



SYMPOSIUM PAPERS

COLOUR IN ART – REVISITING 1919

&

R-BALSON-/41

ANTHONY HORDERNS' FINE ART GALLERIES

SYMPOSIUM PAPERS

COLOUR IN ART – REVISITING 1919

&

R-BALSON-/41

ANTHONY HORDERNS' FINE ART GALLERIES

CONTENTS

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

- Modern Australia: Colour in Art 1910s – 1950s
Dr Daniel Thomas AM 3

COLOUR IN ART – REVISITING 1919

- Introduction: An excerpt from *The Cavalier*
Nick Waterlow OAM and Annabel Pegus 12
- Re-reading the past: What do we really know about the *Colour in Art* exhibition?
Dr Heather Johnson 13
- Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith: Women on the wings of colour in art
Dr Deborah Hart 17
- A Theosophical Sydney: A context for the colour-music theory
Dr Jenny McFarlane 23
- Colour Music – Decoding de Maistre: The colour music code
Niels Hutchison 26
- The cycle of neglect in Australian art
Christopher Dean 30

R-BALSON-/41 – ANTHONY HORDERNS' FINE ART GALLERIES

- Introduction
Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth 32
- Concerning "A new realm of visual experience"
Deborah Edwards 33
- Crowley-Balson: Collaboration in abstraction
Elena Taylor 34
- Metal Guru: Ralph Balson's 1941 exhibition at Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney
A.D.S. Donaldson 37
- The inexplicable Balson
Dr Andrew McNamara 40
- Some observations on the uses of the traditional and the modern in Australian visual culture, 1937 to 1967
Dr Carolyn Barnes 44

MODERN AUSTRALIA: COLOUR IN ART 1910s–1950s

Why revisit *Colour in Art*, an exhibition of paintings and colour theory by 25-year-old "R. de Mestre" (Roi de Mestre, who later altered his name to Roy de Maistre), and modern paintings by 32-year-old "R. S. Wakelin" (Roland Wakelin), held in Sydney in 1919? And why also revisit an exhibition of paintings by 51-year-old Ralph Balson held in Sydney in 1941? Answers: the work reflected adventurous international avant-garde movements; the exhibitions were local milestones (in 1919 de Maistre produced Australia's first abstract painting, and in 1941 Balson's solo exhibition of 21 paintings was Australia's first to consist solely of abstract works); and the work was artistically very good, a point not grasped at the time.

And why me for the keynote address at today's symposium? Nick Waterlow, Director of the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, knew that, early in my 20 years as chief curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, I had made important acquisitions of paintings by Balson and then, in 1966, presented an exhibition – *Balson, Crowley, Fizelle, Hinder* – which contextualised the emergence of a group of Sydney abstractionists. Nick might not have known that the leading historian of Australian art, Bernard Smith, later complained that I had led a shift whose slogan could have been "Down with Dobell, Balson is best". Art museum collection curators do not attack work that has already achieved validation, but one of their chief roles is to identify work whose excellence is not yet widely appreciated, and I confess that I came to admire Balson's work much more than Dobell's. And I now recall that in 1968, when Bernard Smith brought leading art critic Clement Greenberg from New York to deliver the first annual Power Lecture at the University of Sydney, Greenberg failed to pause for Dobell during a tour of the New South Wales collection, but gave Balson's work serious attention and delivered the judgement: "That's good painting".

Nick Waterlow also knew that I had helped demonstrate the significance of the year 1919 when, in 1960, I acquired de Maistre's large *Rhythmic composition in Yellow Green Minor* for the Art Gallery of New South Wales; it was painted in 1919, immediately after the *Colour in Art* exhibition, and, being completely abstract, it was the best surviving example of colour music – which was the term always used in reminiscences of the exhibition. *Rhythmic composition in Yellow Green Minor* was discovered in time to appear as a colour illustration in Bernard Smith's standard text, *Australian Painting 1788–1960*. Bernard Smith's book also illustrated a small de Maistre that I had bought for myself, a patterned landscape in unnatural colours, dated 1918–19, that could have been in *Colour in Art*.

1. *Colour in Art* invitation. "COLOUR IN ART, Mr. Gayfield Shaw requests the pleasure ... Friday August 8th 1919"

In August 1919 the invitation to *Colour in Art* announced "... an INITIAL EXHIBITION introducing R. de Mestre's new theory of colour organisation as it applies to the Art of the Painter and, incidentally, to Interior Decoration, together with an important group of recent paintings by R. S. Wakelin, already known in Sydney as an exponent of modern methods of colour expression". There were five paintings for sale by de Maistre and six by Wakelin, all probably landscapes or still lifes. By de Maistre there were three further interiors: no.12, *Interior in the key of Yellow*; no.13, *Interior, showing two rooms in related colour keys–Blue Green Major leading into Yellow Green Minor*; and no.14, *Interior in Orange Red Key*; "These designs are for sale subject to certain conditions"; plus not-for-sale "Colour Key Board – Discs – Scales, etc." In 1913 de Maistre had first been a music student (viola and violin) at the New South Wales Conservatorium, but began to study art as well; by 1917 he was interested in interiors, in particular the treatment of Great War shell-shock patients in rooms painted in soothing colour combinations.

De Maistre and Wakelin were about 45 years older than me but I often saw Wakelin in Sydney over the 12 years before his death (1971), and I visited de Maistre once, in London, two years before his death. That visit, in 1966, probably encouraged the bequest to the Art Gallery of New South Wales of the wonderful five-metre colour-music scroll and various colour-theory materials that are featured in Nick Waterlow and Annabel Pegus's exhibition *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919*.

Other speakers today will contribute further detail about these works. I will give a broad overview of the 1910s context, and the legacy up to the 1950s.

I hope among the more detailed papers today someone will explain the colour triangle on the 1919 invitation.¹ It contains a highly simplified landscape, a sun disc over mountains. The exhibition contained simplified landscapes, but was the triangle format something to do with mysticism? The beginnings of abstract art in Europe in the early 1910s were mixed up with alternative spiritualities as well as with music, and when I came to Sydney and started at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1958 the Contemporary Art Society's lectures were held in the Theosophical Society's Adyar Hall – named after the Theosophists' headquarters at Adyar in India.

In 1919 colour was still rare in the printing trade and in publishing, so I wonder if the colour triangle on the *Colour in Art* invitation-cum-catalogue was a favour from the progressive Smith and Julius commercial-art studio and advertising agency where Wakelin had a day job. It is also worth remembering that commercial artists, graphic designers and advertising agencies are always interested in the latest thing in art, and are able to afford up-to-date books and magazines on new art.

2. *Colour in Art* exhibition catalogue. Introduction page, signed “R. de M.” and Catalogue page

De Maistre’s now-famous catalogue statement is one of three crucial texts for Australian modern art. In 1919 de Maistre said that for some people:

Colour... constitutes an aesthetic pleasure or an interesting scientific phenomenon – the result of light vibrations acting upon their optic nerves. But there are many for whom Colour means far more than this – to them it brings the conscious realisation of the deepest underlying principles of nature, and in it they find deep and lasting happiness – for those people it constitutes the very song of life and is, as it were, the spiritual speech of every living thing.²

“The very song of life... the spiritual speech of every living thing”? Well, in London, where he lived from 1930 onwards, de Maistre did eventually convert from Anglicanism to a more ‘spiritual’ Roman Catholicism. On the other hand Wakelin’s funeral was without religious rites, so he might have been agnostic or atheist. And nearly ten years after the *Colour in Art* exhibition, when Wakelin looked back at the beginnings of “The Modern Art Movement in Australia” he wrote about structure. He invoked Cézanne, with:

... a table ‘skew-wiff’, a jug out of plumb, apples rough and unfinished... [but if we rectify in the interest of] ‘truth of appearance’ [we destroy] the rhythmic flow of line – that *concentric* feeling in the design, the feeling of ‘radiation from centres’ which is a basic truth of Life itself. In smoothing the apples the colour has lost all that *vitality* that separate juxtaposed touches give. We have sacrificed Life in the design ... to outward appearance. Which is more important, the body or the raiment? ...it is better to have a crude living thing than a well-dressed corpse.³

So, in 1928 the key terms for Wakelin were Life (with a capital “L”), vitality, rhythm, and the body. He was more concerned with the organic structures of nature than with the mystic spiritualities of early twentieth century culture. De Maistre was the avant-gardist; Wakelin settled back into a romantic Post-Impressionism, remaining loyal chiefly to Cézanne.

Back to the 1919 catalogue. The titles of de Maistre and Wakelin’s landscapes and still-lives relate colours to music (for example no.1, de Maistre’s *Syncromy in Blue Green, Major Key*, and no.2, Wakelin’s “*The Bridge*” – *An arrangement in Yellow Major resolving into Red Minor*) but they also retain Cézanne’s concern for landscape colours: “Blue Green” is green in shadow, “Yellow Green” is green for highlights. In 1916 Wakelin had named his house in Sydney “Cézanne”, after the greatest master of modern art. The 1919 catalogue titles also include the term “Syncromy”, spelled differently from the little-known and very short-lived movement called Synchronism. Perhaps someone at today’s symposium will tell us whether it was just a spelling mistake, or whether they were deliberately distancing their not-yet-abstract paintings from the then-recent Parisian Synchronism that they had read about.⁴

3. Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting*, 1915. Title page and Contents page

Willard Huntington Wright’s book *Modern Painting*, published in 1915, must have been the source for de Maistre and Wakelin’s ‘Syncromies’. Look at the inscribed title page in this copy of the book; its Sydney owner, Marriott Woodhouse, an artist, bought it in 1917, so it was certainly available at this end of the world. And remember, colonial Australians were always eager readers of books and magazines from ‘home’, Australian bookshops were happy to fill the demand, and there was never any significant time-lag in the reception of new ideas; it took only six weeks in a steamer from Europe to Australia. Above all, look at the table of contents of this book. In 1915 *Modern Painting* climaxed with chapters on “Henri-Matisse”, “Picasso and Cubism”, “Futurism” and – the most recent development at Wright’s time of writing – with “Synchronism”; no other book ever gave such status to Synchronism. A final chapter, titled “The Lesser Moderns”, is mostly about Kandinsky, who was disapproved of. Wright felt that Kandinsky was an illustrator: landscapes could be identified in his paintings; he didn’t really paint abstract work. (His pure abstract paintings came later than Wright’s book.) And it wasn’t just Kandinsky. The interesting Willard Huntington Wright also considered the Futurists too illustrative.

Only four of Wright’s 29 illustrations were in colour. The frontispiece – of course – was a Cézanne: a colourplate of a celebrated *Mont St Victoire* landscape. Next there was a colourplate nude by Renoir, an artist we no longer rate so highly.

4. Paul Gauguin, *Le Gué* (1901), colourplate from Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting*, 1915 and Henri Matisse. *Bathers with a turtle* (1908)

Much more significant, a Gauguin colourplate emphasised that artist’s flattened non-perspectival space, his flat patches of non-naturalistic colour, and a characteristic subject of primitive non-trivial Symbolist significance, a crossing of a Tahitian river of life, a sacred family in flight. Matisse’s *Bathers with a turtle* was in black and white in Wright’s book but here I show an image in colour to demonstrate the modernity of its colour and space; Wright’s illustration of this masterpiece at least revealed the simplified and very rhythmic forms. Picasso, too, failed to score a colourplate in Wright’s book, so Picasso and Matisse received equal treatment – the two artists who have long been seen as rivals for twentieth-century best, though right now I think art history has settled on Matisse.

5. Pablo Picasso, *Returning from the christening (after Le Nain)* (1917)

Those of you who have visited the exhibition *Picasso and His Collection*, at the Queensland Art Gallery, might have been surprised by an extremely uncharacteristic Neo-Impressionist-style appropriation of a seventeenth-century composition. In 1917, the label told us, Picasso was “somewhat tired of cubism’s austerity”. The brightly coloured pointillism, especially its clustering into rosettes, must have been Picasso’s response to the more vividly coloured concentricities of post-cubist Orphism, much noticed in Paris for a few years around 1913. Perhaps Picasso was not only “tired of austerity” but also aware of being overtaken by new forms of art. However, apart from this one-off oddity, Picasso did not pursue colour painting in 1917, and instead began a return from avant-garde cubist deformations to classical order.

6. Henri Matisse, *Nasturtiums with the painting “Dance”* (1912) and Roland Wakelin, *Untitled landscape with red shed* (1918)

In 1918, the year before the *Colour in Art* exhibition, Wakelin was more Matissean than in 1919; compare Wakelin’s *Untitled landscape with red shed* with a Matisse from 1912, *Nasturtiums with the painting “Dance”*. Note especially the casually scrubbed-in colours in both, and the bare ground left to breathe along the edges of the forms; the cool rectilinearities that accompany the more dominant warmly-curving rhythms; and the deliberate, alien strangenesses that Matisse places at the centre of things – the hard-shelled turtle with the previous naked *Bathers*, here the dangling ‘brooch’ of nasturtium-leaf tendrils at the apex of his studio easel. Wakelin’s red shed – with a sliced-off roof that projects pink rays (dirt roads maybe) out behind the tree-trunks – provides an Australian note of necessary strangeness.

7. Roy de Maistre, *Syncromy, Berry’s Bay* (1919) and Roland Wakelin, *Syncromy in orange major* (1919)

In 1919 de Maistre and Wakelin’s ‘Syncromy’ still-lives and landscapes were perhaps based ultimately on Gauguin’s Symbolist un-naturalism, or, in this pair of images – *Syncromy, Berry’s Bay* (National Gallery of Victoria Collection) and *Syncromy in orange major* (Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection) – perhaps directly on Kandinsky’s early toy-town landscapes.

The two painters must have been out together and found their shared Berry’s Bay subject a short walk towards the Sydney Harbour foreshore from Wakelin’s house. Wakelin by then had been married for three years and I suppose the married couple often fed the young bachelor Roi. In these landscapes the colleagues were not slavish followers of the Cézanne after whom Wakelin had named his house, but de Maistre’s ‘Syncromy’ obviously employs a Cézannesque yellow-green harmony. I am showing you the two images of the same subject together, and I am now proposing that they were placed side by side at The Art Salon in Penzance Chambers, Sydney, in August 1919. The exhibition catalogue for *Colour in Art* listed five alternating pairs, one artist presenting a study in one colour key, the other artist next presenting a contrasting colour key.

Wakelin’s painting, at present titled *Syncromy in orange major*, is the only securely identified work from the 1919 exhibition. Before Mervyn Horton bequeathed it to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Wakelin remembered that its title was either *Syncromy in Orange Red Major* or *Syncromy in Orange Major*. Since then

a copy of the 1919 catalogue has come to light, confirming that in *Colour in Art*, no.4 was “*Synchromy in Orange Red*, 30 Guineas, By R. S. Wakelin” and its companion no.3 was “*Synchromy in Yellow Green Minor*, 15 Guineas, By R. de Mestre”, cheaper and hence smaller than the larger Wakelin.

