



R-BALSON-41

TR-BALSON/41

ANTHONY  
HORDERNS'

Fine Art Galleries

IVAN  
DOUGHERTY  
GALLERY | COFA

22 August – 27 September 2008



Art Gallery of New South Wales Library and Archive

## FOREWORD

This is a memorable moment, one worth waiting on for a long time, and the doggedness and passion with which Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth have pursued their quarry is heroic. Australia's truly ground breaking twentieth century exhibitions are few and far between and to have left one of them, the first solo exhibition of non-objective painting in this country, only to its less than remarkable original reception would have constituted gross negligence.

This is a great moment to present to today's audiences a series of paintings that remain so fresh in colour and so ebullient in spirit. It is particularly apt to do so alongside *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919*, that reconstructs and extends Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin's radical colour music explorations. Furthermore the context is amplified by the presence at the Powerhouse Museum of *Modern Times: the untold story of modernism in Australia* that champions art and design from 1917 to 1967.

I would particularly like to thank all the lenders, both private and public for their generosity and support, and also those whose giving has made possible the production of a fine catalogue. Furthermore I wish to thank all who are contributing to a symposium that will celebrate the reincarnation of this 1941 Ralph Balson exhibition and of *Colour in Art*. All the papers will be published by Ivan Dougherty Gallery.

Deborah Edwards in her captivating essay writes: "In the arena of Australian war-time Modernism... they (the new geometric abstracts) constituted the uncompromising claim that representational modes could no longer be part of a mission to poetically embody the modern condition and universal values." That is one of the many reasons why these works deserve to again be seen in their true context, the more so as they do still embody values for which we need visionary reminders.

**Nick Waterlow**  
Director, Ivan Dougherty Gallery

## INTRODUCTION

Held at Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, Ralph Balson's 1941 exhibition comprised twenty-one works that constituted Australia's first one-person exhibition of completely non-figurative painting. Like many celebrated exhibitions, it has become emblematic of a particular moment in art history – in this case the movement towards a tradition of non-objective art in Australia – yet its specific content is not widely known. We would propose, however, that it was precisely the exhibition's form and content that were of central importance to the artist. The visual relationships between the paintings and their accumulative effect when displayed together were qualities orchestrated by Balson in this exhibition that are arguably crucial to developing an understanding of the work.

It is these qualities that we hope to explore in the present exhibition, *R-Balson-/41*. Our aim has been to locate all of the surviving works and exhibit them together for the first time since 1941. We were motivated by a desire to develop a first-hand understanding of the exhibition as a body of work and to experience how it looked and 'felt' as a group of paintings installed in a gallery.

There are no known photographs of the original exhibition and the list of works published at the time (reproduced on pp.4-5) is almost entirely mute. This exhibition, then, has provided an opportunity to create the first visual document of the 1941 show. Containing new scholarship on the exhibition and reproductions of all known works, this catalogue explores the space between this lionised exhibition in art history and the paintings themselves, displayed together at Ivan Dougherty Gallery.

Fifteen works have been reproduced in this volume: thirteen of the twenty-one paintings displayed at Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries and two unsigned and undated works that were unlikely to have been exhibited in 1941 but appear to have been executed very close to this time. They have been included in order to provide a fuller sense of the body of work that is likely to have constituted the original exhibition.

At this time the locations of nine works from the 1941 exhibition whose whereabouts are unknown. Of these, one painting (reproduced on p.25) was photographed after the artist's death, while the remaining eight are entirely unaccounted for. It is thought that all twenty-one works were stored at Balson's home in Maroubra where they remained until his death in 1964. While it is not possible to account definitively for the missing works, recent research suggests that a number deteriorated beyond restoration during their long period in storage.

It should be noted that the titles cited in this catalogue are those by which the works are currently known. Descriptive titles such as *Constructive painting* and *Untitled (Geometric Shapes)* are likely to have been attributed after the artist's death while *Painting no. 8* and *Painting no. 17*, for example, refer to catalogue numbers in the Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries list of works. The exhibition histories included in the catalogue give details of significant exhibitions in which each work has been displayed – in particular we wanted to acknowledge the important shows organised by Renee Free, Gallery A, Bruce Adams and John Nixon, all of which included works from 1941.

The research for this exhibition began in 2002 and one of the great privileges over the course of its development has been the contact we have had with art historians, curators, Balson specialists and collectors – many of whom are acknowledged at the back of this volume. A central aim has been to provide a platform for new scholarship and we are greatly indebted to Deborah Edwards whose essay – the first major piece of writing on Balson's 1941 exhibition – discusses the mythologising of the original exhibition and presents us with a detailed and perceptive analysis of the works on display.

**Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth**, July 2008.

# ANTHONY HORDERNS'

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# CATALOGUE

of an

Exhibition of

## OIL PAINTINGS

By RALPH BALSON

July 29th to August 9th.  
1941.

*Catalogue of fine oil paintings  
by Ralph Balson  
in the exhibition  
at Anthony Horderns  
and Sons Limited  
Galleries  
29 July to 9 August 1941*

HELD IN THE GALLERIES OF  
ANTHONY HORDERN  
AND SONS LIMITED

# CATALOGUE

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A4577-1C-25/7/41.

A. H. & S. Print

*Constructive* 1941  
oil on cardboard  
71.5 x 56.0 cm  
Signed and dated l.l.: R-BALSON-/41  
Private Collection, Melbourne  
Image courtesy Shapiro Gallery and Auctioneers, Sydney

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Ralph Balson Gallery A*, Sydney, November 1979, cat. 5; *Ralph Balson 10 Constructive Paintings* Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, October 1980, cat. 2.





*Painting 1941*  
oil on cardboard on chipboard  
47.0 x 79.0 cm  
Signed and dated l.l.: R-Balson-/41  
Private Collection, Perth  
Photograph: Jenni Carter

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Ralph Balson Second Memorial Exhibition* Gallery A, Sydney, July 1968, cat. 3; *Ralph Balson* Gallery A, Sydney, November 1979, cat. 13; *Ralph Balson 10 Constructive Paintings* Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, October 1980, cat. 5; Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, March 1984.

