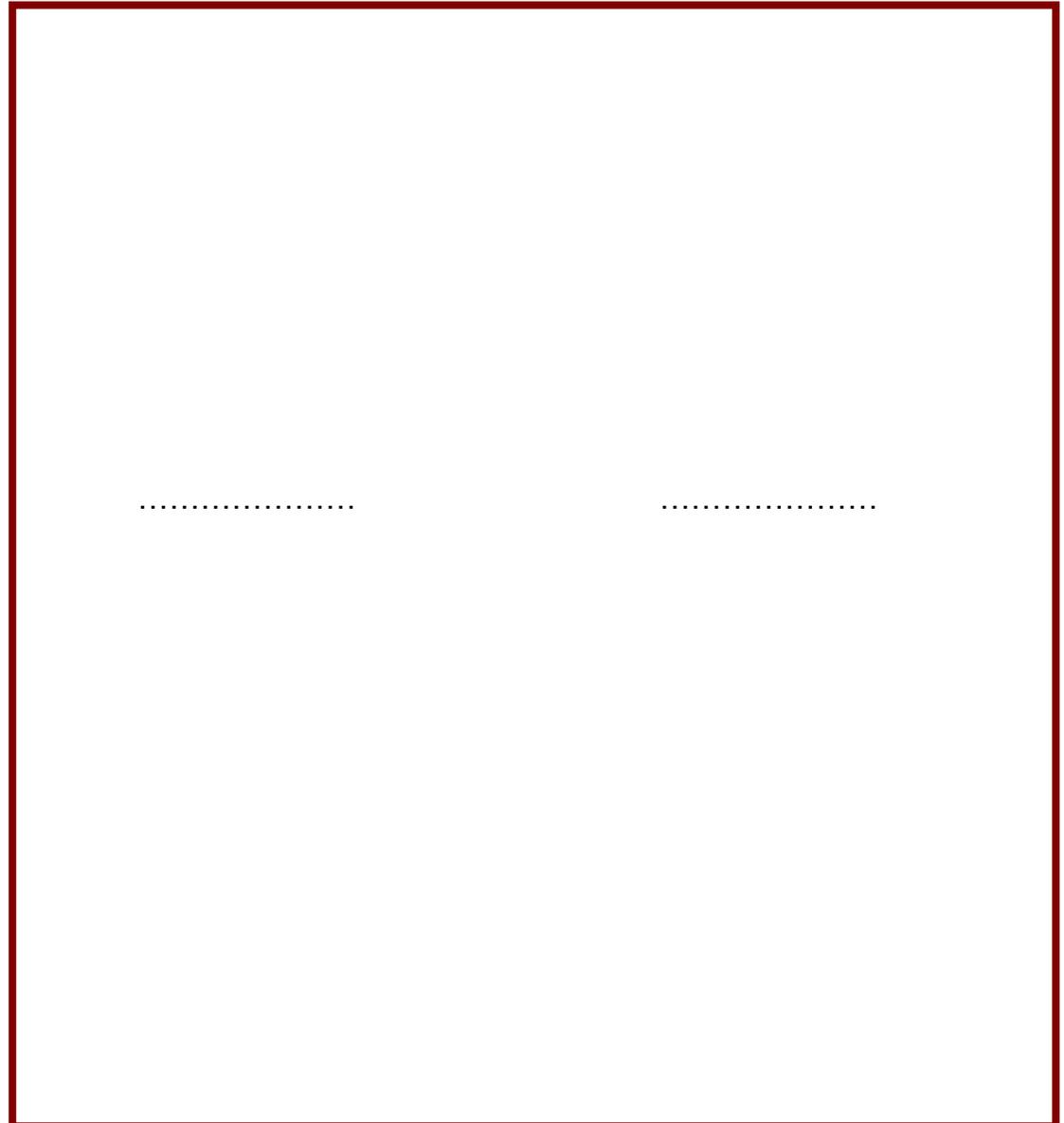
John Olsen in ‘The dead heart lives’  
*National Times*, 17-22 February 1975, p. 31

In *The Simpson Desert approaching the void* 1976, John Olsen endeavoured to express the fluctuating mood and vast emptiness of Lake Eyre. He had first visited the lake in 1974 with the naturalist Vincent Serventy, and returned to it several times over the next three years, at one time experiencing the lake after the largest flood in recorded history. The tangle of brush marks he has used in this painting results in a network of abstract symbols, dots and lines across the surface, parallelling the microcosm of life to be found at the water’s edge.

Read the expanded label next to the painting in the exhibition. What other things influence his painting? Write down what you see in his painting to support this.

- 1.....
- 2.....
3. ....

**Draw some of the symbols in Olsen’s painting. Write under them what you think they might represent.**



# Assemblage

Assemblage is a process comparable to collage, where a work of art is built up from three-dimensional found materials and objects, creating a highly textured and often curious surface. All manner of things can be used: sticks, cardboard, fabrics, cut-outs from magazines, old bits of wood, even kitchen utensils. As long as the artist can stick the objects down and they stay there, they can be used! Artists in the seventies were interested in assemblage as a means to challenge our ideas of what constituted art on gallery walls. Being made of found objects, assemblages usually had an immediate connection with our environment, in a way that painting or photography did not. The real object was present, not a painted or photographed facsimile of it.