Deborah Edwards, curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, is here at today’s symposium, and might please consider adjusting the Wakelin title from *Synchromy in orange major* to *Synchromy in Orange Red*. Similarly, Elena Taylor, still a curator of Australian art at the National Gallery of Australia, and also here today, might consider recommending to her future colleagues in Melbourne that the National Gallery of Victoria adjust the de Maistre title from *Synchromy, Berry’s Bay* to *Synchromy in Yellow Green Minor*. And of course take special care to use the peculiar-to-Sydney 1919 spelling of ‘Synchromy’, not the Americans-in-Paris usage of ‘Synchromy’.

8. Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting*, 1915. colourplate *Arm Organisation in Blue-Green* (MacDonald-Wright) and black and white plate *Synchromie Cosmique* (Morgan Russell)

The last of the four colourplates in Willard Huntington Wright’s 1915 book *Modern Painting* is a Synchromy of abstract body forms. Stanton MacDonald-Wright’s *Arm Organisation in Blue-Green* followed the colourplates by Cézanne, Renoir and Gauguin, and appeared in the climactic chapter titled “Synchromism”. The chapter also included a black and white illustration of Morgan Russell’s *Synchromie Cosmique*. The movement lasted only two years (1913–14) and comprised only the two artists, both of whom were Americans living in Paris. Huntington Wright, who was MacDonald-Wright’s brother, said the movement was over by the time he wrote his book; by then MacDonald-Wright and Morgan Russell claimed they were no longer to be called “Synchromists”, they were only ‘modern painters’. There is a pleasing solidity in their paintings, a haptic empathy with real-world human bodies or man-made objects mutating under the life-force light that reaches Earth from outer space. Huntington Wright [*Modern Painting*, 1915, p.298–99] said:

The Synchromists used natural objects to create organisations of pure colour... This method contained greater emotional potentialities than Cézanne’s, because where the latter’s palette was necessarily much subdued in order to approximate to the attenuated gamut found in nature, the Synchromists’ palette was keyed to the highest pitch of saturation. With MacDonald-Wright and Russell the palette was completely and scientifically rationalised so that one could strike a chord upon it as surely and as swiftly as on the keyboard of a piano... Perfect poise of all the elements of a painting, expressed by the single element of colour, is the final technical aim of Synchromism.

That passage surely has to be the origin of de Maistre and Wakelin’s *Colour in Art*. I like the emphasis on “poise”. It’s an emphasis on energised stillness – that is, on painting as art.

9. Roy de Maistre, *Rhythmic composition in Yellow Green Minor*, 1919

Rhythmic composition in Yellow Green Minor is a large abstract work, over a metre wide, painted by de Maistre later in 1919, shortly after exhibiting the small landscapes in *Colour in Art*. It is an excellent example of Synchromism – but equally it could exemplify Orphism, or even Futurism. The three movements, formed by artists respectively from the United States, France and Italy, produced works that were very similar. (The closest overseas painting to de Maistre’s in an Australian collection is the Italian Futurist Leonardo Dudreville’s radiating colour-abstract *Espansione della Lirica* [*Expansion of Poetry*], (1913), acquired by Queensland Art Gallery in 1994.)

De Maistre never exhibited his swirling *Rhythmic composition in Yellow Green Minor*. He left it behind in Sydney when he finally departed Australia in 1930. It probably became the property of the painter Woodward Smith who lent it to the poetess Imogen Whyse to decorate her salon in a large attic apartment in the George Street artists’ quarter, where an impoverished young poet got his hands on it and sold it in 1960 to the Art Gallery of New South Wales – but probably was not its owner. Waiting for legal disputes to blow over, I withheld it from the annual Catalogues of Acquisitions that the Gallery published in those days. I was never fully satisfied whether the title de Maistre supplied, after eighteen months of my pestering correspondence, was a title in use in 1919 or a title that he made up in 1961. At any rate it is a convincing title. I had been suspicious of the title *Frozen music*, which is what the gang of poets called it.

10. Robert Delaunay, *Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon*, 1913 and Frantisek Kupka, *Red and blue disks*, 1911

The two American exponents of Synchromism in Paris protested, too much, that they had nothing to do with the better-known and slightly longer-lived movement called Orphism. Well... just look at these examples of Orphism: *Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon* (1913) by Robert Delaunay and *Red and blue disks* (1911) by Frantisek Kupka.

Sydney’s senior art-historian, Virginia Spate, in 1979 published the only full study of the movement. Her *Orphism: The evolution of non-figurative painting in Paris 1910–1914* mentions the Synchromists briefly, but focuses on the leaders of three strands: Robert Delaunay for what she calls ‘Perceptual Orphism’, Frank Kupka for ‘Mystical Orphism’, and Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp for ‘Psychological Orphism’. The term Orphism, referring to Orpheus the ancient god of music, was coined in 1914 by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who at first had spoken of Orphic Cubism; the movement grew out of cubism and developed into lyrical abstraction, employing pure, intense colours, and making reference to music. ‘Simultanisme’ was the term preferred by Delaunay, referring partly to the existence of endlessly interrelated states of being, but chiefly to Chevreul’s early-nineteenth-century treatise *On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colours*. Chevreul had observed that when contrasting colours of similar tonality are brought together they give a painting greater intensity and vibrance. De Maistre when I called on him in 1966 remarked on the special vibrance of the red–green contrast.

11. Roland Wakelin, *Colour-music, gouache* (1940s?) and Roy de Maistre, *Arrested phrase from Haydn Trio in Orange Red Minor* (1919–1935)

Senior artists often become testy when historians and curators dwell on early efforts. Grace Cossington Smith was inclined to dismiss her now-iconic *The sock knitter* (1915) [Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Collection, bought 1960], as mere “student work”; in the 1960s she preferred us to take an interest in her current work. Similarly when I asked Wakelin about his crystalline *Colour-music* gouache, he was unable to remember much about it except that it was “a return to colour-music, probably 1940s”. It’s the only known Wakelin comparable with any of de Maistre’s abstract works, and close to de Maistre’s own 1930s ‘return’ to abstract colour music. De Maistre’s *Arrested phrase from Haydn Trio in Orange Red Minor* and his *Arrested phrase from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Red Major* were painted in London in 1935 from studies made in Sydney in 1919. His *Rhythmic composition in Yellow Green Minor* belongs with Delaunay’s ‘Perceptual Orphism’, which was chiefly concerned with colour theory, whereas his Haydn and Beethoven compositions resemble Kupka’s ‘Mystic Orphism’.

12. Frantisek Kupka, *Study for the Language of Verticals* (1911) and Roy de Maistre, *Arrested phrase from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Red Major* (1919–1935).

13. Roy de Maistre, *Waterfront, Sydney Harbour* (1918-19) and Roland Wakelin, *Barn near Tuggerah* (1919) and Grace Cossington Smith, *The cabbage garden* (1919)

Grace Cossington Smith is always grouped with de Maistre and Wakelin as an important pioneer modernist. Wakelin’s 1928 article on the Modern Art Movement mentioned only the three of them, and wrote of “Miss Cossington Smith” around 1919 producing “topical subjects in vivid colour, using an extremely simplified symbolism”. Her small nocturne *The cabbage garden*, with a Chinese market gardener, is not vivid, and reflects Van Gogh more than Cézanne, but is strongly structured and makes a nice comparison with the rising horizontal bands in de Maistre’s *Waterfront, Sydney Harbour* (1918–19) (a work of the kind that was in *Colour and Art*) and the radiating greens in Wakelin’s *Barn near Tuggerah* (1919) (a work that Wakelin told me was not in *Colour in Art*). I once owned the three paintings, but sold the de Maistre to pay for an overseas trip, and gave the Cossington Smith and the Wakelin to the National Gallery of Australia which needed them when it was about to open. Cossington Smith, when I asked her in the 1960s, did not remember attending the *Colour in Art* exhibition.⁵

14. Max Meldrum, *The three trees* (c1917) and Clarice Beckett, *Hawthorn Tea Gardens* (c1933)

A quite opposite theory of art-making came to de Maistre and Wakelin’s attention a few months after *Colour in Art*. In December 1919 a Melbourne publisher issued *Max Meldrum: His Art and Views*. (And years later, in 1950, the theory was republished as *The Science of Appearances: As Formulated and Taught by Max Meldrum*.) Meldrum’s own tonalist anti-colourism and anti-emotionalism is nevertheless modernist in structure, and so is that of the even finer artist Clarice Beckett. By January 1920 Melbourne’s Meldrumism was the talk of the town in Sydney; Meldrum visited and lectured in Sydney several times over the next two years.

15. Wakelin, *Self-portrait* (1920) and Roy de Maistre, *Still life* (1922)

Wakelin and de Maistre experimented for a while with Meldrumite non-colour. Wakelin's *Self-portrait* (1920), is a black and white oil; de Maistre's *Still life* (1922), a tonalist study of pale cream roses in shadowy space, was bought that year by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, as featured in *Misty Moderns: Australian Tonalists 1915–1950*, Art Gallery of South Australia, the first exhibition to analyse the movement; it includes these two paintings.

16. Grace Cossington Smith, *Eastern Road, Turramurra* (c1926) and Grace Cossington Smith, *The Lacquer Room* (1936)

If the Sydney modernists received a fright in 1919, by the late 1920s they were re-energised. Wakelin and de Maistre had both spent three years in Europe and were confirmed in their modernist directions. In 1924 Cossington Smith had discovered Beatrice Irwin's *The New Science of Colour*, which spoke of "The psychic and philosophical messages of colour... Spiritual colour..." and a year later began to be encouraged by the writer Ethel Anderson who was a particular admirer of the great colourist Gauguin. Cossington Smith's watercolour *Eastern Road, Turramurra*, (c1926), exemplifies the moment, and displays the radiating and concentric forms and vibrating touch that Wakelin specified as Modern in 1928. Perhaps the particular work helped inspire Wakelin's remarks, for it was shown in Cossington Smith's first solo exhibition five months before his article "The Modern Art Movement" appeared in the magazine *Art in Australia*.

Cossington Smith spoke very warmly of Wakelin – "He was a rock!" – and respected de Maistre, who had engineered her first solo exhibition, at the Grosvenor Galleries, but she also volunteered that de Maistre "was very social", which I took to be disapproval of his networking in high society. Her midwinter *The Lacquer Room*, (1936), a Sydney café interior, emphasised warm indoor colour, and red–green vibrancy, and climaxed her high-colour period before embarking on outdoor landscape excursions which produced a more subdued Cézannism.

17. Ralph Balson, *Girl in pink* (1937) and Henri Matisse, *Woman in blue* (1937)

The year 1937, like 1919 and 1926, was a turning-point in Australian modernist painting. Local and international events then started the process that led to Ralph Balson's 'constructive' abstraction. Internationally, the publication in London of *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art* solidified the spread of geometric abstraction as an international style. "Constructive Art" was not Constructivism; the book did not feature the avant-garde Russian Constructivists of the 1910s, but instead began with Mondrian and then settled on Ben Nicholson and various post-cubist French movements from around 1930 such as *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and Square), *Art Concret*, and *Abstraction-Création*. Balson feasted on the book.

Locally in 1937 Grace Crowley ended five years of teaching the academic, sober cubism she had mastered under André L'Hote and Albert Gleizes during her time in Paris in the late twenties. Balson had attended her classes and continued to work in her studio after the classes ceased. Frank Hinder, who had returned in 1934 from eight years in the United States, where he had produced a few post-cubist constructive paintings, also joined Crowley's sketch club. A lecture delivered in 1936 by Crowley was unusually respectful of Hinder: "[In] a Cimabue, a Michelangelo, a Vermeer, a Renoir, a 1916 Cubist, an Albert Gleizes, a Frank Hinder... the fundamental principles of all good art must forever remain unchanged."

Eleonore Lange, a highly intellectual artist, art theorist, art lecturer and Anthroposophist, was living at the same address as the Hinders. It was she who provided the Foreword for *Exhibition 1*, which launched the circle of George Street semi-abstractionists at David Jones Exhibition Galleries in August 1939:

... the neo-classicism of this century... For Painting: Composition based on colour laws, instead of linear or atmospheric perspective... The French artist, Henri Matisse, was the first to offer a new system of order, i.e. of composition, in replacing the vanishing point by the pictorial plane. Each colour in a neo-classic picture is determined in its area, tone, value, hue, by its power to interpret third and often fourth and more dimensions in their direction to the pictorial plane... so the painter to-day uses a scene or a posing model only to elaborate its inherent colour-sensations into an artistic theme of colour relations... This leads step by step to "Abstract Art"...

Lange's Foreword for *Exhibition 1* is the third of the three crucial documents that I foreshadowed, and it is the only one to mention Matisse.

Eleonore Lange's unusually sophisticated positioning of Matisse surely explains the sudden arrival among the Sydney cubists of Balson's *Girl in pink* (1937), here compared with Matisse's similar *Woman in blue*

(1937). Balson's *Girl in pink* was included in *Exhibition 1*. So was Crowley's *The artist and his model* (1938) (a rear-view portrait of Balson), apparently her first shift away from the sombre Cubism of L'Hote and Gleizes towards Matisse's colour fields, as well as towards a greater emphasis on 'Circle and Square' constructive elements.

18. Grace Crowley, *The artist and his model* (1938) and Frank Hinder, *Rhythm: Fishermen hauling nets* (1939)

In *Exhibition 1* Hinder included a less abstracted watercolour version of a beautiful tempera titled *Rhythm: Fishermen hauling nets* (1939). Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788–1960* used a colour reproduction of Hinder's tempera to illustrate the discussion of *Exhibition 1*; alongside it was a 1954 constructive painting by Balson.

19. Ralph Balson, *Painting no.17* (1941)

Exhibition 1 contained one completely abstract painting by Hinder, titled *Design*, and perhaps Balson's *Composition* was a second. Two years later, at Anthony Horder's Fine Art Galleries, Balson presented 21 paintings that constituted Australia's first solo exhibition of abstract art. It was wartime, and the art-historical milestone was little noticed. The dancing circles and squares owed something to recent work by Kandinsky, shown to Balson in 1938 in an exhibition catalogue Hinder had received from New York. However, the content is surely straightforward delight in the science – or technique, or craft – of perfectly poised advancing and receding colours, tones and forms. After all, Balson's day job was house-painting; he knew a great deal about how colour creates and modifies space.

A consensus that Balson and Hinder were Australia's two leading abstract painters was confirmed in 1953 when Eric Westbrook, then director of the National Gallery of Victoria, included them in his *Twelve Australian Artists*, an exhibition shown in London and then toured through the U.K. by the Arts Council of Great Britain. For British audiences Hinder's tempera *Yellow abstract* (1948), and Balson's *Abstraction* (1951), were to be equal in importance to works by Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and William Dobell.

20. Frank Hinder, *Yellow abstract* (1948) and Ralph Balson, *Abstraction* (1951)

Balson, uninterested in spiritualities, more concerned with the optical engineering of colour, nevertheless provided a splendid fulfilment for some of the ideas first promulgated in Sydney by de Maistre's *Colour in Art*.