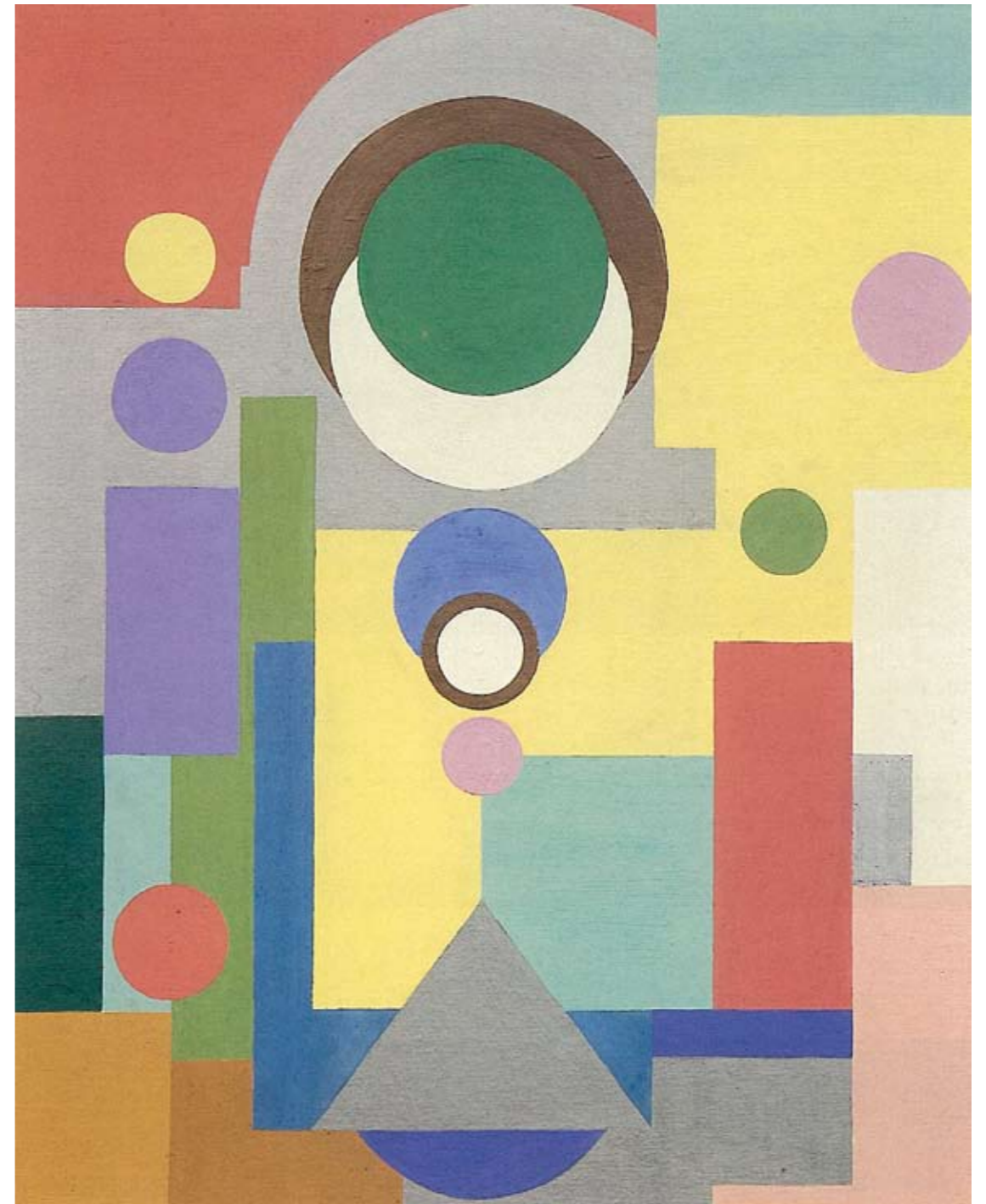
*Painting* 1941  
oil on cardboard  
79.0 x 63.5 cm  
Signed and dated l.r.: R-Balson-/41  
Purchased 1965  
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales  
© R Balson Estate

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Balson Crowley Fizelle Hinder Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, October 1966, cat. 5; Ralph Balson A Retrospective Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, August 1989, cat. 9.*



*Constructive painting* c1941  
oil on cardboard  
78.0 x 63.0 cm  
Unsigned and undated  
Conal Coad / Colin Beutel Collection  
Image courtesy Deutscher-Menzies, Sydney

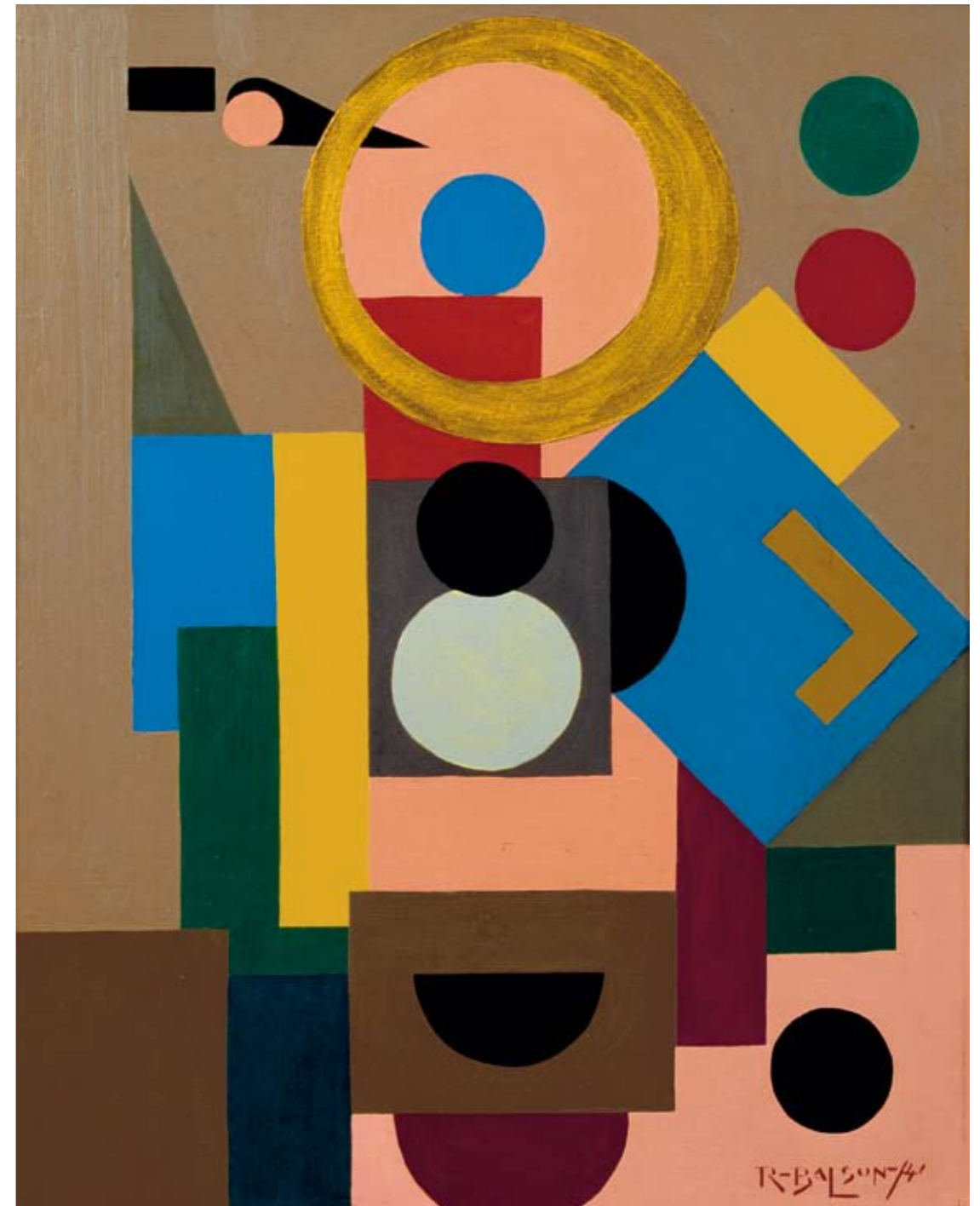
Exhibited: *Ralph Balson* Gallery A, Sydney, November 1979, cat. 12; *Ralph Balson 10 Constructive Paintings* Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, October 1980, cat. 1.