## Helen Fuller

Since the late 1970s, Adelaide-based artist Helen Fuller has produced small-scale serial works using everyday materials. Fuller's work can be seen as autobiographical. She uses objects that have personal meanings, combining them in ways that reflect on her own experiences and give insights into her private world. There is usually an underlying tension or sense of anguish in Fuller's work, reflected in the title, *Pain T*.

Think of the title '*Pain T*'. What do you think the artist means?

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Write down all the different materials you can find in *Paint T*

.....  
.....

**Cut it out (and stick it down)! Make a collage or assemblage about your life.**



# Seventies timeline: Find out when . . .

## 1970

First Adelaide Festival held;  
Vietnam Moratorium rallies held around the country;  
Pop group 'Daddy Cool' debut in Melbourne;  
Germaine Greer's book 'The Female Eunuch' published, inspiring women to feminism;  
Opening of Indooroopilly and Strathpine Shopping Centres.

## 1971

Lake Pedder in Tasmania flooded;  
Queenslander Neville Bonner becomes first Aborigine in federal parliament;  
Daddy Cool's 'Eagle Rock' goes to No.1;  
South African Springboks tour prompt anti-apartheid protests across Australia;  
VCRs introduced;  
Australian troops start to withdraw from Vietnam.

## 1972

Aboriginal tent embassy set up in Canberra on the lawns opposite Parliament House;  
Women teachers are no longer required to resign when they marry;  
Victorian Vice Squad destroys copies of Philip Roth's book 'Portnoy's Complaint';  
Billy Thorpe arrested for swearing on stage in Sydney, prompting him to write 'You Can't Go Around Saying F\*\*k On Stage';  
English singer Joe Cocker deported;  
*Cleo* magazine launched with nude male centrefold;  
Helen Reddy 'I am Woman' reaches No.1 in US;  
Women granted equal pay;  
Gough Whitlam elected to Prime Minister, ending two decades of Liberal rule;  
Brisbane's Captain Cook Bridge opens to traffic.

## 1973

First Tamworth country music festival held;  
Australia's first legal casino opens at Wrest Point in Tasmania;  
Mushroom Records launched;  
Aquarius Festival is held in Nimbin;  
Sydney Opera House opens;  
AC/DC debut in Sydney;  
Whiskey A-Go-Go nightclub bombing in Brisbane kills fifteen.

## 1974

Eight people drown in Brisbane floods;  
Whitlam changes national anthem from 'God Save Queen' to 'Advance Australia Fair';  
Credit cards introduced;  
Premiere of Peter Weir's first feature film, 'The Cars that Ate Paris';  
Skyhooks' debut LP 'Living in the Seventies' is released (six of their tracks are immediately banned from radio airplay);  
Darwin devastated by Cyclone Tracy on Christmas eve.

## 1975

Colour TV broadcasts commence;  
Australia's first legal nude beach opens in Adelaide;  
Gough Whitlam sacked and Malcolm Fraser instated as Prime Minister;  
2JJ's broadcast begins with Skyhooks' '(You just like me 'coz I'm) Good in Bed';  
The Ted Mulry Gang has No.1 hit with 'Jump in My Car';  
4ZZZ commences broadcasting in Brisbane.

## 1976

First Concorde flight;  
Tobacco advertising banned;  
Australia's Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) founded;  
Saints self-financed debut single, '(I'm) Stranded', give the band international status as punk musicians;  
Sex Pistols' 'Anarchy in the UK' released;  
Fraser Island protected from sandmining.

## 1977

Eighty people killed in Granville rail accident in Sydney;  
Former Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies dies;  
First *Star Wars* movie released;  
Anti-drug campaigner Donal McKay murdered in Griffith;  
Little River Band become the first Australian band to go Gold in the US;  
Elvis Presley dies;  
'Saturday Night Fever' enters the US charts;  
Right-to-march movement gains momentum in Brisbane with more than seven hundred demonstrators arrested in two months.

## 1978

First Test-tube baby born;  
Sex Pistols break up;  
'Abba: The Album' released;  
Saturday Night Fever goes to No.1 in Australia;  
Sid Vicious, bass guitarist of the Sex Pistols, arrested for the murder of his girlfriend;  
Johnny O'Keefe dies of a heart attack;  
Queensland Police break up punk dances in Brisbane;  
Late night shopping starts on Friday nights in CBD and Thursday nights in suburbs.

## 1979

Three Mile Island (Pennsylvania, USA) nuclear reactor has partial meltdown;  
Margaret Thatcher becomes First Woman Prime Minister of Great Britain;  
Nobel prize awarded to Mother Teresa;  
Sony launches the Walkman;  
Midnight demolition of historic Bellevue Hotel (just opposite Parliament House) for government buildings.