21. Roy de Maistre's studio, 13 Eccleston Street, Westminster

Roy de Maistre left Australia for London in 1930; by 1937 he was settled by grandee patrons into a studio, on the fringe of Belgravia, where he remained the rest of his life. It's where I called on him in 1966. The artful clutter, the colour, the paintings, the furniture (including a sofa designed by Francis Bacon), the bric-à-brac, the flowers and fruit, were a reminder that in 1919 *Colour in Art* was concerned with "Interior Decoration" as well as with "the Art of the Painter". He was still interested in new art, and in colour. I had been in New York and he asked about Andy Warhol. On the mantelpiece was the Museum of Modern Art's *Love* greeting card, designed by Robert Indiana, a Pop Art paraphrase of Matisse's sublime *Music and Dance* (1910) using the same ecstatic saturations of red and green and blue.

22. Roy de Maistre, *Garden of Gethsemane* (c1950), Robert Indiana, *Love* (1964) and Henri Matisse, *Dance* (1910)

It emerged that de Maistre's *Garden of Gethsemane* (c1950), was not only to do with the Roman Catholicism into which he had been baptised in 1949 but was also a memory of his Australian youth. The violet-coloured night-time landscape shows angophora trees above Palm Beach near Sydney, and the men sleeping together in the foreground shrubbery are the young de Maistre with the painter Sydney Long, who was 23 years older. I was not game enough to ask for more details of their relationship, but it was evidently significant, for the composition exists in a second variant, titled *The Agony in the Garden*.

De Maistre uses colour, in this late painting, to calm sexual activity and link sex with religion, whereas Balson's late paintings use colours as building-blocks for perfectly poised but energy-charged structures. Balson chose the way of pure aesthetic pleasure and interesting scientific phenomena. De Maistre ended

up preferring uneasy human exaltation, “the very song of life... spiritual speech”. But both approaches – remaining entirely orderly and rational on the one hand, and on the other edging towards the allure of disorder and unknown othernesses – are valid. Sometimes, indeed, the sane and the silly co-exist in the same artist. Anything goes in art-making, and all that counts is whether the art product has enough aesthetic force to engage the viewer.

I believe the Australian modernist paintings presented here have already proved their lasting power. It is time for works by de Maistre, Wakelin, Cossington Smith, Crowley, Hinder and Balson to take their place not only among the finest achievements of Australian art but also as equals to many of the American and European works that constantly recur in present-day histories of Modernism. These two Ivan Dougherty Gallery exhibitions have confirmed the outstanding excellence and interest of work by three of the six artists on my list, and the outstanding exhibition catalogues will preserve the new insights. The next generation of ‘World Art History’ texts will have no excuse for omitting Australian work of this kind.

Dr Daniel Thomas AM

Dr Daniel Thomas AM knew Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin in the 1960s, long after they staged their legendary colour music exhibition in Sydney in 1919, but nevertheless can offer some insights about them and their work. Two years ago the editors, Ann Stephen, Philip Goad and Andrew McNamara, of *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967* asked him to contribute the Preface to that prize-winning book, which constituted the groundwork for the Powerhouse Museum’s exhibition *Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia*. In 1958 Daniel Thomas was the first curatorial staff member at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and eventually became its chief curator and head of Australian art. From 1978 he was head of Australian art at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, and finally, 1984-1990, Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Now retired and living in Tasmania, he still occasionally writes on Australian art.

SLIDE LIST

1. Exhibition invitation. *COLOUR in ART, Mr. Gayfield Shaw requests the pleasure ... Friday August 8th 1919 at the Art Salon, Penzance Chambers, 29 Elizabeth Street* [Sydney]
2. *Colour in Art* exhibition catalogue • Introduction page, signed “R. de M.” • Catalogue page.
3. Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning*, New York and London: John Lane, 1915 • Titlepage • Contents page • Images courtesy of the Art Gallery of New South Wales Research Library, whose copy was given c1945/46 by Mrs Marriott Woodhouse.
4. Paul Gauguin, *Le Gué*, colourplate from Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting*, 1915 • [Gauguin’s painting *Le Gué (The ford)* (1901), is also known as *The Flight*, *The crossing*, and *Riders*; Pushkin Museum, Moscow] • Henri Matisse, *Bathers with a turtle* (1908), St Louis Art Museum, Missouri • Gauguin image courtesy of the Art Gallery of New South Wales Research Library.
5. Pablo Picasso, *Returning from the christening (after Le Nain)* (1917), Musée National Picasso, Paris.
6. Henri Matisse, *Nasturtiums with the painting “Dance”* (1912), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York • Roland Wakelin, *Landscape with red shed* (1918), Private Collection.
7. Roy de Maistre, *Syncromy, Berry’s Bay* (1919), National Gallery of Victoria, • Roland Wakelin, *Syncromy in orange major* (1919), Art Gallery of New South Wales.
8. Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting*, 1915 • colourplate *Arm Organisation in Blue-Green* (MacDonald-Wright) • black and white illustration *Syncromie Cosmique* (Morgan Russell) • Images courtesy of the Art Gallery of NSW Research Library.
9. De Maistre, *Rhythmic composition in Yellow Green Minor*, 1919, Art Gallery of NSW, bought 1960.
10. Robert Delaunay, *Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon*, 1913, Museum of Modern Art, New York • Frantisek Kupka, *Red and blue disks*, 1911, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
11. Roland Wakelin, *Colour-music*, gouache (1940s?), Private Collection. Image courtesy Niagara Galleries, Melbourne • Roy de Maistre, *Arrested phrase from Haydn Trio in Orange Red Minor*, 1919-1935, National Gallery of Australia.
12. Frantisek Kupka, *Study for the Language of Verticals* (1911), Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid • Roy de Maistre, *Arrested phrase from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Red Major* (1919-1935), National Gallery of Australia.
13. Roy de Maistre, *Waterfront, Sydney Harbour* (1918-19), Alan Boxer Collection • Roland Wakelin, *Barn near Tuggerah* (1919), National Gallery of Australia • Grace Cossington Smith, *The cabbage garden* (1919), National Gallery of Australia.
14. Max Meldrum, *The three trees* (c1917), Private Collection • Clarice Beckett, *Hawthorn Tea Gardens* (c1933), Art Gallery of South Australia.
15. Roland Wakelin, *Self-portrait* (1920), Art Gallery of New South Wales • Roy de Maistre, *Still life* (1922), Art Gallery of New South Wales.
16. Grace Cossington Smith, *Eastern Road, Turramurra* (c1926), National Gallery of Australia • Grace Cossington Smith, *The Lacquer Room* (1936), Art Gallery of New South Wales.
17. Ralph Balson, *Girl in pink* (1937) • Henri Matisse, *Woman in blue* (1937), Philadelphia Museum of Art.
18. Grace Crowley, *The artist and his model* (1938), Art Gallery of New South Wales • Frank Hinder, *Rhythm: Fishermen hauling nets* (1939), Private Collection.
19. Ralph Balson, *Painting no.17* (1941), Hassall Collection.
20. Frank Hinder, *Yellow abstract* (1948), National Gallery of Australia, • Ralph Balson, *Abstraction* (1951), Art Gallery of New South Wales.
21. Roy de Maistre in his studio at 13 Eccleston Street, Pimlico, London, c1944. Image courtesy Heather Johnson, *Roy de Maistre: The English Years 1930–1968*, Roseville East [Sydney]: Craftsman House, 1995, p.29.
22. Roy de Maistre, *Garden of Gethsemane* (c1950), Queensland Art Gallery • Robert Indiana, *Love* (1964), commissioned by The Museum of Modern Art, New York as a greeting card • Henri Matisse, *Dance* (1910), Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

NOTES

- 1 Note: Jenny McFarlane, following her symposium paper, “A Theosophical Sydney”, did elucidate the colour triangle.
- 2 The text is available in full in Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad (eds), *Modernism and Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917–1967*, (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2006): 62, a preliminary book to the same team’s exhibition and book *Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia* at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. Deborah Hart’s symposium paper, “Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith”, presented the startling discovery that de Maistre had lifted his text from Beatrice Irwin’s *The New Science of Colour*, first published 1916.
- 3 This, the second of the three crucial texts, is available in full in Ann Stephen et al, *Modernism and Australia* (2006): 76–77.
- 4 No one was able to elaborate.
- 5 I then assumed the exhibition must have been less of an artistic sensation than we had been led to believe. However, later speakers at this symposium made it clear that *Colour in Art* was indeed a considerable sensation, and I now wonder if the sensationalism might have caused the respectable young lady artist to stay at home in Turramurra.

COLOUR IN ART – REVISITING 1919

■ INTRODUCTION: AN EXCERPT FROM THE CAVALIER

Wakelin and de Mestre had formulated a relationship between colour and music and completed a series of pictures they called 'colour music' paintings. They were to go on exhibition in Gayfield Shaw's Elizabeth Street art gallery. For weeks beforehand there has been little else the art world could talk about. A select few had been shown the pictures privately. For those who hadn't – including the Ashtons, father and son – second-hand reports and rumours had to suffice. It was at this time that Howard Ashton declared his intention 'to crush this thing once and for all'.

The two young artists had even prepared colour charts and diagrams to make a thematic link between colour and music. Gayfield Shaw had arranged the pictures, not around the gallery walls, but on a stage framed in theatrical lighting. The body of the gallery was made over as an auditorium with seating for the audience. But there was standing room only. It was one of the most sensational art nights ever staged in Sydney.

The tensions and animosity in the crowded gallery were almost tangible. The walls were lined by students from the Conservatorium and members of the Van Breughen Symphony orchestra – potential allies, so de Mestre and Wakelin assumed... to their cost. Almost anybody with the faintest connection with the art scene was present. Dattilo-Rubbo managed to squeeze into the back of the gallery. Julian Ashton in ill health was virtually carried in and given a seat. "I got out of a sick bed to deal with these young fellows", he declared (presumably looking balefully at their mentor & 'svengali', Dattilo-Rubbo).

To complete the unusual presentation, space was provided on stage for Wakelin and de Mestre to address the audience and answer questions. They took up their positions to a chorus of cheers and cat calls.

The evening almost teetered on violence between members of the opposing factions. Gallantly, and bravely, opened by Sydney Ure Smith, respectful silence for the two artists thereafter was short-lived, drowned in a chorus of jeers and interjections, notably from the Conservatorium faction, until Ure Smith managed to restore order.

The two artists remained calm, de Mestre particularly so with the sang-froid of the landed gentry.

Throughout the stormy evening Julian Ashton was nearly apoplectic. More than natural courtesy, only his illness and restraint of concerned hands prevented him from joining the noisy interjectors. Rees noticed him repeatedly trying to get to his feet.

When finally, in a hoarse voice, he demanded of de Mestre: "But is it beautiful Mr. de Mestre, is it beautiful?" Almost without missing a beat, de Mestre replied with exquisite courtesy. "Yes, Mr Ashton – I think it is."

The gallery erupted in applause, cat calls, whistling and the thunder of stamping feet.

When that uproar subsided, there was no lessening of emotional charged drama. Questions from the floor became bellicose speeches and counter-attacks. To cut across the heated exchanges, Ure Smith called on Dattilo-Rubbo to speak. He went forward from the back of the hall, pushing his way through the crowd, muttering to himself and shaking his head, complaining – why me! Why me!

In the event, it was the fieriest speech of the evening. Dattilo-Rubbo stormed and declaimed and pleaded in an impassioned defence of the artistic freedom of his protégés. At one stage, he was on both knees, with arms outflung!

Lloyd Rees observed that it was the most remarkable art exhibition he ever attended.

The following days noticed were not only almost uniformly critical, Rees recalls, but 'vicious'.

Nonetheless that historic and exciting evening, in the long run, paved the way for acceptance and future development of cubism and abstraction.

The "war" of course continued, but in each successive battle in the next few years, the conservatives lost a little more ground.

**As read by Nick Waterlow OAM at the Symposium, 23 August 2008.
Reproduced with permission by Mike Dattilo-Rubbo pending discovery of the author.**

RE-READING THE PAST: WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW ABOUT THE COLOUR IN ART EXHIBITION?

This paper is about the reception that was given to the *Colour in Art* exhibition in 1919.

One of the ongoing stories of art history is that of the antagonism between the artists working in the accepted styles and the young artists trying to break new ground. It is the age-old Oedipal story – the rivalry between father and son. It gets repeated in the art histories of every art style that has ever evolved.

And it's also part of the myth of *Colour in Art*.

We have read the stories of the opening of the exhibition when supposedly 700 people gathered in Gayfield Shaw's gallery in Sydney to look at the paintings and to ridicule the work of Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin. We have heard and read many times how Howard Ashton, son of Julian Ashton and art critic for the *Sun* newspaper, called the exhibition "elaborate and pretentious bosh".

But what really happened? Was this exhibition truly such a controversial event in Sydney? Were de Maistre and Wakelin ostracised by the art community? Was modern art pitted against more traditional styles or did the two co-exist?

I want to start with Gayfield Shaw's gallery where the exhibition was held. Gayfield Shaw opened his gallery, The Art Salon, in Sydney in 1917. This was not a revolutionary gallery – the artists he represented were all traditional-style artists and many of them leading figures in the Sydney art world: Julian Ashton and his co-teacher, Norman Carter, Norman and Lionel Lindsay, Sydney Ure Smith, Elioth Gruner and J.R. Jackson – well respected landscape painters – and the photographer, Harold Cazneaux, were some of them. In 1918 Shaw added Arthur Streeton to his list. At the time, Gayfield Shaw was one of two main private gallery owners in Sydney. The other was Adolph Albers who handled a similar group of artists. These were the artists that Sydney patrons were buying then – painters of mostly Australian landscapes.¹

Thus, when Gayfield Shaw gave over his gallery to de Maistre and Wakelin for the *Colour in Art* exhibition in 1919, the exhibition was not held apart from the conventional art scene, but was very much part of it.

The exhibition was opened by Sydney Ure Smith. If, in 1919, you wanted to select someone to represent Sydney art you could not really go past Ure Smith. He was an artist himself – of paintings and etchings. He founded and edited the magazine, *Art in Australia*, he was the president of the Society of Artists, and he was a trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It would have been hard to find a more art-establishment figure to associate the exhibition with. The exhibition was not aimed at being a counter-establishment exercise. De Maistre and Wakelin were projecting themselves right into the centre of the Sydney art circle.