*Painting* 1941  
oil on cardboard  
70.5 x 56.0 cm  
Signed and dated l.r.: R-Balson-/41  
Private Collection, Sydney  
Photograph: Jenni Carter

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Ralph Balson* Gallery A, Sydney, November 1979, cat. 14; *Ralph Balson 10 Constructive Paintings* Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, October 1980, cat. 6.





*Painting* 1941  
oil on cardboard  
70.0 x 55.0 cm  
Signed and dated l.l.: R-Balson-/41  
Collection of Sir James and Lady Cruthers, Perth  
Photograph: Jenni Carter

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Pure Abstraction Painters* Gallery, Sydney, August 1986, cat. 1; *Ralph Balson A Retrospective* Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, August 1989, cat. 10.



*Constructive painting* c1941  
oil on cardboard  
51.0 x 76.5 cm  
Unsigned and undated  
Arthur Roe Collection  
Courtesy Niagara Galleries, Melbourne  
Photograph: Mark Ashkanasy

Exhibited: *Blue Chip III: The Collectors Exhibition* Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, March 2002, cat. 11.



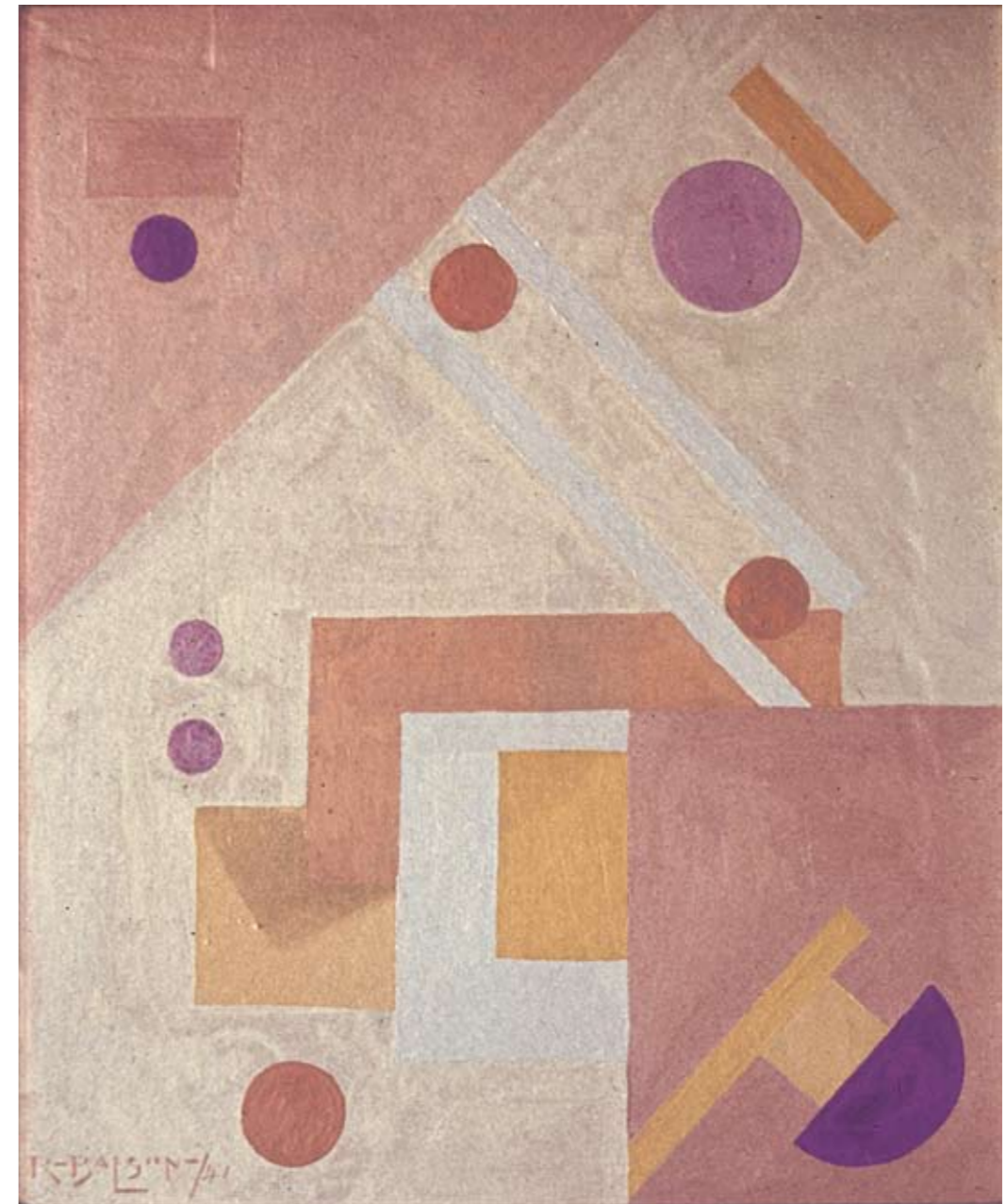
*Painting 1941*  
oil and metallic paint on cardboard  
46.0 x 77.0 cm  
Signed and dated l.l.: R-Balson- /41  
Whitworth/Bruce Collection  
Photograph: Sue Blackburn

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Ralph Balson Second Memorial Exhibition* Gallery A, Sydney, July 1968, cat. 1; Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney, June 1992, cat. 5.



*Painting no. 14* 1941  
oil on cardboard  
46.0 x 79.0 cm  
Signed and dated l.l.: R-Balson- /41  
Private Collection, Sydney  
Image courtesy Christie's Images Ltd

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941, cat. 14; *Ralph Balson Second Memorial Exhibition* Gallery A, Sydney, July 1968, cat. 2.



*Painting* 1941  
oil and metallic paint on cardboard  
50.8 x 58.4 cm  
Signed and dated l.l.: R-Balson-/41  
Whereabouts unknown

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Ralph Balson Second Memorial Exhibition* Gallery A, Sydney, July 1968, cat. 4.

Not exhibited at Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 2008.

*Painting* 1941  
oil and metallic paint on cardboard  
77.0 x 62.0 cm  
Signed and dated l.l.: R-Balson-/41  
Whitworth/Bruce Collection  
Photograph: Sue Blackburn

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Ralph Balson Second Memorial Exhibition* Gallery A, Sydney, July 1968, cat. 5.





*Constructive painting* 1941  
oil and metallic paint on cardboard  
73.5 x 90.0 cm  
Signed and dated l.l.: R-Balson-/41  
Private Collection, London

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Ralph Balson Second Memorial Exhibition* Gallery A, Sydney, July 1968, cat. 7; *Ralph Balson* Gallery A, Sydney, November 1979, cat. 7; *Ralph Balson 10 Constructive Paintings* Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, October 1980, cat. 8; Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney, June 1992, cat. 6.

Not exhibited at Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 2008.