Who was the audience for the exhibition? Most of the first-hand information about the exhibition itself has come from the memoirs of Lloyd Rees. He described a huge crowd of Sydney artists and people from the Conservatorium of Music and wrote:

The opening of the exhibition took place at night, and for it Gayfield Shaw turned his gallery into a hall with full seating accommodation and an illuminated stage. Upon the stage were displayed works by the two artists, who both gave an address in which they explained their works and their artistic theories.²

Rees recalled further how when de Maistre finished describing one of his works, "Julian Ashton got to his feet and called out, 'Mr de Mestre, what I want to know is – is it beautiful?'"³

And when de Maistre replied, "I think so Mr Ashton", Rees tells us that,

The intelligent audience, recognising the artists' prerogative to determine for himself the question of beauty, applauded loudly and stamped on the floor, and poor Julian Ashton subsided and was heard no more.⁴

So was this a hostile audience? It may have been opinionated and divided, but de Maistre and Wakelin were obviously not without support. Lloyd Rees described the exhibition as ending on "a note of argument and excitement" and as being "certainly the most remarkable exhibition opening" he had ever attended.⁵

Let's look at the press. Yes, Howard Ashton did describe the work of de Maistre and Wakelin as "elaborate and pretentious bosh",⁶ but this review was written before the exhibition opened and was referring to modern art in general more than to *Colour in Art* specifically. Rees writes of Ashton that "he certainly gave the show a blistering review, but far from crushing... [it]... he merely stimulated public interest".⁷

Other reviewers were quite supportive. A reviewer in the *Sunday Times*, who used the name 'Gallery Boy', started his 'Art Notes' column with a criticism of "the inevitable stagnation which follows upon the purely academic outlook in art", and added that "ultra modernists, cubists and futurists are simply people who have left the beaten track in art and need to express themselves in a new way".⁸

The writer informed readers that, "those ultra modern tendencies have found an echo in our own country", in the work of Mr R de Maistre and R.S. Wakelin. He went on to explain in detail the theories behind the works. Although he did not feel the works lived up to the claims made for them by the artists, the writer urged that "every such effort to obtain a new starting point, or to open a fresh chapter in the history of painting does good."⁹

Another review, this time in the *Daily Telegraph* and headed, 'What is modern art? Pictures set to music', gave the exhibition a favourable review concluding, "These pictures played in paint... hit; they attract; they are beautiful patterns; and they 'carry'... Both artists are to be congratulated on their courage and their enthusiasm in thus breaking new ground in the onward sweep of art."¹⁰ Even the *Sun*, which had published Howard Ashton's critical review, gave the exhibition an encouraging mention two days later.¹¹

How did the public view the works? It is usually supposed that none of the works in the *Colour in Art* exhibition were sold. This was not the case. A newspaper review reported that, "Mr Wakelin's work has already found purchasers, who recognise that the young artist is instinctively working on an interesting conception of colour values".¹² The catalogue of the exhibition shows that three works, at least, had been sold even before the exhibition opened: two works were owned by Leonard Dodds and one by Mrs Neville Dangar.¹³ Leonard Dodds was described at the time as a leading man in mining and an art patron.¹⁴ His art collection, which was auctioned in 1922, consisted of works by artists such as Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton, Norman Lindsay, J.R. Jackson, and Elioth Gruner. Besides the works from *Colour in Art*, Dodds's collection also contained five other works by Wakelin and two other works by de Maistre. In the catalogue of the auction, Wakelin was described as having "tendencies towards Modernism", as being "original in outlook", "fearless in execution" and as having "supreme individuality"; buyers were advised that they had a chance "to acquire work upon which posterity may bestow a very high honour".¹⁵

The inclusion of the works of de Maistre and Wakelin in the collection of a well-known art collector of mostly traditional-style artists, and the very positive mention of the works by de Maistre and Wakelin in the catalogue of the public auction of the collection, just two and a half years after the *Colour in Art* exhibition, indicates not only that at least one collector considered the experimental work of these two artists part of the overall history of Australian art, but also that the innovative nature of the work was considered a positive attribute by the auction house and one that would attract buyers from the Sydney public.

Did *Colour in Art* have a detrimental effect on the careers of de Maistre and Wakelin? Any uninformed conjecture about the future lives of the artists is nothing but speculation. There is reliable evidence, however, that in the years immediately following the exhibition both artists were still very much part of the Sydney art scene. Wakelin continued to have works hung in the annual exhibitions of the Society of Artists in 1920 and 1921, and in 1926 when he returned from overseas. In 1925 he had a one-artist exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in Sydney and had work hung in the Royal Art Society of New South Wales. De Maistre had works hung in the Society of Artists exhibition in 1920 and 1922, and in 1926 when he returned from overseas, as well as in other Sydney exhibitions; and held a one-artist exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in 1926. He was awarded the Society of Artists' Travelling Scholarship in 1923 (the first time the scholarship had been awarded for twenty years) and had a work purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1922. This is not a picture of artists ostracised and excluded from the art scene.

In the histories of nearly every new style of art, it has been almost *de rigueur* to construct the story of an antipathy between the old and the new – with the new suffering the tortures and torments of insult and lack of recognition from the old. It makes for a good story. But an examination of all evidence and information reveals, more often than not, that anecdotes about rejection and criticism have been wildly exaggerated. That in almost all cases the new was, in fact, accepted and supported by at least part of the established art scene. That artists experimenting in new art styles had, not more, but a similar amount

of difficulty in earning a living by their art, and received, not more, but a similar amount of unfavourable (and favourable) criticism, as artists working in traditional styles. And this, I argue, based on available and verifiable evidence, was certainly the case for the work of de Maistre and Wakelin in *Colour in Art*.

Dr Heather Johnson

Dr Heather Johnson is the author of two books on the artist Roy de Maistre and one on the Sydney art patronage system. Her working life has oscillated between art history (writing and lecturing) and nursing. She has a PhD in Art History and Theory, and Masters degrees in Nursing and Rehabilitation Counseling. She is currently teaching English and vocational skills related to aged care in the government's Adult Migrant English Program.

- 1 For more information on the private art galleries and dealers in Sydney at this time see Heather Johnson, *The Sydney art patronage system 1890-1940*, (Sydney: Bungoona Technologies, 1997).
- 2 Lloyd Rees, *The small treasures of a lifetime. Some early memories of Australian art and artists*, (Sydney: Collins, 1984): 92.
- 3 *ibid.*,93.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 Howard Ashton, "Is it art?" *Sun* 8 August 1919: 6.
- 7 Rees, 92.
- 8 Gallery Boy, "Art Notes," *Sunday Times* 10 August 1919: 27.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 "What is modern art? Pictures set to music," *Daily Telegraph* 9 August 1919: 8.
- 11 *Sun*, 14.
- 12 *Daily Telegraph*, 8.
- 13 *Colour in Art*, exh. cat. (1919) in Nick Waterlow and Annabel Pegus, *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919*, exh. cat. (Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery COFA, UNSW, 2008): 5.
- 14 "Leonard Dodds" in Fred Johns, *Who's Who in the Commonwealth of Australia*, (Sydney, 1922).
- 15 James R Lawson, *Mr. Leonard Dodds: Collection of Valuable Pictures*, exh. cat. 31 January 1922.

■ BEATRICE IRWIN AND GRACE COSSINGTON SMITH: WOMEN ON THE WINGS OF COLOUR IN ART

Image 1: Photographs of Beatrice Irwin and Grace Cossington Smith as young women

The inspired idea of revisiting *Colour in Art* (1919) encourages us to look again and think again about a particular exhibition as well as the broader context of the times in which it occurred. When discussing the symposium with Nick Waterlow, Director of the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, we agreed that it was a great opportunity to open up fresh ways of looking at the past and new possibilities for future research. In this regard I will focus on two women: Beatrice Irwin, an author on the 'science' of colour, a colour poet and a performer, and Grace Cossington Smith, who has often been identified as a pioneering modernist along with the two exhibiting artists in *Colour in Art*, Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin. I would specifically like to consider Irwin's influential text *The new science of colour* and Cossington Smith's friendship with de Maistre and Wakelin as ways of suggesting some parallels in their works and ideas.

Born in India to English parents, Beatrice Irwin has been described by Bruce James as a Laurie Anderson of her day, who travelled the world giving colour-poem recitals.¹ She began her career as a more traditional theatrical performer but by 1910 she had clearly become enamoured by the idea of colour as a way of transforming our ways of thinking about the world. As she wrote:

In New York (1910) and in London (1912), I made some public colour experiments ...

These demonstrations for testing the effect of certain luminous masses of colour were given in the form of aesthetic entertainments, which I called 'Colour-poem evenings.' ...

At the Hudson Theatre in New York where my name was already familiar to the public in connection with the production of poetic plays, one of my chief obstacles lay in the difficulty that I had in getting people to dissociate my known personality from the new work and to realise that the 'colour-poem-evening' was something more than an entertainment, and that beneath its aesthetic appeal there lay a scientific and philosophic message.²

Attired in attractive costumes, mainly evoking 'the Orient', Irwin posed against scenic backgrounds as she "declaimed her colour-poems while ever-changing coloured lights were thrown upon her!"³ At the time of the *Colour in Art* exhibition, Roland Wakelin noted that the colour scales "Mr de Mestre will demonstrate" may be applied to many and various forms of colour expression. "It may eventually create a new medium of colour expression in the form of projected coloured lights."⁴ An interest in colour in relation to an avant-garde approach and a sense of theatricality was in the air in the first two decades of the twentieth century. This was in turn related to theosophical, mystical and spiritual ideas. In the New York press Beatrice Irwin was described as making a difficult and delicate experiment. "Her aim is spiritual suggestion through the mysterious medium of colour."⁵

Image 2: Photographs of Roy de Maistre, Grace Cossington Smith and Roland Wakelin

Although Grace Cossington Smith was not involved in the *Colour in Art* exhibition and many years later could not remember seeing it, the friendships she shared with Roland Wakelin and Roy de Maistre and their conversations about art suggests that she would have been familiar with some of the ideas discussed at the time. The three artists attended classes with Anthony Dattilo-Rubbo and met regularly around the time of the exhibition and into the 1920s to discuss their work. In 1970 Cossington Smith said in an interview with Alan Roberts that they were her closest art friends at the time.

We used to meet to compare our paintings... they were in the art world. I never felt going about helped me much. They were the only two who did work that interested me. Wakelin was outstanding.⁶

Cossington Smith recalled that sometimes she would visit Wakelin's home and at other times the three of them would meet at Roy de Maistre's studio in Burdekin House. She described the meetings taking place upstairs in a lovely big room looking over Macquarie Street. They met to talk and compare works. Cossington Smith was on the surface the most retiring of the three in terms of her outward persona and attachment to family. On another level there were 'secrets' in her studio in the garden of their Turramurra home on the North Shore. This was her world where she was able to be daring in her art, to experiment with new ideas, to allow her deep appreciation of the manifold possibilities of colour to take flight.

Image 3: Roy de Maistre text in the *Colour in Art* catalogue and an excerpt from Beatrice Irwin's text in *The new science of colour*

In 2004 I was working as the curator of a Grace Cossington Smith Retrospective held the following year at the National Gallery of Australia (the first retrospective having been curated by Daniel Thomas at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1973).⁷ In the course of my research, I came across a reference in Bruce James' monograph on the artist that Cossington Smith had copied out Beatrice Irwin's text *The new science of colour* virtually in full. Naturally I was keen to read Irwin's text. It was while reading this text late one night that I came across the following words that rang a very distinct bell:

What is colour? For some, only a matter of course; for others, an aesthetic pleasure or an interesting scientific phenomenon, the result of vibrations of light acting upon different substances and upon our optic nerves.

But there are those for whom colour means much more than this, because in it they find health and music; in short, the very song of life and the spiritual speech of every living thing.⁸

The words seemed really familiar to me but at first I could not place them. I went to bed around midnight and at 2.00am sat bolt upright. Suddenly it was clear! It was in the much-quoted extract from Roy de Maistre's lecture that he presented at the Australian Arts Club on Friday 8th of August in 1919, printed in the catalogue for the *Colour in Art* 1919 exhibition. I got straight up, went back to my desk and re-read the second paragraph of the de Maistre text again:

What is Colour? Many accept it unquestioningly – a few, I believe, are almost unconscious of its presence – for others it constitutes an aesthetic pleasure or an interesting scientific phenomenon – the result of light vibrations acting upon the optic nerves. But there are many for whom Colour means far more than this – to them it brings the conscious realisation of the deepest underlying principles of nature, and in it they find deep and lasting happiness – for those people it constitutes the very song of life and is, as it were, the spiritual speech of every living thing.⁹

It felt like a revelation. The poetic ideas of 'the very song of life' and 'the spiritual speech of every living thing' long identified with de Maistre were in fact drawn from Beatrice Irwin. The fact that he had closely read her text opened up the possibility that he may well have discussed Irwin's ideas on colour with Wakelin and Cossington Smith. Although Cossington Smith transcribed Irwin's text in 1924, it is conceivable that her interest in the publication had been sparked several years earlier (perhaps even before de Maistre came across it). Irwin performed in Chelsea in 1912 around the time that Cossington Smith made her first visit to England and it is possible that she heard of Irwin around this time or even saw her perform.¹⁰ She could even have introduced de Maistre to Irwin's work. The act of copying the text several years later could well have been a way of reinforcing the ideas rather than viewing them for the first time. Irwin also visited Sydney, a hub of theosophical activity at the time, and she records something of her feeling for Australia in *The new science of colour*. Irwin's text was first published in 1916 three years prior to *Colour in Art*.

It is not surprising that the first accounts of de Maistre and Cossington Smith did not know about the connections they made with Beatrice Irwin. The artists simply never mentioned her to them. In the case of Cossington Smith she would in all likelihood have been mindful of her family's strong Anglican faith and would not have wanted to worry her family with the idea that their daughter was meddling with esoteric ideas (as numerous modernist critics thought they did). What is apparent from her art of the 1920s and 1930s is that while her familial world was quite conservative her intense curiosity, drive and experimentation easily matched that of her male peers.

Image 4: Grace Cossington Smith, *Study of head: self portrait* (1916), *The Holmes à Court Collection* and *The sock knitter* (c.1915), Art Gallery of New South Wales

The experimental spirit of the times also needs to be considered within the context of the First World War. The first chapter of Irwin's *The new science of colour* places 'colour-science' in the context of old structures breaking down, "clearing the ground for fresh growth". She begins with a broad brush noting that "our planet stands at an unparalleled crisis in the history of her evolution" and that the universal passing of things meant that "no moment could be more fitting in which to herald the light ahead." She continued: "War has unfurled a banner in which the countries of the world are but fluttering streamers blown by the breath of one purpose – Progress."¹¹

In art, progress was also considered as part of a continuum. Grace Cossington Smith and Roland Wakelin often remarked on what a supportive teacher Dattilo-Rubbo was: how he was much more interested

in colour than others of his generation who aimed for subtle tones; how he introduced them to Post Impressionists such as Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne. In his *Colour in Art* essay Wakelin wrote:

Tracing the development in Art of this modern tendency for expression by means of colour, it will be seen by carefully studying the art in Europe, for the past 50 years or more, that this form of expression is not merely a freak diversion, but a real evolutionary development – Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne are the best known masters of this form of expression while the Syncromists are now working towards a further development.¹²

The subject of Cossington Smith's well-known work *The sock knitter* (c.1915) is of one of her sisters, Madge, knitting socks for the soldiers in the First World War. What is significant in relation to modernist principles and the experimental work of her peers, is the emphasis on the formal aspects of the painting, in particular colour and structure. In an interview years later Cossington Smith revealed that at times her experimentation became a bone of contention for her teacher Dattilo-Rubbo, eventually causing her to move on after a lengthy period as a student:

I think I was developing my own feeling about painting and everything I did seemed to him to be wrong. I think what it was, I was developing more a pattern in painting... He used to say, "You don't put a distance into your paintings", you know in the academic way it went back in tone... You see I didn't want that, I didn't feel like that a bit. My early, early paintings were much more a pattern... like that one in the art gallery (Art Gallery of New South Wales) *The sock knitter*... Well I saw things in a pattern expressed in colour, it was quite a natural thing, I didn't force myself to do it... I don't believe in that. I think you have a feeling about what you want to paint – it's half unconscious... but you do know what you don't want to do! [Laughter]¹³

Despite the different subject matter, the most striking shared connections with the paintings undertaken by de Maistre and Wakelin around the time of the *Colour in Art* exhibition are: abstracting from the real, creating a pattern expressed in colour and limiting perspectival space to a shallow stage set.

Image 5: Grace Cossington Smith, *Van Gogh's room* (c.1916), National Gallery of Australia and *Bed time* (c.1922), Manly Art Gallery and Museum

Cossington Smith would later become well known for her paintings of interiors and in the years around *Colour in Art* she painted some of her earliest bedrooms: *Van Gogh's room* (c.1916) and *Bed time* (c.1922). She had been inspired by one of Dattilo-Rubbo's lunchtime readings from a letter Van Gogh wrote about his bedroom at Arles. Van Gogh had written of how colour can affect our emotional states, including how it can be suggestive of rest and sleep, as indeed de Maistre did in his interest in painting the rooms of hospitals to create more harmonious environments for shell-shocked soldiers. Beatrice Irwin also considered ideas of the impact of colour in rooms to have an impact on our states of mind and being. The colours in Cossington Smith's *Bed time* relate to one of Irwin's colour exercises in which olive green equates with 'mental sedatives', while flame rose, orange and mauve (all in this work) are considered "spiritual stimulants and recuperatives".

Image 6: Beatrice Irwin's colour chart from *The new science of colour*

In their respective texts for *Colour in Art*, de Maistre and Wakelin wrote of a systematic approach to colour. Beatrice Irwin's colour chart at the start of *The new science of colour* includes a triangle within a circle. (Triangles within an overall triangle appeared in the *Colour in Art* catalogue.) In her text Irwin wrote that the underlying purple in the triangle represents the earth; the golden circle, ether; the central triangle with subdivisions, a universal colour system. She notes that the triangle was the ancient's symbol for truth, and the sum of the three triangles the number nine, which they regarded as symbolising the perfection of terrestrial manifestation, the number ten representing the deity. Most significantly according to Irwin's colour chart there were three natural divisions – physical, mental, and spiritual – each with subdivisions of sedative, recuperative, and stimulant colour. Cossington Smith created her own colour chart based on Irwin's theories with subtle variations (notably her favourite warm yellow in the circle surrounding the triangle). Among the most important aspects of Irwin's writing for Cossington Smith was the need to go beyond optical vision and to consider the effect that colour has on us.

Image 7: Grace Cossington Smith, *Eastern Road, Turramurra* (1926), National Gallery of Australia and Roland Wakelin, *Causeway, Tuggerah* (1919), Art Gallery of New South Wales

Irwin encouraged students of colour to proceed slowly, not to follow blindly but to experiment and test their findings. She wrote, "[T]he first step that you must take is to meditate on colour in nature, and

to note and tabulate the results of your work.”¹⁴ This tabulation of colour – abstracting it intuitively – appears in many preliminary drawings in Cossington Smith’s sketchbooks. Among the detailed drawings is a study for a watercolour *Eastern Road, Turrumurra* (1926), undertaken while she sat in the semi-rural, suburban landscape to do it. Irwin wrote of the intuitive aspects of working with colour in the landscape:

In any land, sky or seascape, you can find large pools of colour, in which you must immerse your consciousness. During this process of concentration remain quiescent, let thought and deduction come after, but for the moment just focus your attention on the colour whose vibrations you desire to understand, holding yourself mentally and physically in as negative [open] and relaxed a condition as possible.¹⁵

Analysis of the written notations in Cossington Smith’s drawing suggest that her colour choices correspond closely with Irwin’s recommendation of colours that ‘constitute a safe middle path, between the mysteries of the senses and of the soul.’¹⁶ Significantly she later told Daniel Thomas that her notes inscribed in sketchbook drawings for *Eastern Road, Turrumurra* would have meant a lot to her then, ‘more than they seem’.¹⁷

Irwin felt that spiritual colours should be imbued with ‘a tingling, phosphorescent quality’, while ‘mental colours’ should have a ‘crystalline transparency’.¹⁸ It is precisely these qualities of phosphorescence and luminous clarity that are present in Cossington Smith’s *Eastern Road, Turrumurra* and Wakelin’s tiny abstracted landscape *Causeway, Tuggerah* (1919). While the latter is small in scale it is surely one of his most astonishingly daring works for the time.

Image 8: Roy de Maistre, *Boat sheds, Berry’s Bay* (1919) and Grace Cossington Smith, *The Bridge in curve* (c.1930), National Gallery of Victoria

The idea of luminous colour was also important to Roy de Maistre. He encouraged Cossington Smith to put light into the colour of the sky in her paintings of the Harbour Bridge. Later on Cossington Smith often said that she wanted her paintings to be vibrant with light. Although de Maistre’s *Boat sheds, Berry’s Bay* (1919) and Cossington Smith *The Bridge in-curve* (c.1930) are separated by more than a decade there are some striking parallels. While it is hard not to be captivated by Cossington Smith’s daring, sweeping arc in her depiction of a great the modernist icon, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, it is fascinating to focus closely on the more prosaic understorey. The blocky, pared back architectural structure in the foreground, the schematic, rounded shapes of green foliage and the particular subtleties in the palette of pale blues, mauves, orange, tints of rose and greens, all bear a close resemblance to de Maistre’s *Boat sheds, Berry’s bay*. Irwin wrote that a developed colour sense did not focus on bright ‘mental’ colours alone but would take into account the many gradations ‘that combine ‘in a subtle symphony of one tint’. She was also keen on auras and the auratic glow around Cossington Smith’s bridge painting in which the two arms of the structure reach out to one another across the expanse clearly has mystical or spiritual overtones.

Image 9: Roy de Maistre, *Rhythmic composition in yellow green minor* (1919-1935), oil on paperboard, Art Gallery of New South Wales and Grace Cossington Smith, *Sea wave* (1931), private collection on loan to the National Gallery of Australia

A feeling for a spiritual dimension of worlds within worlds is apparent in Roy de Maistre’s *Rhythmic composition in yellow green minor* (1919-1935). Much has been written of this painting. In this context it is worth thinking of Wakelin’s emphasis on concentricity in modern painting. It also recalls the radiating rhythms in Cossington Smith’s *Sea wave*, a work that in part reflects an intensely personal search for meaning after the death of her mother. There is such feeling in the movement in the waves of the ocean and waves of light; like the in-breath and the out-breath, as though the continuity of the rhythms of nature is akin to a continuity of the spirit. The repeated rhythms suggest infinite space in both paintings and recall another quote in Irwin’s *The new science of colour* attributed to Fechner’s *On Life after Death*:

Through heavenly space, the earth floats along, an enormous eye immersed in an ocean of the light which proceeds from numberless stars, and wheeling round and round to receive on all sides the impact of its waves, which cross a million of times without ever disturbing each other.

It is with that eye, man shall one day learn to see, meeting with the spreading waves of his future life the outward waves of the surrounding ether, and undisturbed by the encountering waves, penetrating with the most subtle vibrations into the depth of heaven.¹⁹

Image 16: Grace Cossington Smith, *Black mountain* (c.1931), private collection and *Trees* (c.1926), Newcastle Region Art Gallery

Another remarkable example of a spiritual landscape in which the earth is turning is Cossington Smith’s *Black mountain* (c.1931), discovered in a private collection the course of my research. Works like this and *Purple horses* (c. 1933) leave one in no doubt that Cossington Smith like de Maistre in particular was well aware of Gauguin and the idea of the spiritual in art that artists like Kandinsky and the Blaue Reiter Group espoused. Around 1926 Cossington Smith painted a bold, thoroughly modern painting, *Trees*. Ravishing in colour and dynamic in its faceted compositional structure, it revealed the divided opinions at the time it was painted. As with responses to some of the works by de Maistre and Wakelin, she received a number of dismissive reviews and rejections from anti-modernist critics. A review in the *Bulletin* was scathing about the moderns, pitting the ‘freaks’ like Cossington Smith, Aletta Lewis and de Maistre, against the ‘excellencies’ like George Lambert, Will Ashton and Hans Heysen; the reviewer’s careless disdain for Cossington Smith’s work reflected in the fact that he couldn’t even get her name correct. “The most curious of the freaks”, he wrote, “is by H. Cossingham Smith, whose picture of “Trees” is evidently intended to suggest how trees might have looked if a demented Creator had wrought them.”²⁰

There were, however, important supporters of her work and of the modern movement in general. It was de Maistre who actively helped her to have her first solo exhibition at the Grosvenor Galleries. As she recalled: “Walter Taylor and Adrian Feint were the Directors and it was through Roy de Maistre [that the exhibition happened]. He told Adrian Feint ... and they both came up and saw my paintings down in the studio.”²¹ Apart from other artists there was Ethel Anderson, a poet, writer and enthusiast of modern art (who was also the wife of Austin Thomas Anderson, Secretary to the Governor of New South Wales). Anderson had come to live at Ball Green in Turrumurra and was an active supporter of Cossington Smith, de Maistre and Wakelin.

In the spirit of fostering and opening up fresh ways of looking at works in the current exhibition *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919* and in the context of this brief paper that takes into account the input of a little known colour-poet, Beatrice Irwin, it seems appropriate to end this paper with the first encounter by Ethel Anderson with Cossington Smith’s art. The occasion was recorded by her daughter Bethia who recalled sitting on the long verandah at Cossington overlooking the tennis court, “surrounded by a great many neatly tended flower beds, and beyond, a deep stretch of measureless bushland, where tall gum trees shaded a many-windowed little building of oiled wood [Grace’s studio] ... a dear little place ripe for delicious secrets”.²² After a tour of the garden, Grace was asked to show Mrs Anderson her studio. She did so reluctantly, while the others returned to the verandah for tea. After a time, Bethia recalls the two emerging in a rapturous state:

My mother’s eyes were sparkling with excitement. Gracie’s too were alight... “And who knows?” Mother encouraged Grace, “With your unique brush stroke, with your grasp of colour, you may be about to give expression to a quality in life, more moving than beauty alone, more intimate than infinity. *You* may find a fourth dimensional emotion as yet unfound, un-named.”

No one had ever spoken to Grace like that before. The Smith family sat goggle-eyed; and Grace was overcome. To have her work taken so seriously, to have it praised, was like a burgeoning flower in the arid desert of her life.²³

One senses a generosity of spirit behind the exhibition *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919* – in the curatorial initiative and openness of Nick Waterlow and Annabel Pegus. The act of inviting the audience to look again and think again about the works from 1919 and beyond is a welcome opportunity to revisit the past afresh in the broad context of the times and ideas shared by numerous artists, writers and others. Through the exhibition and accompanying publication and through the opportunities presented in the symposium, we are able to open up fruitful ways of keeping the past alive. In the spirit of the exhibiting artists and two pioneering women discussed in this paper, this enables us to think of the past not as a relic but as a truly regenerative force in the present.

Dr Deborah Hart

Dr Deborah Hart is Senior Curator of Australian Painting and Sculpture post-1920 at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA). Over the past twenty-five years she has worked at State and Regional galleries as well as in the capacity of freelance curator. She has curated many exhibitions and is a widely published art historian. She has written monographs on artists as well as numerous exhibition catalogues including: *Identities: Art from Australia* (University of Wollongong and Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1993) *Joy Hester and friends* (NGA, 2001), *Grace Cossington Smith* (ed., NGA, 2005), *Imants Tillers: one world many visions* (ed., NGA, 2006), *Andy and Oz: parallel visions* (NGA with Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, 2007) and *Richard Larter: a retrospective* (ed., NGA, 2008).

All images relating to Grace Cossington Smith referred to in this paper can be sourced in Deborah Hart (ed.), *Grace Cossington Smith*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2005. Works by Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin can be sourced in Nick Waterlow OAM and Annabel Pegus (eds.), *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, 2008.

- 1 Bruce James, *Grace Cossington Smith*, (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1990): 67.
- 2 Beatrice Irwin, *The new science of colour*, (London: William Rider and Son Ltd, 1923): 96-97.
- 3 Quote from *The Herald* in New York, quoted in *The new science of colour*, appendix, unpaginated.
- 4 Roland Wakelin, "Colour in Art," *Modernism & Australia: documents on art, design and architecture 1917-1967*, eds. Ann Stephen, Philip Goad and Andrew McNamara, (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2006): 63-64.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 Grace Cossington Smith, "Interview with Alan Roberts," 1970, *op.cit.*
- 7 Both retrospectives toured nationally. Daniel Thomas's pioneering work on Grace Cossington Smith meant that many of the best works he discovered in her studio in Turramurra ended up in our State and Regional gallery collections and the National Gallery of Australia.
- 8 This text is quoted in *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919* exh. cat.: 10.
- 9 Beatrice Irwin, 10.
- 10 Bruce James, 67.
- 11 Beatrice Irwin, 1-2.
- 12 *Modernism & Australia: documents on art, design and architecture 1917-1967*, (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2006): 63-64.
- 13 Interview with Alan Roberts, *op.cit.*
- 14 Irwin, 46.
- 15 *ibid.*, 46-47.
- 16 *ibid.*, 43. Irwin advocated that the 'mental colours' in her chart provided this middle path. These colours included olive green (sedative), rose madder, fawn, royal blue and emerald green (recuperative) and violet and chrome (stimulant).
- 17 Daniel Thomas, *Grace Cossington Smith: a life, from drawings in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia*, (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1993): 24.
- 18 *ibid.*, 33.
- 19 Irwin, 21.
- 20 *Bulletin* (Sydney), 15 September 1927: 25.
- 21 Cossington Smith, "Interview with Alan Roberts," 9 January 1970
- 22 Bethia Foott, *Ethel and the governors' general*, (Rainforest Publishing: Sydney, 1992): 128.
- 23 *ibid.*, 128-130.

■ A THEOSOPHICAL SYDNEY: A CONTEXT FOR THE COLOUR-MUSIC THEORY

The real achievement of the 1919 *Colour in Art* exhibition lies in the radical assumption that the arrangement of colours on a canvas produces a harmony of superior value to the originating representational reference. Roy de Maistre's *The boat sheds, in violet red key* (1919) has ceased to be a representation of boat sheds or any mundane topographic reference, and has become instead an arrangement of colour.¹

Crucially, in this very short paper, and elsewhere,² I argue that, at the point of its making, the work was not self referential. *The boat sheds, in violet red key*, while not a representational depiction of boat sheds in Berry's Bay, did reference an invisible reality, a Theosophical reality, what the Theosophists still call an astral harmony.