*Construction 3* 1941  
oil on cardboard on pineboard  
71.0 x 106.9 cm  
Signed and dated l.l.: R-Balson-/41  
Purchased 1978  
Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery  
Photograph: Dean Beletich

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Ralph Balson Second Memorial Exhibition* Gallery A, Sydney, July 1968, cat. 8.



*Untitled (Geometric Shapes)* 1941  
oil on cardboard  
73.0 x 89.0 cm  
Signed and dated l.r.: R-Balson-/41  
Collection Rupert Murdoch  
Photograph: Sue Blackburn

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941; *Ralph Balson* Gallery A, Sydney, November 1979, cat. 11; *Ralph Balson 10 Constructive Paintings* Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, October 1980, cat. 4.

*Painting no.17* 1941  
oil and metallic paint on cardboard  
91.7 x 64.8 cm  
Signed and dated l.r.: R-Balson-/41  
Hassall Collection  
Photograph: Sue Blackburn

Exhibited: Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, July 1941, cat. 17; *Ralph Balson Second Memorial Exhibition* Gallery A, Sydney, July 1968, cat. 6; *Ralph Balson A Retrospective* Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, August 1989, cat. 11.



## ‘A NEW REALM OF VISUAL EXPERIENCE’<sup>1</sup>

In the 1930s, a decade which has been characterised as the most restless of the twentieth century, Ralph Balson matured as a progressive proto-cubist painter within a circle of like-minded Sydney artists, then plunged, seemingly fully-formed into non-objective painting, with a solo exhibition at Anthony Horderns’ Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, in 1941. Here, in twenty-one works – a mixture of vertically and horizontally oriented compositions adopting geometrical motifs – he was seen to have radically reconceived his art in terms of the constructive capacities of shape and colour alone. Balson’s previous years had been spent with aesthetic partner Grace Crowley processing Paul Cezanne, Henri Matisse, the ‘soft-cubists’ Roger de La Fresnaye and Andre Lhote, and the work/writings of cubist Albert Gleizes, who had also assimilated the Orphism of Roger and Sonia Delaunay. The new geometric abstracts, probably the result of eighteen months work, were a leap into pure painting’s drive to the self-referential and to energised surface relationships. In the arena of Australian war-time Modernism – and several years in advance of Balson’s friend, sculptor Robert Klippel – they constituted the uncompromising claim that representational modes could no longer be part of a mission to poetically embody the modern condition and universal values.

In an era that saw an intense cultural focus on the conflicting aims of internationalism and nationalism, and a serious threat to diverse modernist enterprises from realist modes, modernism presented internationalism as a form of abstract universality, the value of which “could be felt by everyone”.<sup>2</sup> It encouraged a larger sense of a universal order encoded within the natural world, which sent a generation of Australian interwar artists, including Balson, to investigate the expression of utopian, metaphysical or mystical ideas through the ‘absolute’ systems of geometry, the organic mathematics of dynamic symmetry, theosophy, anthroposophy and Eastern mysticism. Geometric abstraction, described by the Museum of Modern Art director Alfred Barr in 1936 as intellectual, structural, architectonic and rectilinear, was seen as a new form of classical painting – ordered, analytical and capable of unlocking, beyond the sum of its parts, the inner logic of all things.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, geometric abstraction and Balson’s 1941 configurations are firmly related to an interwar ‘call to order’ or classicism which accompanied the rhetoric of progress and impacted on the art of both the European avant-garde and the establishment during this era.

Whilst shown for a mere ten days, Balson’s exhibition fulfilled over-ambitious claims made by the erudite and didactic modernist commentator Eleonore Lange two years previously when she heralded *Exhibition 1* – the group show of Sydney progressives Frank Hinder, Crowley, Balson, Rah Fizelle, Lange and others – as “a new realm of visual experience”.<sup>4</sup> Conceived as the first in a series which would usher abstract art into Australia, and promoted in avant-garde terms, *Exhibition 1* was nonetheless comprised of semi-figurative work and foregrounded a progressive rather than a vanguard position.<sup>5</sup> Balson’s solo exhibition of ‘pure painting’ during the war years, from an artist too old to enlist, was in one sense a cathartic substitute for the projected ‘Exhibition 2’.<sup>6</sup>

If one can claim that Hinder came to abstraction (or semi-abstraction) primarily through geometry, and Klippel through a machine-organic duality, Balson’s 1941 paintings speak of a transformation facilitated by his skill as a virtuoso colourist. Indeed over the course of Balson’s career as a committed abstract painter colour was consistently accorded pictorial supremacy in his art. His 1941 paintings demonstrate Lange’s central claim that colour relations were a keynote of contemporary painting.

The immediate, intriguingly jazz-moderne impact of these abstracts detours geometry’s “freezing virtue of aesthetic purity” for a remarkable colouristic and formalist hedonism; an abstract *joie de vivre*, which segregates these early paintings from others in Balson’s oeuvre, and perhaps implies the continuing impact of Bergsonian vitalism on Sydney painters.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding Lange’s invocation in 1939 of utopian idealism and its requisite theoretical underpinnings for art

practice, Balson’s public entrée as a constructive painter is less a treatise on the universal spiritual, than a celebratory, experimental and empirical engagement with non-representational composition and the effects of colour. The paintings are devoid of the didacticism or theorem oriented elements which persistently shadow Hinder’s art, for example. Beyond his use of rectangular canvases, which may have been chosen to align compositions to the harmonious proportions of the golden section, Balson’s apprehension of an underlying structure, like Klippel’s, appears not to have generated an interest in geometrical or mathematical systems beyond the poetic conception of them.<sup>8</sup> Yet if his works are more earthy than other (international) purist abstractions signifying visions of sublime transcendence or metaphors of an intangible reality, they were certainly signs of the new; representing gateways to a new visual experience in Australia.

In tracing a context for Balson’s aesthetic shift, it seems feasible to suggest something of an epiphany for the artist and Crowley around 1938-1939, which involved their realisation that, in terms of conveying the vital rhythms of reality, there was a crucial difference between those artists who abstracted (from the natural world) and those who conceived abstractly. In the terms of the era, this was a difference between a general category, ‘abstract art’, and that of non-objective painting, using ‘absolute’ forms.<sup>9</sup> The differences and values of each proved to be a central discussion in the decade: it was for example the core debate for the American Abstract Artists group, formed in 1937.

Crowley’s understanding of a fundamental split between the abstracted and abstract developed when working through the differences between her cubist teachers Lhote and Gleizes. She wrote that, “Fundamentally... Lhote seemed loath to leave the visual world about him and worked from it towards the abstract. Lhote made a compromise between the object seen and the wall, like Cezanne. Gleizes began with the wall and insisted that one never forgot it”.<sup>10</sup> Balson, “a born abstract artist” was, according to Crowley, “rather more than interested” in the theories of Gleizes, whose dictums were sent to the artists from the mid-1930s in a steady stream by the evangelical Anne Dangar.<sup>11</sup> They stressed the animation of the flat surface, the elimination of all three dimensional effects which break the flatness of this surface, and the notion of setting flat planes in motion by shifting them across one another in layered rectangles and tilting or rotating them.<sup>12</sup>

Such revelations were no doubt consolidated by Balson’s (apparently extensive) reading in the European historical avant-garde and interwar non-objective painters.<sup>13</sup> His familiarity with seminal modernist texts, Wassily Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art* (1912) and *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), and Paul Klee’s *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1925) can perhaps be assumed; along with his knowledge of the Russian constructivists. Crowley, Hinder and various scholars have cited other publications of interest to the Sydney painters in these years, including *Unit I, L’Esprit Nouveau*, László Moholy-Nagy’s *New Vision* (1939); Naum Gabo in *Circle* (1937), the writings of Paris-based group *Abstraction-Creation* (which became a rallying point for those developing a more rational side of abstraction through geometry), and Alfred Barr’s landmark *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), stressing the formalistic implications of abstraction.