To understand the context for *Colour in Art* and its significance in art historical terms, it is necessary to see it in the context of its time and place, in a Sydney awash with Theosophical debate. While neither Roy de Maistre nor Roland Wakelin were members of the Theosophical Society, the genealogy of the work produced for this exhibition leads inexorably to the Society and CW Leadbeater's visionary experience. This is the same conceptual framework which enabled a similar shift in Europe and so positions the 1919 exhibition within a larger conversation shared by such artists as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian.

Roy de Maistre's Theosophical Sydney is mappable through his relationship with the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and friendship with both its new Director, Henri and his son Adrien Verbrugghen. Roland Wakelin recalled that the impetus for the 1919 exhibition came through Adrien Verbrugghen and de Maistre who brought him a "scheme of colour in relation to music that they had worked out".³ The influence of the Theosophical Society on the 1919 *Colour in Art* exhibition was locally inflected by tensions set up by the colour music organ of Alexander Hector, first raised by Elizabeth Gertzakis,⁴ the Kemp Prossor inspired shell shock treatments and the local arts community, both well explored by Heather Johnson.

The Theosophical Society had a voice in Sydney within ten years of its formation in 1875. By 1911 a Pythagorean Music Society was gathering at the Theosophical venue King's Hall to sing in a 'Pythagorean choir' and to discuss the movement of the spheres. They would have been reading Madame Blavatsky's *Isis unveiled* and her description of an astral harmony perceptible to those with advanced psychic abilities through musical vibration and colour. Blavatsky states:

...how reasonable will it not appear that the terrific impulses imparted to the common medium by the sweep of the myriad blazing orbs that are rushing through 'the inter stellar depths,' should affect us and the earth upon (sic) which we live, in a powerful degree?⁵

The idea of colour-music has a long history.⁶ However, in Sydney these ideas achieved fresh and topical inflection through the experiences of the Theosophical leadership, notably CW Leadbeater who came to live in Sydney in 1914. The experience of the war only amplified interest in Leadbeater's message. Inspired by the influential volume; *Thought forms*,⁷ and Leadbeater's own lectures on the subject, Sydney Theosophists explored musical and colour vibrations and the implications for visible reality.

Leadbeater's visionary experiences impacted directly on the work of a number of Australian artists notably the jeweller, Gustaf Köllerstrom (active 1895-1920) and painter / etcher, AE Warner (1879-1968). There were other explorations. In March 1917 the Professor of Diction at the Conservatorium (1915-1918), Miss Rose Seaton, gave a Lecture-Recital at the premier Theosophical venue, King's Hall.⁸ During the program the colours red, yellow, blue and green were illustrated by pieces of music.⁹ More complex pieces of music and texts by Irish Theosophist WB Yeats were given more elaborate treatment. One of the Conservatorium students, Miss Beryl McNamara, "who possessed the rare faculty of seeing colour in relation to music",¹⁰ played the piano. Charles Boulton, a Conservatorium student and Theosophist, wrote with a distinctly Theosophical approach on the universal and music's role in December 1916.¹¹ The following year saw an article in *Theosophy in Australia* devoted to the accord between the ideas expressed in Henri Verbrugghen's weekly lecture concerts and Theosophical ideas.¹²

Henri Verbrugghen had been an outspoken advocate of Theosophical ideas before his arrival in Sydney. In 1914 he had chaired a lecture on 'Theosophy and the music of the future'. At the end of which lecture he "spoke enthusiastically from the chair on Theosophy in relation to the arts... (and) signified his intention of joining."¹³ While Verbrugghen does not appear to have formally joined the Society he did encourage

discussions and performances on the subject among his staff and students, and invited Leadbeater to lecture at the Conservatorium on at least one occasion.

After 1917, when de Maistre met Henri and began to share a room with Adrien Verbrugghen, (from 1917-19)¹⁴ any shared colour-music theory would have been Theosophical in tone. At its most basic there was an understanding that the trained seer could understand colour and music as manifestations of a higher reality. Similarly a lecture at the Conservatorium as late as 1921 records Leadbeater describing how “music on the material plane of terrestrial existence becomes transformed into enchanting creations of colour and form in the unseen world.”¹⁵ There were a range of responses to Leadbeater’s colour-music vision. On this occasion *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the address was “listened to with interest by many; with utter incredulity by others.”¹⁶

Deborah Hart has conclusively linked Beatrice Irwin’s *New science of colour* as a significant influence on the 1919 exhibition. Irwin’s book was written from within a Theosophical Society framework and Irwin remained deeply sympathetic to the Theosophical Society at least until 1933.¹⁷ The *New science of colour* was the instruction manual which built on the conceptual framework of Theosophical Sydney as experienced via the Verbrugghens. It is unclear at this stage whether de Maistre met Beatrice Irwin. We know Irwin travelled with the JC Williamson theatrical machine and later recalled many friends in Australia.¹⁸

Irwin’s book differed from Leadbeater’s *Thought forms* in that she urged her readers to develop their own colour charts based on their personal experience of the psychic dimension of colour.¹⁹ It was both an instruction manual for the artist and training manual for the seer. This is not to say that the experience of colour was arbitrary. For Irwin it was in fact highly codified and variations of experience were assumed to be the result of levels of training. Irwin, Leadbeater and Henri Verbrugghen saw colour and music as phenomena best made use of by the properly sensitive individual. That sensitive individual could apprehend a higher reality if properly trained. This assumption of a higher harmony made visible through colour and sound is useful in understanding the idea that each painterly composition could be played. In a perverse use of scientific methodology, typical of the Theosophical Society, the success of a colour arrangement (i.e. its correspondence to a higher harmony) could be cross-checked by performing the colour notations to produce a musical harmony. This musical cross-check was not the goal of the aesthetic experience but the proof of the sensitivity of the artist.

De Maistre cribbed from Irwin’s *New science of colour*²⁰ to describe the factional interests of the colour-music debate. The quote he used was apposite because it described the dimensions of the debate. He positioned himself with Irwin amongst those for whom “it constitutes the very song of life and... the spiritual speech of every living thing.”²¹ This exhibition was the focus point not just for discussions about art or art schools but about how one apprehends reality. Daniel Thomas drew attention to the motif on the front of the 1919 catalogue. If interpreted in a Theosophical sense it would be described as an upward pointing triangle, referencing the spiritual, framing an arrangement of further upwardly pointing triangles and part of a circle. The colours would reference devotion to a noble idea, devotion mixed with affection, highest intellect, high spirituality and adaptability. If interpreted through Irwin’s text the colours reference a balance of spiritual and mental recuperative and stimulant colours, evidencing her Theosophical inheritance. There can be no question that de Maistre was flagging through the apparently innocuous design, a new intellectual project against a background of spiritual ambition. The 1919 exhibition embodied a significant departure from previously accepted ways of viewing and representing the world. The works in this exhibition continue to represent a significant point of reference in the larger conversation on abstraction and representation.

The general public, Theosophists and at least Henri Verbrugghen remained actively interested in the idea of colour-music well after 1919. Following Leadbeater’s 1921 lecture at the Sydney Conservatorium interest was sufficiently high for *The Daily Telegraph* to seek out the Conservatorium Director’s position on colour-music. The journalist found that for Mr Henri Verbrugghen, “an art of colour-music is a practicable idea... [but that] the particular form which successful colour-music will take on is scarcely foreshadowed in the colour-music keyboard attempts of today.”²²

Dr Jenny McFarlane

Dr Jenny McFarlane is a freelance curator and writer. Her most recent article was for the July issue of *Art Monthly Australia* on the work of Micky Allan. She advises on public collections in the ACT including the collection of the Legislative Assembly for the ACT. Her doctoral thesis was on the influence of the Theosophical Society on Australian artists in the early modern period.

- 1 Roy de Maistre *The Boat Sheds, in Violet Red Key* (1919) oil on wood 32.5 x 20.5 cm, Private Collection. Illustrated in *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919*.
- 2 Gertsakis, Elizabeth, “Roy de Maistre and colour-music 1916-1920,” Honours Thesis. University of Melbourne, 1975. For a discussion of Hector’s colour music in the context of de Maistre and CW Leadbeater see McFarlane, Jenny, “Colour in art and Alexander Hector’s Colour-Music Organ” *Art and Australia* 40.2 (Summer 2002): 292-297
- 3 Wakelin, Roland, “Post Impressionism in Sydney,” *Quarterly AGNSW* 3. 2. (1962): 91-94, 93.
- 4 McFarlane, Jenny, “Colour in art and Alexander Hector’s Colour-Music Organ,” *Op. cit.* 292-297.
- 5 Blavatsky, HP. *Isis unveiled*, (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1960): 274
- 6 The experience of colour-music is both longstanding and topical as indicated by Professor John Bradshaw’s recent research at the Neuropsychology Research Unit, Monash University into synaesthesia and colour-music. See also “Colour Music,” *The Lone Hand*, 1 July 1913: 240-244.
- 7 First published in 1901. Besant, Annie, and CW Leadbeater, CW, *Thought forms*, (Wheaton, Ill. USA: Quest Book, 1975)
- 8 Kings Hall was touted as the most beautiful and most acoustically perfect auditorium in Sydney. John C Staples, “Easter Convention, 1917,” *Theosophy in Australasia* 23.2 (1917): 30. The average attendance was 307 John C Staples, “Lodge Reports: Sydney,” *Theosophy in Australasia*, 23.2 (1917): 44
- 9 Price, Herbert, “Letter to the Editor,” *Discovery Magazine* 1921, Sydney. Alexander Hector’s clippings album, private collection.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 Charles Boulton studied advanced chamber music at the Conservatorium. He performed with the Conservatorium orchestra and also the Theosophical orchestra under Mme Grieg. He was important in the foundation of the Theosophical radio station 2GB.
- 12 Staples, John C, “The music of the future,” *Theosophy in Australasia* 23. 9 (1917): 225-26
- 13 “Glasgow Lodge,” *The Vahan*, 1 April, 1914.
- 14 *ibid.*, 3.
- 15 “Unseen world: Music changed into colour,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 1921
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 In 1912 Irwin published *The pagan trinity*, a collection of poems dedicated to Rodin which references many of Eduard Schuré’s Theosophical ideas and in 1914 she published the lyrics to *The Kiss* in what was to become a long term professional relationship with the Theosophical composer Axel Wachtmeister then also in Paris.
- 18 McFarlane, Jenny, “A fourth-dimensional emotion,” *Art Monthly Australia* 182 (August 2005): 31-33
Beatrice Irwin was in Melbourne in 1907 with Mr. Knight’s Company as leading lady in “Raffles” touring through.
Williamson, J.C, *New Zealand Free Lance* 8. 378 (28 September 1907): 14
- 19 Beatrice Irwin, *The new science of colour*, (London: William Rider and son, 1916)
- 20 Deborah Hart, *Grace Cossington Smith*, exh. cat. (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2005): 19
- 21 Roy de Maistre, *Colour in Art*, exh. cat. (Sydney, 1919)
- 22 “Music: Harnessing the rainbow,” *The Daily Telegraph* 30 April, 1921. “Unseen world: Music changed into colour,” *The Daily Telegraph* 1921

COLOUR MUSIC - DECODING DE MAISTRE: THE COLOUR-MUSIC CODE

The paintings of Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin were first shown in their exhibition, *Colour in Art*, at Gayfield Shaw's Sydney Art Salon in August 1919. Now, the Ivan Dougherty Gallery has marvelously recreated the earlier show, bringing together many of the original works and juxtaposing them, for the first time, with later paintings. Viewers will note the musical titles given to many of the pieces – to landscapes and abstract designs alike. The young artists held to a theory of colour music, which systematically associated particular colours with different musical notes. Using charts and diagrams (see *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919* (2008) catalogue pp 51-2), de Maistre equated the seven named notes, A to G, with seven successive colours – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet (or ROY G BIV for short). This distinctive colour-set had originated in Isaac Newton's "Opticks" of 1704; ROY G BIV described the spectrum he obtained, when a thin beam of sunlight was refracted through a glass prism, and dispersed into its component colours. It is fitting that a prism-shaped triangle, containing a multi-coloured landscape, should appear on the original 1919 catalogue cover to *Colour in Art* (see *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919* catalogue p3).

To name and measure the colours of the spectrum, Newton had originally divided them by a musical matrix. The colours ROY G BIV were distinguished by the same ratios that separated notes of the Dorian mode – effectively those white notes on a piano keyboard, in the octave from D to d. Since Newton's time, the musical system has changed, but ROY G BIV survives as a common acronym for colours of the rainbow. Contestants on the ABC quiz show, "The Einstein Factor" (junior version), were recently asked to name the sequence. Even reputable theorists have been intrigued by Newton's esoteric analogy of colour to music; some allotted spectral colours to various scales of white notes on a modern keyboard. Professor A W Rimington described the basic method in 1895, prior to one of his famous colour-organ concerts in London:

Starting from these remarkable physical analogies, I have divided the spectrum band into diatonic intervals or notes, on the same plan as that of the musical scale... The middle C having usually been the note selected for fixing the pitch of a keyed instrument, it would seem natural to take it as the first point of contact between the two scales [of music and colour].

In 1919, de Maistre followed a modified scheme, shifting the spectrum two notes down the keyboard. He nominated red, the first colour, to coincide with A, the first-named note. His spectrum stretched over the white notes, from red at A, to violet on the G above. It covered a musical scale in the key of A minor, which is equally 'native' to the white notes as its relative major, C. In practice, A minor is usually supplemented by a couple of accidentals – namely F sharp and G sharp. As a viola player, de Maistre would have located them by shifting his finger along the string being played; on a keyboard, the modified notes are displayed visually, as separate black notes between the white ones. De Maistre accommodated each of the five black notes with intermediate hues – C sharp became yellow-green, halfway between the adjacent yellow of C and the green of D. So he built a palette of twelve colours, one for each of the semitones within a musical octave, and created a comprehensive colour-music code.

A	=	RED
A sharp	=	red-orange
B	=	ORANGE
C	=	YELLOW
C sharp	=	yellow-green
D	=	GREEN
D sharp	=	green-blue
E	=	BLUE
F	=	INDIGO
F sharp	=	indigo-violet
G	=	VIOLET
G sharp	=	violet-red
a	=	RED (again)

De Maistre and Wakelin both used colour-music in a search for colour harmony; it also applied leverage to their palettes that modified naturalistic colour in their landscape paintings. When de Maistre renewed his interest in colour music in the 1930s, he stuck by the rules formalized in the colour-music code of 1919. Two important works from the later period are displayed in *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919* (catalogue pp 54-5): both are double-dated 1919-1835, to indicate a continuity of the principles that inspired *Colour in Art* originally. They are not mere technical exercises, nor are they landscapes, real or imagined. Rather, their subject is music itself, and the titles proclaim specific pieces by Beethoven and Haydn as their inspiration. They promise colour-music painting in its purest form, where the senses of sight and sound converge, and tempt us to uncover their musical origins.