Bruce Adams has noted Balson’s access to Piet Mondrian’s essays from the 1930s, (“Neoplasticism in Painting” and later in the 1940s, “Plastic art and Pure Plastic art”), in which this spokesperson for a universal, spiritually motivated, scientifically based art, argued that Cubism had not accepted the logical consequences of its own discoveries, the expression of “pure plastics”, and urged the dissolving of the individual ego for the universal; the subjective for the objective – views which Balson would later paraphrase to historian Herbert Badham.<sup>14</sup> If Balson, who claimed Mondrian the single greatest influence on his art, had no interest in visual homage, the 1941 paintings nonetheless speak of Mondrian’s promotion of an entirely abstract art of relationships, and of his obsession with flatness.

All such readings were significant for Balson, yet there also seems little doubt that of central impact on him was a 1937-1938 catalogue of the Guggenheim collection of non-objective paintings featuring Kandinsky and Rudolf Bauer, which Hinder showed to him around 1938.<sup>15</sup> Indeed the preoccupations and innovations of Kandinsky's 1920s Bauhaus paintings and to a lesser extent those of the more reductive Bauer, permeate Balson's 1941 group as a whole. The question of how one achieves a balanced, ordered yet not static composition, and how the work might be freed from the gravitational ground, for example, are played out through an overarching investigation into dynamic tensions and asymmetrical balances. Harmony, contrast, and counterbalance of geometrical forms and colour become the means of achieving surface animation in the relational whole. Iconographic elements of modernism – such as the diagonal (Kandinsky's line of ascending motion) and the floating circle (the symbolic core of Kandinsky's 1920s paintings) – are used extensively (without this artist's cosmic overtones), along with Gleizes' dictum of tilting and setting planes in motion, and the diagramatised triangle/rectangle configurations of El Lissitzky, for example. In contrast to the methodologies of distillation at work in Mondrian, Balson largely opts for Kandinsky's achievement of abstraction through a proliferation of forms.

The paintings, which are conceived along broader lines than the highly detailed worlds of Kandinsky and Bauer, present as a series. Marked by eclecticism, within an overall coherency, they imply step-by-step moves through various aesthetic relationships or problems – the investigatory nature of which will be amplified across the terrain of Balson's art as a whole. One hypothetical sequence would begin with the vertically oriented *Painting* (page 11), a proto-cubist work with a clear central arrangement, which retains the sense of a motif abstracted.<sup>16</sup> Balson may then have painted the set of highly animated rectangular compositions, climaxing in the exuberant clash of geometric (rectangular and circular) elements in *Untitled (Geometric Shapes)* (page 33) – before the stylistic diversion of the rigorously flattened, metallic compositions, and finally perhaps the arrangements of half-concealed, half-revealed forms, and quiet, largely rectangular overlapping planes. These latter works prefigure, in their erosion of the figure-ground configuration and their greater austerity, the essential concerns and different spatial pulsations of Balson's simplified 1940s 'transparent' paintings.

The works are smoothly painted on cardboard and have been meticulously planned, with careful pencil underdrawing and little alteration. Background colours have generally been brushed in as the final act. One is immediately struck by the materiality and handcrafted quality of the paintings, which are given greater emphasis by opaque pigment and the collage feel of slightly raised painted forms. Those works with largely pristine surfaces are the result of restorative manicuring, and make punctilious Balson's otherwise rustically hand-hewn edges and the beguiling wonkiness of his painted circles.

Given the Sydney interwar focus on colour theory, Lange's in-depth investigations into colour and light over 1936-1939, and Balson's own occupation as a house-painter, one can assume his familiarity with the subject.<sup>17</sup> Constructive colour theory embraced the principles of colour effects as they could be derived empirically, yet for most artists intuition remained primary, not systematisation. Balson's colour in 1941, as subsequently, appears devoid of programmatic application. As James Gleeson once aptly put it, whilst always calculated in his uses, Balson was "a lover of colour, not an administrator of it".<sup>18</sup> Unlike Crowley he was not swayed by the low-key colours of Lhote-inspired Cubism, yet the blond and pink tonalities of the mid-1930s paintings leave us unprepared for the baroque orchestrations of 1941. Indeed it is in his colour relationships and rhythms that these paintings are uniquely Balson. Like all intuitives, Balson displays emotional affinities for certain hues – the dusty pink and pastel green combinations remain in his work for decades. In this series he works, like Matisse and Kandinsky, largely on the basis of relationships of contrasting colour. Yet it is not Kandinsky's symbolically resonant colour; or

Klee's lateral uses of pigment nor Matisse's fauvist intensity, but an idiosyncratic combination of emphatically opaque, 40s and 50s domestic-type spectrums of subtle tertiary hues – faded brownish pinks, sour pastel leaf greens, ochre-ish tarnished yellows, aged baby blues – which are interspersed with areas of fresher, acid colour. Following Mondrian, black becomes an element in itself. Whilst avoiding the volume-producing effects of lights and darks angled against each, Balson's arrangements create sometimes dizzying recession-projection tensions on the simultaneously flat surface – such as those orchestrated around a screen of pale grey bars and bright colours in *Painting no. 14* (page 23).

If Balson's rather extraordinary use of metallic paints (bronze, gold, silver and copper in the majority of paintings studied) followed an example set by Klee, the results are radically different.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding the difficulty in gauging their original effects (due to oxidisation) allusions to the machine were surely always subsumed to the decorative, the theatrical, and light reflecting. The suggestion that Balson used metallic pigment to dampen down his compositions seems plausible: the primary effect in compositions wholly comprised of metallic paints is of extreme flatness and static arrangements slightly reminiscent of the forms of Synthetic Cubism. Silver backgrounds conflate ground and picture plane, and even with successions of overlapping planes, tilted elements, and projecting rays (which could all imply recession) there is little surface tension and virtually no depth. If Mondrian's white reaffirmed the flatness of the pictorial support whilst simultaneously suggesting infinite space, Balson's thinly painted metallic areas are incapable of implying either unbounded space or surface animation. Yet it is also possible that the isolated metallic elements in the otherwise oil painted works, such as *Painting* (page 15), became light-reflecting 'flares', forcing an even greater dynamism. Perhaps such experimentation can be seen as a first indicator of what would become a major preoccupation with the effects of light amongst Australian painters in the subsequent decade. Sidney Nolan for example, also looked to Klee (though for different reasons) and he too, like Balson, Crowley and Hinder, became preoccupied with light in the 1940s.