Both paintings resemble musical notation, albeit in modified form. Equally spaced vertical lines divide the pictures, as if to mark each beat of a quaver. Subdivisions of half the width would then represent semiquavers, and the flow of time could be read from left to right, as in a music score. Individual 'colour notes' also seem to ascend the picture plane, just as musical notes climb up ledger lines to show a rise in pitch. In addition, colour differences establish relative pitches within an octave, and these grow lighter towards the top of the paintings, and darken on descent. So de Maistre has combined three factors – colour, tone, and height on the picture plane – to represent pitch. On a page of music, pitch is indicated by height alone. De Maistre has supplied an abundance of clues as to the musical content of each painting. What follows is an attempt to solve part of the puzzle, for one of these paintings, and shed light on the artist's colour music methods in the process.

BEETHOVEN

Arrested phase from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in red major (illustrated in *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919* catalogue p55) is divided into twelve vertical strips (or 'beats'), of equal width. Five of them, spanning the centre of the painting, are dominated by shades of red and pink, which give the picture its red major title. Towards the top of each pink strip is a large red lozenge, with blue arcs at two of its corners. Repeated along the horizontal, five of them together create a pronounced rhythm – to suggest any musical device, such as a trill, would only be guessing. The lower portion of the central red section is more informative: at the bottom of the painting, each beat is divided into thinner columns, coloured in the ROY G BIV sequence from left to right. This group of half-beats is capped by a diagonal line of 'colour notes', sloping up towards the right and forming a colour scale. Their colours lighten as they rise, beginning with dark red at the lower left and ending at the top right with pink. The smooth, upward flow is only interrupted at the third and sixth notes, which are dislocated from their expected positions. De Maistre has deliberately raised them, to indicate the musical notes are sharpened here.

In a brilliantly coloured preparatory sketch (illustrated in *Colour in Art – Revisiting 1919* catalogue p15), the artist clearly revealed the nuts-and-bolts of his method. The musical scale described above is painted in the simplest ROY G BIV colours (as are fragments of the same scale, which appear elsewhere in the painting). Beneath the thin paint of the sketch, we can see de Maistre has penciled in the musical names of the notes, from A to D. In some places, an additional cross marks the red A, where both scale and colour music code begins. (Crosses also mark the position of red, in each rhythmic lozenge along the top.) In the central scale, the third note is a plain yellow, over painted with green scumbling. The resultant yellow-green, along with its raised position, shows the musical note has been elevated from a yellow C, to C sharp. Elsewhere, de Maistre has not bothered with the green, leaving the note a plain yellow, though a written sharp sign (#) can be faintly discerned in places.

The sixth indigo note, by its raised position, suggests its pitch is increased to an F sharp. Together with the C sharp of the third note, we are given all the notes sufficient for a scale in the key of D major. It begins in its middle, on the red A, rises through its green tonic (or first note D), and ends on the A above. De Maistre has neither raised the seventh note, violet, nor changed its hue to violet-red. He has let it stay on G, avoiding the G sharp that is necessary for the key signature of A major. Effectively, there is a green scale (D major) against the red background (A major) of the painting's title. The apparent dilemma is resolved if red major is considered the name of a transitory chord, situated in a passage in the key of green. The chord of A seventh fits the bill, harmonising the notes A, C sharp, E, and G (natural, not sharp) which are all contained in the key of D. Musically, A7 is the dominant chord, built on the fifth note of the scale, and would most often resolve into the tonic, the key chord of D. And de Maistre shows exactly that: the elaborate red passage is immediately followed by one-and-a-half beats of green, the keynote of D in his colour-music code. Together, they form a perfect cadence, a closing device for the end of a musical phrase.

When de Maistre converted the sketch for *Arrested phase from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in red major* into the finished oil, he added tonal variation to the flat colours. F sharp was distinguished from blue E by greater brightness, rather than a marked shift of hue into indigo-violet; the yellow-green of C sharp was darkened to a muddy ochre. Still, the central scale is clear enough. Immediately above its high end, a fragment of the same scale re-appears in the darker colours. They may represent the deep notes of one instrument, such as a violin, played against the high notes on an instrument of deeper register, such as a viola. Or de Maistre may have simply wished to highlight the tonal difference between opposite ends of the scale. In any case, the four or five notes of the fragment create a sweet harmony of parallel thirds with the main scale below. After they finish, the lower scale starts again, this time flowing through the green key chord of D; after six notes, it ends on two half-beats of blue or indigo.

De Maistre's painted scale expresses a definite musical idea, and when its fragments are combined they form a motif, that could be written out as musical notation. It may be possible to identify its shape within the score of the Ninth Symphony, designated in the title of de Maistre's painting. Beethoven's composition is a monumental work, nominally in the key of D minor, which is introduced by a B flat. As it proceeds, key signatures are changed, but there are no sections marked with three sharps, the red A major of the picture's title. By the end, two-thirds of the piece has been played in the D major key. Marked by two sharps, these passages are the logical places to look for de Maistre's motif. In them, I have located only two bars – within Schiller's "Ode to Joy" at the closing of the Fourth Movement – which duplicate the note pattern of the two main painted scales. (They are bars 913 and 914 in the prestissimo, eight bars before the *maestoso*, on page 273 of the Edition Peters. They form a brief instrumental phrase between repeats of the words "schöner Götterfunken!").

Indeed, the score shows the scales starting on A, moving through an A (red) chord to D (green) major, but the resemblance is not sufficient to warrant a Eureka moment. Both the parallel-thirds harmony and the rhythmic device above it are missing, and the surrounding chords are completely the wrong colour. It also seems an unlikely choice: a passing effect, performed at manic pace, it lasts two seconds at most. If de Maistre relied on a recording of the Symphony, and there were no music manuscripts in his effects when he died, he would easily have misheard it. It seems he was elaborating a similar phrase, and possibly being inventive rather than literal in his interpretation. But I am loath to believe the artist simply made his music up, and named the painting after a record he was playing at the time. The precise motif could lie, yet concealed, within the Ninth, maybe as a short modulation into D major from a section of another key. For those who might care to trace De Maistre's musical source further, a transcription of his motif is appended below. By establishing a closer relationship between music and painting, we can but enrich our understanding of the creative process.



Niels Hutchison

Niels Hutchison is an artist based in Melbourne, whose practice has covered such diverse areas as painting, printmaking, architecture, and stained glass. Niels has exhibited in many solo and group exhibitions, and his work is included in private and public collections. He has occasionally worked as a musician, composer, and arranger, and is the author of the website COLOUR MUSIC, at <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~colmusic>. In it, the work of Roy de Maistre (and others) is examined, for their use of colour-music codes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beethoven, Ludwig van. "Neun Symphonien für Orchester." Edition C F Peters, Leipzig.
- Eagle, Mary. *Australian Modern Painting Between the Wars 1914-1939*. Sydney: Bay Books, 1989.
- Hutchison, Niels. "Colour Music." 1997. <<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~colmusic>>
- Johnson, Heather. *Roy de Maistre: the Australian Years, 1894-1930*. Sydney: Craftsman House, 1988.
- Johnson, Heather. *Roy de Maistre: the English Years, 1930-1968*. Sydney: Craftsman House, 1995.
- Klein, A B. *Colour Music: the Art of Light*. London: Crosby Lockwood & Son, 1926
- Newton, Sir Isaac. *Opticks: or, Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light*. 1st ed. London: Sam Smith & Benj. Walford, 1704.
- Rekveld, J. "alexander wallace rimington." August 2008. <<http://www.lumen.nu/rekveld/files/newart.html>>

THE CYCLE OF NEGLECT IN AUSTRALIAN ART

“The basis of understanding art is to distinguish between the painter and the artist. The painter to my mind is a tradesman imitating reality, other painters, or themselves. The artist on the other hand transforms reality into a pictorial language in an individual way.”¹

Orban’s argument suggests that the conceptual character in art lies not in the artworks themselves but in the attitude to art making that informs them. His division decisively separates the artist from the painter and his analysis characterises the binary positions that artists frequently adopted throughout the Twentieth Century. This sentiment also appears in the writings of many other Australian artists including Roy de Maistre, Sam Atyeo, Grace Crowley, John Passmore and Tony McGillick who were in various ways attempting to establish the ground rules for a critical system that sets apart the process of “art making” from that of an “art practice”. The common ground that connects these artists is that they had a mutual interest in developing what Frances Colpitt referred to as a “System of Opinion”.²

In her influential book *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century* Colpitt states that systematic forms of thinking in art are frequently derived from a subjective position. According to her schema abstract art has evolved from the Metaphysical to the Formal and into the Subjective. However this analytical framework can also be applied retrospectively and as a result earlier systems such as Roy de Maistre and Roland Wakelin’s experiments in colour-music can be interpreted as a system that simultaneously represents objective and subjective concerns.³

The first point that I would like to make is that the *Colour in Art* exhibition was more than just a simple exercise in exploring the relationship between colour and music. Instead it was a component of a much larger and more complex system that presented audiences with a conceptual position that clearly articulated an alternative language of non-pictorial representation. The great tragedy is that these methods of producing and interpreting art never gained a foothold in the official narrative of the visual arts in Australia. From this position a book could be written called “Great tragedies of Australian Art” that maps out the history of stillborn ideas.

It is important to note that two of Australia’s most popular artists of the twentieth century, namely Sidney Nolan and Brett Whiteley started out as abstractionists but quickly abandoned this path early on in their respective careers to pursue a way of working that would gain them greater popular acceptance. The shift of direction in the work of these two artists characterises what might be called the ground rules of Australian art. These rules foreground a productive literal narrative that historically had its outcomes in the tradition of nationalistic landscape painting. More recently this tradition has evolved to embrace the popularisation of graphic imagery that has been institutionalised through Australia’s system of art prizes. The end result is that the use of terms such as illustration that was once exclusively used as a term of derision has now become an accepted genre. This cultural condition has obviously had a negative impact on the careers of those artists who have chosen to adopt a more systematic or conceptual way of working.

The end result is that artists such as de Maistre and Wakelin developed careers that were only a shadow of what they might have been. It is also interesting to speculate how artists from Europe and America who developed systems would have survived in a place like Australia. Would have artists such as Piet Mondrian, Kenneth Martin, On Kawara and Sol Le Witt have abandoned their systems in preference for landscape or portrait painting?

An example of this cultural condition that curiously appears in Heather Johnson’s first book on de Maistre is Ian Burn’s comment that the *Colour in Art* exhibition of 1919 had little influence on any other artists of the period. As a result the second point that I would like to make is that de Maistre and Wakelin’s syncretic system of colour-music did influence their contemporaries as well as subsequent generations of Australian artists.

As a young artist John Passmore acknowledged his interest in the theories of de Maistre and Wakelin. In turn he went on to teach a new generation of artists such as Peter Upward who then went on to explore the relationship between colour and jazz. During the 1950s and early 1960s Upward worked closely with jazz musicians occasionally exhibiting his works in the nightclubs of Kings Cross. Many of the titles of Upward’s paintings made reference to jazz including a major work produced in 1959 called *Syncopation*. The marriage of Abstract Expressionism and improvised music opened the door to the next generation of artists who limited the excessive gestures to create a style that became known as Colour-Field painting.

From the mid 1960s artists such as David Aspden drew upon his life-long interest in music to develop an individual system of colour and form that made reference to a fusion of musical traditions. Aspden’s choice of colours and formal compositions were based around a process that he referred to as “fine

tuning”. This system resembled Bach’s elaborate musical compositions and his skilful use of formal devices resembled the musical techniques of *counterpoint* and *fugue*. This way of working enabled Aspden to produce major works such as *Bach’s Blues* that contain a vast selection of shades and tones of the colour blue to create an overall composition that is constructed through a system of subtle formal variations.

By the 1970s artists such as John Nixon had developed an ongoing dialogue between monochrome painting, punk and experimental music. More recently Nixon has extended his *EPW* (Experimental Painting Workshop): *Polychrome* series to include new works such as *Colour Music (Music Composition)*. This series currently includes over 25 works that have been produced between 2007 and 2008. The significance of these paintings in relation to the history of colour-music in Australian art is that they use colour and form as notations that can be interpreted by musicians. Through the use of pictorial symbols Nixon has become a composer by producing non-objective paintings that answer the unresolved question that historians of de Maistre and Wakelin’s work still struggle with, *can a painting be performed as music?* Another innovative development in the history of Australian colour-music is to be found in the work of John Aslanidis. As with de Maistre, Aslanidis was a student at Sydney’s Conservatorium of Music before going to art school. Since the early 1990s he has continuously explored the relationship between optical and sonic art through a detailed examination of the patterns of waves, frequencies and vibrations. For Aslanidis the aim of painting is to produce chromatic intensities that for the viewer resemble the experience of listening to music. Through a detailed study of art historical movements including Futurism and Synchronism Aslanidis has been able to explore the process of synaesthesia. These paintings have been informed by Aslanidis’s participation in the field of electronic music and in particular the sub-genres of Dub, Minimal Techno and Hip Hop.

In conclusion this talk attempted to demonstrate two points, firstly that de Maistre and Wakelin’s colour-music paintings were part of a larger conceptual system that challenged the prevailing narrative of Australian art, and secondly that *Colour in Art* did have an identifiable influence on subsequent generations of Australian artists. In retrospect the obstacles that confronted de Maistre and Wakelin in the development of their philosophical system are reminiscent of the difficulties that contemporary painters working in Australia face today. Based on this evidence it is reasonable to suggest that the cultural expectations surrounding the role of painting remain largely unchanged since 1919.

Christopher Dean

Christopher Dean is a practicing artist, curator and lectures in Art History and Theory at Sydney College of the Arts. He is currently completing a PhD titled “The Pink Monochrome Project” at The College Of Fine Arts. The focus of Dean’s research is the examination of the relationship that connects monochrome painting to subjectivity. In 2007 he curated the exhibition *Frozen Gestures: The Art of Peter Upward* at The Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest.

1 Horton, Mervyn, *Present Day Art in Australia*, (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1969): 151.

2 Colpitt, Francis, *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*, (London: Cambridge University Press: 2002)

3 Objective concerns relate to the more scientific position of colour-music while the subjective relates to the personal concern of the artists.

R-BALSON-/41 – ANTHONY HORDERNS' FINE ART GALLERIES

■ INTRODUCTION

R-Balson-/41 was a research project with the aim of reconstructing Ralph Balson's 1941 exhibition at Anthony Horder's Fine Art Galleries, Sydney – widely held to be the first one-person exhibition of non-figurative painting in Australia.