The colouristic euphoria and the subversions to the geometric order in Balson's compositions are as arresting as the rational structures. The latter include the repeated use of an irregular, unbalanced open-circle, an arching slug like form, and the strangely serrated black shape seen in *Painting* (page 11). Such elements can be read as subjective incursions into a purportedly objective art, or organic territories within the constructivist whole; and prompt one to question whether the notion of the detached analyst, and of painting as metaphor of scientific idealism, has not been overstated in Balson's art. These elements not only animate the composition but threaten that sense of a mutual exclusivity between geometric and organic, the constructivist and expressive; and the view of Balson's aesthetic shifts as a move from the mechanically rigid to the embracingly flexible, which has been evident in various critiques of his work.

Balson's paintings made specific claims to Modernism's internationalism, yet these paintings are also products of a particular Sydney milieu. Sydney preferences for rhythmic expression have been well documented.<sup>20</sup> The concept of art as a construction; as a set of identifiable, interrelated components which each have a function in forming a unified relational whole (thereby implying what is permanent about this whole) had also been valued across a wide range of modernisms in Sydney from the early 1920s.<sup>21</sup> These first non-representational experiments also have a stylistic lineage that stretches from Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin's colour-music abstracts of 1919 to the design-oriented Burdekin House exhibition (1929), which also indicated artists' familiarity with Mondrian, early Constructivism and the Bauhaus.

At a time when Hinder continued to balance flat patterning with depth, Balson skated along an unequivocally flattened edge, which Kandinsky himself feared, involving how to avoid the non-referential sliding into the decorative. One can argue that here

Balson embraces and extends the terms of 'the decorative' as already encountered in Sydney interwar traditions, where cubist and abstract devices gained currency as fashionable designs across photography, graphic design, applied arts and fashion. The exhibition of these works in the grand gallery space of one of Sydney's interwar 'cathedrals of commerce', which reserved the Gallery's central area for furniture, artefacts and carpets, only reinforces a point which is perhaps also made by Crowley's archly moderne signature (of Balson's name) on their surfaces.<sup>22</sup>

Notwithstanding the view of a delay or lag in Australian experimentation with and acceptance of abstract art, Balson's move to geometric abstraction proceeded in parallel with contemporaneous trends in America and Britain. Burgoyne Diller's mid-1930s Mondrian-inspired abstractions are generally considered the earliest investigations of new abstraction in America; and in 1935, under the aegis of the Seven and Five Society, British artists including Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, and Henry Moore mounted what is viewed as the first entirely abstract exhibition in England since Vorticist shows two decades previously.

If critic Basil Burdett could claim in 1938 that "Surrealism is practically non-existent. Abstraction is practised very little. Even post-Impressionism is in its infancy" he stood on the crest of a wave which broke a moment later.<sup>23</sup> Whilst drives to shape a national idiom in art continued unabated in Australia (and Hinder, for example, was criticised by Margaret Preston for painting in an 'un-Australian manner'), artists were also involved in diverse ranges of abstract experimentation by the late 30s – Sam Atyeo, Russell Drysdale, Adrian Lawlor, and Nolan among them (Atyean's controversial *Organised Line to Yellow* had been exhibited in 1934).<sup>24</sup> In Sydney Hinder produced abstract watercolours and experimented with constructivism in 1938, and Eric Wilson began teaching abstract composition at East Sydney Technical College in 1940. Australian transitions through Cubism were highlighted in one critic's identification of an "endless repetition of abstract designs in the Picasso manner" within the Contemporary Art Society in 1940 – a group for which Lionel Lindsay registered in the same year influences as diverse as Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, Gleizes, Joan Miró, Jean Arp, Juan Gris, Salvador Dalí, Kandinsky, Willi Baumeister, and Lyonel Feininger.<sup>25</sup>

The aesthetic partnership formed between Balson and Crowley over 1938-1939, which underpinned the 1941 exhibition, was marked by joint portraits – a significant project on the eve of an unequivocal departure from proto-cubist painting, particularly as Crowley and Balson both embraced the notion of an insightful account of the subject.<sup>26</sup> One can argue this desire as complicit in Balson's pull back to a Cézanne-esque rather than cubist treatment in *Portrait of Grace Crowley* (1939). Using, perhaps coincidentally, the beige, pink and blue palette of Mondrian's pre-World War I constructions (which would remain amongst Balson's favourite combinations), the artist painted an elegy to volumetric modelling and representation; conveying light, depth and the character of Crowley as an attractive, petite, contemplative woman. Crowley's Matisse-inspired *The Artist and his Model* (1938) is, on the other hand, revelatory but only in the way the title implies. Portraying Balson from behind, standing to attention in front of the easel, it is a portrait of 'the artist' with no more individual idiosyncrasy or physiological likeness than can be indicated by Balson's signature house-painter overalls, the implication that he is a modernist, and the 'Mondrian palette' lying at his feet. The subject's psychological muteness is a point neatly made: Crowley later noted that, "As time went on I began to realise that Balson WAS his painting".<sup>27</sup> In this sense the work perhaps marks both the enigma of the Balson-Crowley relationship and the beginning of a mythologising of Balson.

This enigma is a significant part of the story that Balson's 1941 paintings were the triumphal introduction of geometric abstraction in Australia. In the context of a longstanding debate over mutual influence, Crowley positioned herself with those who saw Balson as the prime figure of Australian non-objective innovation.

She claimed "As far as abstract work was concerned I owe more to Balson than to anyone else", virtually writing herself out of the cathartic developments in non-objective painting over 1940-1941, through both consistent promotion of Balson and the destruction or surrender of her own 1940-1941 paintings to his art.<sup>28</sup> Crowley later orchestrated Balson's appointment as part time teacher at East Sydney Technical College in 1949: she was perhaps instrumental in organising his 1941 exhibition.<sup>29</sup>

The tendency in the 1960s to lionise Balson as the heroic precursor of the 'architectural' structures of 1960s geometric abstraction left him the perennial, although venerated, outsider. This and claims during the 1980s that "to talk of influences on Balson's art is irrelevant" or that Balson was "probably the only true modernist Australia has produced until the 1960s generation" followed an impulse to historicise and mythologise in which Balson was arguably complicit.<sup>30</sup> Although it has been claimed that no-one could have painted with less concern for either the art market or art history, the historicising of the 1941 exhibition as the first purely abstract solo show here was a claim made by Balson himself, in 1955, when compiling his abstract credentials for French critic Michel Seuphor's *Dictionary of Abstract Painting* (1957).<sup>31</sup>

The subsequent view that the 1941 exhibition was the victim of staunchly negative critiques proves inaccurate. If what was seen as the purely intellectual and non-indigenous proposition of abstract art constituted a challenge to establishment modes, most controversy in Sydney was, nonetheless, directed towards the challenge of Surrealism, not geometric abstraction (which appears frequently to have been ignored). *The Bulletin's* brief report was characteristically condescending towards modernist art, whereas *The Sydney Morning Herald's* was positive; allowing that Balson had created "some really capable and interesting works" and that "too few of our painters can truly claim this distinction".<sup>32</sup> Also in September 1941 *Art in Australia* reproduced a Balson abstract from the Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries exhibition.<sup>33</sup> In the context of the period this constituted a not unsuccessful enterprise.

If the Australian public was largely committed to the heroic nationalist mythologies of the 1940s and 50s, and barely purchased Balson in his lifetime, artists and art institutions have long known Balson's work – from the 1940s and 50s when he was exhibiting regularly, to the 1960s when Balson's 're-discovery' became part of the marketing of his estate – and to the present day.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless within this history, the notion of a progressive or evolutionary development in Balson's abstraction, and the consistent value applied to the dazzling, dappled paintings of the late 1950s, has been complicit in keeping knowledge of and admiration for the first geometric paintings of 1941 at a minimum.<sup>35</sup> Notwithstanding an extremely modest price range (£5-25), it appears that none of the paintings were sold in 1941 and were subsequently stored for two decades.<sup>36</sup>

If the question of status does continue to haunt Australian geometric abstraction, one can perhaps posit that under this first opportunity for we, who are now outside the modernist tradition, to gain comprehensive insight into the 1941 works, Balson's series will significantly enhance claims made for the genesis and stature of geometric abstraction in this country. Indeed the 1941 paintings form a surprisingly demonstrative, vivid, and regionally nuanced episode of sheer colouristic individualism and inventiveness in the history of Australian non-representational painting and sculpture which is yet to be written.

#### Deborah Edwards

Senior Curator of Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, July 2008

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<sup>1</sup> Eleonore Lange, “Foreword,” *Exhibition 1*, exh. cat., (Sydney: David Jones’ Art Gallery, 1939)

<sup>2</sup> Hilla Rebay, “Non-Objectivity is the Realm of the Spirit. Value of Non-Objectivity,” *The Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings*, (New York, 1937); expanded edition 1938.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Barr, Director of Museum of Modern Art, described it thus in the exhibition catalogue for the landmark show, *Cubism and Abstraction*, New York, 1936.

<sup>4</sup> Lange, 1939.

<sup>5</sup> All works were semi-figurative except for one small abstract design by Frank Hinder which Renee Free says “has the impression of being abstracted rather than truly abstract”. Renee Free, *Balson-Crowley-Fizelle-Hinder*, exh. cat., (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1966); Renee Free and John Henshaw, *The Art of Frank Hinder*, unpublished manuscript, (Sydney, 2008) 88.

<sup>6</sup> Ignored by many critics and scathingly reviewed by the reactionary Howard Ashton it has been suggested that the impetus of *Exhibition 1* was lost in the declaration of war and the subsequent dispersal of the group (although Hinder, Balson, and Crowley, along with Gerald Ryan did show again in May, 1944). In this context one can note that Frank, and probably Margel, Hinder did not see Balson’s 1941 exhibition. (Frank had joined the army, on 8 July 1941 and was apparently in Canberra). Free and Henshaw, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> What James Gleeson called the chief danger in abstract art James Gleeson, *Sun* 21 May 1952.

<sup>8</sup> Certainly the canvases examined under ultra-violet show pencil drafting but no graphing or gridding up of the composition.

<sup>9</sup> Under such a schema Crowley later referred to ‘pseudo-abstractionists’ who emerged in the 1940s. They probably included the great semi-abstract painters John Passmore, Ian Fairweather and Godfrey Miller.

<sup>10</sup> Grace Crowley, “Notes to Bruce Adams c.1974,” *Crowley bequest papers*, Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archive.

<sup>11</sup> See Bruce Adams, *Ralph Balson. A retrospective*, exh. cat. (Heide Park and Art Gallery: Victoria, 1989); Bruce Adams, *Rustic Cubism. Anne Dangar and the Art Colony at Moly-Sabata*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2004); Helen Topliss, *Earth, Fire, Water, Air. Anne Dangar’s Letters to Grace Crowley 1930-1951*, (Allen & Unwin: Sydney, 2000).

At a practical level Crowley claimed that Balson was disinclined to embark on the many preparatory drawings, which were part of Gleizes’ method and became part of Hinder’s characteristic practice. (Grace Crowley, “Notes,” Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archive; see also Bruce Adams, 1989)

<sup>12</sup> Crowley on the other hand, had registered that during earlier lessons from Gleizes, in 1928, she had been “really not terribly interested in the completely abstract”. She has said, “I was a completely linear artist but he [Balson] was not ... he constructed a space while I had to be educated to that”.

Grace Crowley, “Grace Crowley speaks about Ralph Balson,” *Hazel de Berg Collection*, (Feb 1966), NLA. Certainly line is more difficult to disassociate from the

representational than colour. In the absence of extant paintings by Crowley from 1940-1941 (although it is known that she was painting then), a recently discovered c.1940-1941 geometric abstraction by the artist (which was painted-over and used as backing for another work) must (perhaps unfairly) act as reinforcement of this point. In terms of this unresolved painting at least, Balson must be viewed as the master to Crowley’s student.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Thomas, “Ralph Balson,” *Art and Australia* 2.4 (March 1965): 248-259; see also Bruce Adams, 1989 for lists of books read by Balson.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Adams, “Metaphors of Scientific Idealism: The Theoretical Background to the Paintings of Ralph Balson,” *Art and Architecture. Essays Presented to Bernard Smith* (eds.) Anthony Bradley and Terry Smith, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1980) 183-191. Balson said that he believed modern technology would eventually lead to the submersion of the individual ego into a kind of universal ego; that the source of true design was to be found in cosmic laws; and that these truths remained a better basis for progress than any other.

Herbert Badham, *A Study of Australian Art*, (Sydney, 1949) 146.

<sup>15</sup> The publication, *The Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection of Non-Objective Paintings*, (New York, 1937); expanded edition 1938, carried an introductory essay by Hilla Rebay. The 1938 edition also contained illustrations of the work of Leger, Picasso, Delaunay, Klee, Feininger, Gleizes and others.

<sup>16</sup> It is possible that the motif was Picasso’s *Harlequin with guitar* (1918), and the black shape in the painting an abstraction of the harlequin’s hat. The work is reproduced in Carl Einstein’s 1931 *Die Kunst des 20-Hahrhunderts*, which may be “the large German book” Crowley mentioned to Balson exhaustively examining in the late 1930s. For example, “The big German book ... must have had a profound influence on Balson 1932-1934. He did not know a word of German nor did I but the reproductions absorbed him til he nearly wore it out with his eager hands.”

Grace Crowley, *Crowley Bequest Papers*; Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archive.

<sup>17</sup> Lange was engaged in writing *On the Spectral Colour Forms*, an anthroposophy-inspired analysis of light and colour which may have impacted on the investigations of Balson, Crowley and Hinder into the 1940s.

<sup>18</sup> James Gleeson, “Second Memorial Exhibition. Gallery A,” *Sun* (undated c.1968); Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archive.

<sup>19</sup> The paints, according to conservators Stewart Laidler and Margaret Sawecki are of the type one could buy in an art supply shop for decorative effects on frames. (I am grateful to both for looking at the works). Metallic paints have been used on *Painting* (page 15), *Painting* (page 17), *Painting* (page 21), *Painting* (page 25), *Painting* (page 27), *Constructive painting* (page 29), *Untitled (Geometric Shapes)* (page 33), *Painting no. 17* (page 35).

<sup>20</sup> One cannot find a better study than Mary Eagle, *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-1939*, (Bay Books: Sydney, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Bill Wright recalls that Balson as a teacher very much retained the relational model of creating, claiming for example, that the painting had to be able to work when rotated. (Bill Wright, in conversation with the author, June 16, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Balson first exhibited work publicly with the ‘Younger Group of Australian Artists’ in February 1927 at Anthony Horderns’ Fine Art Galleries. It is generally accepted that

Crowley signed all of Balson’s paintings for the 1941 show (his name but her idiosyncratic signature writing): the reason frequently cited is that her writing was superior to his, although this seems a not entirely convincing explanation for this strangely possessive gesture. She dated all of them 1941.

<sup>23</sup> Basil Burdett, “Modern Art in Melbourne,” *Art in Australia* 3:73 (November 1938) 12.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Hinder, “Daze in the Grosvenor Gallery,” *Diary*, (1938); Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archive. All produced cubist still lifes and abstract studies in Melbourne. Sidney Nolan’s late 1930s abstracts were consolidated in the controversial surrealist *Boy and the moon* (c.1939-1940) and works which comprised his first solo show in 1940 in Melbourne and at the Contemporary Art Society exhibition, Sydney, September 1940.

<sup>25</sup> “RL”, unidentified press clipping, (1940); Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archive; Lionel Lindsay, “Letter to the Editor,” *Sydney Morning Herald* 10 October 1940. The 1939 Herald exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art, whilst championed as a key moment for ‘the modern’ in Australia appears, as Daniel Thomas has recognised, to have had a less than profound impact on Australian artists who were well travelled and up to date. It also largely omitted Analytical Cubism, Dada and abstraction.

<sup>26</sup> These are also amongst Crowley and Balson’s most actively painted works of the period, with large areas of untouched ground, scumbled and exuberantly applied brushstrokes, and in Balson’s case, splashes and runs of paint down the surface.

<sup>27</sup> Grace Crowley, “Notes,” *Crowley Bequest Papers*, Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archive.

<sup>28</sup> Crowley paintings have been found as backing boards for Balson’s works, or cut up, used as filler between frame and painting. Crowley regarded her support of Balson as the most important role she had played. See Crowley, “Notes,” *Crowley Bequest Papers*, Art Gallery of New South Wales; Hazel de Berg interview (1966), NLA; Elena Taylor, *Grace Crowley, Being Modern*, (National Gallery of Australia: Canberra, 2006); The author in conversation with Elena Taylor and Daniel Thomas, (June 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Horderns’ Fine Art Galleries had a manager, but according to wording on Balson’s exhibition catalogue, “Anthony Horderns’ Fine Art Galleries are ... available to artists of repute and art exhibitors generally who desire to show their work to the best advantage. Enquiries are cordially invited.” (*Catalogue of an exhibition of oil paintings by Ralph Balson*, 29 July – 9 August 1941). In other words Balson may have simply rented the space. William Lister Lister, aged 81, had exhibited a set of “genial landscapes” at Horderns’ in April 1941, and immediately preceding Balson, Sylvia Davis, a young pupil of Sydney Long, had her first solo show there: both, perhaps, imply that a rental system for the Horderns’ Fine Art Galleries was in place.

<sup>30</sup> Paul McGillick, “The Importance of Ralph Balson,” *Aspect. Art and Literature* 22 (October 1981): 5-17. Balson himself revealed very few biographical details, and certainly the few extant accounts concerning influences on his art are enigmatic. Grace Crowley for example claimed that Balson was “not very patient” when hearing about Lhote and Gleizes (Daniel Thomas, 1965; “Crowley notes”, Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archive); Hinder noted that Balson viewed the mathematical systematisation outlined by Lange as “silly” and that he dismissed the Kandinsky-Bauer catalogue which Hinder brought to his attention around 1938. (Renee Free, *Frank Hinder*, exh. cat. (Art Gallery of New South Wales: Sydney, 1980) 11; Renee Free, 2008, 68.)

Robert Klippel later told of Balson’s claim that “he got nothing out of” studying two Riopelle paintings Klippel had lent to him around 1950. (Klippel, interview with author, 19 May 1999). In each case the impact proved seminal.

<sup>31</sup> Most appear to think the claim to have been made by Daniel Thomas, 1965, or Crowley, 1966. Balson’s wording to Seuphor was in fact; “First one man show of abstract work Sydney 1941, the first in Sydney”. (Balson, “Notes”, *Crowley Bequest Papers*, Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archive.) By the time the book was published it had been altered to “first in Australia”.

<sup>32</sup> *The Bulletin*, 6 August 1941; By Our Art Critic, “Two art shows of interest,” *The Sydney Morning Herald* 30 July 1941: 7.

<sup>33</sup> The work reproduced is *Painting* (page 9).

<sup>34</sup> As Daniel Thomas has pointed out (Thomas 1965), Balson’s art had been known from the mid 1930s when he had held his first one man exhibition and been inscribed in William Moore’s major, *Story of Aust Art* (1934). He was mentioned in Bernard Smith’s *Place Taste and Tradition* (1945); discussed in Herbert Badham’s *A Study of Australian Art* (1949); and was acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the 1950s. He exhibited regularly in this decade, in various Australian and international exhibitions. He taught abstract painting at the National Art School, East Sydney Technical College, Sydney (1949-1959), which brought him to the attention of two generations of contemporary painters. Balson became a figure of attention as Gallery A launched its three memorial exhibitions over 1967-1969: (Then) Director of Newcastle Art Gallery David Thomas recalls large numbers of Sydney artists at the exhibitions, which elicited extensive press coverage, unprecedentedly high sale prices (comparable to Nolan’s), and significant acquisitions for both public institutions and private collectors. It was at these exhibitions that the artist’s 1941 geometric abstractions first came again to light.

<sup>35</sup> Regard for Balson’s different phases of abstraction has waxed and waned. The so-called ‘matter paintings’ of the early 1960s – in which Balson moved beyond the notion of chance as gateway to the individual unconscious, to a sense of a blind chance – catalysed a strong negative reaction from Surrealist James Gleeson. The pricing structure for the Balson paintings immediately after his death highlights the value placed on the 1941 works: Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased (in 1965) *Painting* (1941) for 10 guineas (page 11); *Abstraction* (1950) for 70 guineas and *Pastel* (1959) for 20 guineas.

<sup>36</sup> Most of the works were for sale between £10-20 (which can be compared for example with unknown artist Sylvia Davis whose first solo exhibition at Anthony Horderns’ Fine Art Galleries in May 1941 had works priced up to 70 guineas). Balson is reputed to have sold less than a dozen works in his lifetime. (Unknown Author, “Ex-housepainter hailed as art wonder”, *Sun Herald* 12 November 1967, Art Gallery of New South Wales Archives). Re: history; The group of paintings was apparently returned to Grace Crowley’s studio at 215a George Street after the 1941 exhibition, then moved in 1942 to Balson’s home at Maroubra when Sydney Harbour came under threat of bombing. Here they remained, although it appears that by the time they were picked up by Max Hutchinson and Gallery A (by April 1967) there were no longer 21 paintings extant. See Chambers and Whitworth, this catalogue.

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