Balson's 1941 exhibition has come to be regarded as something of a landmark in Australian art history and the beginnings of a local tradition of non-objective art. In spite of its art historical significance, however, there has been little research looking at the specific content of the exhibition. A key motivation for the project, then, has been to use the material fact of Balson's 1941 paintings as a platform for generating new scholarship. The exhibition at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery brought together thirteen paintings and provided an opportunity to address this watershed exhibition as a 'body of work', to question the manner in which it has been regarded by art history and to undertake detailed study of individual works.

The *R-Balson-/41* exhibition and the papers contained in this volume add to a growing body of research on Balson's oeuvre and we would like to acknowledge in particular Daniel Thomas' work in the 1960s, Bruce Adams' Ralph Balson retrospective held at Heide Museum of Modern Art (1989) and David Pestorius' exhibition *Geometric Painting in Australia 1941-1997* held at the University of Queensland Art Museum (1997).

We are greatly indebted to Deborah Edwards for her essay, 'A New Realm of Visual Experience', published in the exhibition catalogue, and to each of the symposium contributors who brought a rich and diverse range of research backgrounds to bear on Balson's work.

Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth
Co-curators of *R-Balson-/41* exhibition

■ CONCERNING “A NEW REALM OF VISUAL EXPERIENCE”

As I have written the catalogue essay for the current *R Balson/41* exhibition, I believe my responsibility today is to summarise the position I elaborated on in this essay, or at least mark several points from it.

My study of the 1941 paintings revolved around three larger concerns:

1. An attempt, if only preliminary, to contextualise the paintings in relation to Balson's own output; in terms of the Sydney context, and with some reference to international trends;
2. A belief in the need to interrogate the nature of the Balson-Crowley aesthetic relationship; and;
3. An interest in exploring the sense I have had of a mythologising or historicising impulse at work in a number of historical and contemporary dealings with Balson and the 1941 exhibition at the Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries.

In terms of contextualising Balson's works, one of the things which I sought to explain initially was my sense that Balson – who had matured as a proto-cubist painter within a circle of like-minded Sydney artists in the late 1930s – appeared to plunge, seemingly fully-formed, into non-objective painting with his solo exhibition in 1941. In a mixture of vertical and horizontally oriented compositions adopting geometrical motifs, Balson radically reconceived his art in terms of the constructive capacities of shape and colour alone. It was radical leap into pure painting, which constituted an uncompromising claim in the arena of Australian wartime Modernism - that representational modes could no longer be part of a mission to poetically embody the modern condition and universal values.

In this sense this series (which may have begun in 1939 although all paintings are dated 1941), embodied “a new realm of visual experience” within the terms or creative parameters of Australian art of the period. They are an experimental series or set of step-by-step exploratory moves through various new aesthetic problems – the ordering of which remains nonetheless opaque (although one can constitute a number of hypothetical sequences for their production). They not only reveal (in almost baroque orchestrations of idiosyncratic colour) the pictorial supremacy which Balson accorded to colour, but that Balson was a non-programmatic non-objective painter. His repeated use of an irregular unbalanced circle, an arching slug form, and a strange serrated shape for example, present the idea of subjective incursions into a purportedly objective art; of organic territories held within the constructivist whole. As such these painterly incursions or acts unsettle that sense of Balson as the detached analytical painter of metaphors of scientific idealism which has shaped many analyses of the artist's work. Moreover, surely such complex constructions also unsettle that notion of Balson's artistic life as a progressive development from the mechanistically rigid to the embracingly flexible which has played at the edges of critiques of his art.

Amongst many elements at work for Balson in the late 1930s, there seemed perhaps three which were primary facilitators of his shift to geometric abstraction. In the interests of a radical compression today these have become the three ‘C’s’ – Colour, Grace Crowley and an intriguing Catalogue. The larger context for Balson's shift was Modernism's presentation of internationalism as a form of abstract universality: an idealistic credo which sent a generation of Australian artists to investigate the expression of Utopian, metaphysical and mystical ideas through systems of geometry; of dynamic symmetry; of theosophy and anthroposophy and various Eastern mysticisms throughout the interwar decades and subsequent years. Yet if one can claim that Frank Hinder came to abstraction primarily through geometry, and Robert Klippel through the metaphor of an organic-mechanical duality, Balson's transformation was facilitated by his skill as a virtuoso, intuitive colourist. His intriguingly jazz-moderne abstracts detour geometry's aesthetic purity for a remarkable colouristic and formalist hedonism; an abstract *joie de vivre* of time-and-culture specific colour combinations which revealed Balson's public entrée as a constructive painter as less a treatise on the universal spiritual than a celebratory, experimental and empirical engagement with non-representational composition and the effects of the artist's own idiosyncratic colour affinities.

In relation to the impact of Grace Crowley, I do see this artist as a crucial facilitator of Balson's recognition, around 1938-39, of the terms of a central debate amongst abstractionists of the 1930s. This revolved around the view that in terms of conveying the vital rhythms of reality, there was a crucial difference between those who abstracted, and those who conceived abstractly. In the parlance of the era, it was the difference between the general category of ‘abstract art’, and that of ‘non-objective painting’ which used geometry's absolute or universal forms. Crowley's own understanding of this fundamental split had emerged as she registered the differences between her cubist teachers, André L'Hote – who she said seemed loath to leave the visual world, and Albert Gleizes who, ‘began with the wall and insisted that one never forgot it’. Balson's marked interest in Gleizes – whose theories as we know were regularly sent to Crowley by the evangelical Anne Dangar in France – provided a gateway to explorations of the flat surface and the orchestration of elements to animate this surface, without recourse to three dimensional effects.

The catalogue: Bruce Adams in his comprehensive study of Balson identified those works and writings which directly affected the artist and the Sydney circle in the mid to late 30s – Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, Klee, the Russian constructivists, Gabo, Herbert Read and others – but I also believe that one can't overestimate the impact on Balson of Hilla Rebay's 1937-38 catalogue of the Guggenheim Museum's collection of non-objective paintings. Renee Free tells us that Frank Hinder lent this catalogue (which had been sent to him by a friend in the USA), to Balson around 1938. It appears to have provided a crucially stimulating reinforcement of Balson's ideas concerning ‘the abstract’. It featured the 1920s paintings of Kandinsky and the more reductive German Rudolf Bauer along with a number of others, and their preoccupations and innovations, involving iconographic elements of modernism (Kandinsky's diagonal line of ascending motion, his floating circle, and Gleizes tilted planes, for example), can be said to permeate Balson's 1941 group as a whole.

Very briefly, in terms of contextualising Balson's work – and notwithstanding the paintings' claims to modernist universality – I see the 1941 Constructions as very much in line with a Sydney context of production. These first non-representational experiments have a stylistic lineage which stretches from de Maistre and Wakelin's colour-music abstracts of 1919 to the design-oriented Burdekin House exhibition of 1929, which also indicated artists' familiarity with Mondrian, early Constructivism and the Bauhaus. The paintings are also part of a larger Sydney lineage which can be summarised in terms of: a particular preference for rhythmic expression; a preference for the concept of art as a set of identifiable, interrelated components which each has a function in forming a unified relational (and permanent) whole; and a particular relationship to ‘the decorative’ or decorative painting as it was defined by Sydney modernists at the time. In their conversion to Modernism, ‘the decorative’ signalled an art of abstract relationships: the decorative painting was a ‘design’ which expressed the idea of art as a form of visual thinking. ‘Decorative painting’ was in this context, as Margaret Preston claimed, ‘the keynote of everything’. Nonetheless, a time when Preston's ‘decorations’ remained tied to the real, and Frank Hinder continued to abstract from nature and hence balance flat patterning with depth, Balson moved in 1941 over an unequivocally flattened surface, and thereby within a territory which Kandinsky himself remained extremely conscious of involving the issue of how to avoid the entirely non-referential becoming ‘the decorative’ or ‘a design’ *alone*. One can argue that here Balson embraced and extended the terms of ‘the decorative’ as already encountered in Sydney interwar traditions, where cubist and abstract devices had gained early currency in fashionable designs across photography, graphic design, applied arts and fashion. In this context, the showing of Balson's work in Anthony Hordern's Department store - one of Sydney's interwar ‘Cathedrals of Commerce’ (which reserved space in its gallery for furniture, artefacts and carpets) – reinforces a point which I believe is also made by Grace Crowley's archly moderne or decorative signature on Balson's paintings. (One might add, in this context, that Crowley's signing of Balson's paintings for the 1941 show is an intriguingly possessive gesture notwithstanding the generally stated rationale that her handwriting was better than his).

In terms of an international context for Balson's art, I felt there were a couple of simple points to emphasise. The first being, notwithstanding the persistent view of a delay or lag in Australian experimentation with and acceptance of abstract art, that Balson's move to geometric abstraction proceeded in parallel with contemporaneous trends in America and Britain, where non-objective painting and sculpture also became visible from the mid-to-late 1930s. Secondly, I feel one needs to remember that various diverse ranges of abstraction impacted upon Australians artists, in both Melbourne and Sydney, from the mid-1930s. It is perhaps also worth noting that geometric abstraction, which was described by Museum of Modern Art director Alfred Barr in 1936 as “intellectual, structural, architectonic and rectilinear”, was widely seen as a new form of classical painting. In this sense Balson's 1941 paintings can also be related to the interwar ‘call to order’ or classicism which impacted on both European avant-garde and establishment production in this era.

Concerning the Crowley-Balson aesthetic relationship, I believe that the joint portraits which the artists produced on the eve of their unequivocal departure from proto-cubist painting represent a significant moment – particularly as both Balson and Crowley embraced the portrait idea of an insightful account of the subject. Yet where Balson pulled back to a Cezannesque treatment and painted what amounted to an elegy to volumetric modelling and representation in his *Portrait of Grace Crowley* (1939), Crowley's Matisse-inspired, *The artist and his model* (1938), is revelatory only in the way the title implies – as a portrait of ‘the artist’ with no more individual idiosyncrasy or physiological likeness than can be indicated by Balson's

house-painter overalls and the implication that he is a modernist. The subject's psychological muteness is a point neatly made by Crowley: she later noted that, "As time went on I began to realise that Balson WAS his painting." In this sense Crowley's painting, and her comments, perhaps mark both the enigma of the Balson-Crowley relationship and the beginning of a mythologising of Balson.

In this context, and in conclusion, several very brief comments concerning this idea of a mythologising and/or historicizing of Balson and the 1941 exhibition. In relation to Balson's 1941 paintings having come down to us as the triumphal introduction of non-objective painting in Australia – one needs, as Elena Taylor has maintained, to remain conscious of Grace Crowley's own definite moves to establish Balson as the prime figure of Australian non-objective innovation – and moreover, of Balson's own possible actions to this effect. As we know, Crowley virtually wrote herself out of the development into non-objective painting through her consistent promotion of Balson and through the destruction of her own 1940-41 paintings. One can also note Renee Free's identification of Frank Hinder's experiments with non-objective composition from the late 1930s.

Grace Crowley's claims followed an impulse to historicise or mythologise which Balson may -advertently or inadvertently - have complied with. He appears for example, to have been consistently enigmatic in relation to influences: Crowley reported that Balson expressed impatience with Gleizes; Hinder said he was openly dismissive about the Guggenheim non-objective paintings catalogue which Hinder lent him; and Robert Klippel later reported Balson as saying that he got nothing out of the two Riopelle paintings which Klippel lent him in 1950. Yet in each case the impact was seminal. Contrary to the belief that Daniel Thomas (in 1965) or Grace Crowley (1966) first recognised the 1941 exhibition as 'the first purely abstract one-man show' in Australia, this claim had been made by Balson himself in 1955 (he actually said it was the "first abstract one-man show in Sydney"), when compiling his abstract credentials for French critic Michael Seuphor's *Dictionary of Abstract Painting* (1957).

Did such impulses feed the later (inaccurate) view that the 1941 exhibition, and hence this new abstraction, had encountered staunchly negative critiques in Australia? Did it feed the tendency in the 1960s to lionise Balson as the heroic precursor of the 'architectural' structures of 1960s geometric abstraction, which left him the perennial, although venerated, outsider? This left him subject not only to problematic claims such as one critic's in 1981 that "to talk of influences on Balson's art is irrelevant" or that Balson was "probably the only true modernist Australia had produced until the 1960s", but to a marketing campaign after his death which claimed him (also inaccurately) to have been an almost entirely unknown master during his lifetime.

The reality is of course more finely nuanced.

Deborah Edwards

Senior Curator of Australian Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

Deborah Edwards was the first assistant curator of Australian art at Queensland Art Gallery, working there 1980-84 until returning to Sydney to begin post-graduate studies and tutor at Sydney University. Joining the Art Gallery of NSW in 1986, she became a curator and subsequently Senior Curator of Australian art. She specialises in 20th century art and has a strong interest in Australian sculpture. She has lectured and published widely and is the author of monographs on sculptors Lyndon Dadswell, Rayner Hoff and Robert Klippel, and painters Godfrey Miller and Margaret Preston. She has mounted many exhibitions, including Stampede of the Lower Gods. Classical mythology in Australian art (1989), Australian sculpture 1890s-1910 (1990), the Godfrey Miller retrospective (1996), Rosalie Gascoigne: Material as Landscape (1998) and Rayner Hoff and his school (1999), and initiated the popular Australian Art Collection Focus series. Recent major exhibitions include the Robert Klippel retrospective (2002), Presence and Absence: Portrait sculpture in Australia (National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, 2003) and the Margaret Preston retrospective (2005).

■ CROWLEY-BALSON: COLLABORATION IN ABSTRACTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine the evolution of Grace Crowley's art towards abstraction from 1929 onwards, to establish Crowley's parallel move into abstraction with Ralph Balson in 1940-41, and to raise the question of mutual influence in this endeavour.

The partnership between Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson is amongst the most significant and long lasting in Australian art history. From 1938 onwards, Crowley and Balson painted together exclusively in her George Street Studio. In 1955, upon Balson's retirement from full-time work at age 65, he established a studio in her garage at Mittagong where he also maintained a bedroom, and in 1960 they traveled together in Europe for a year. Crowley admired Balson greatly and during his life and after his death actively promoted his work.

While 1937-38 marks the beginning of the close association between Crowley and Balson, the two artists met in the mid 1920s when Crowley was a teacher and Balson a student at the Julian Ashton Art School. They renewed their friendship in the early 1930s when both artists were briefly associated with Dorrit Black's Modern Art Centre. In 1934, Balson became part of the small group of artists who painted on the weekends at the Crowley-Fizelle Art School in George Street. Although the question as to the exact nature of their relationship cannot be completely answered, Crowley and Balson were intimately connected for over a quarter of a century, painting together, living together and traveling together.

We know from the evidence of this exhibition, by 1941, Balson was painting geometric abstract works. There are no corresponding works by Crowley from this time. Indeed, there are no surviving works at all by Crowley from her last semi-figurative works of 1938-39 and her earliest dated abstracts from 1947¹. Although the works no longer exist, we do know from the evidence of her exhibition history that throughout this time Crowley was also painting geometric abstract works. In September 1942 at the Society of Artist's Annual Exhibition she exhibited for the first time an abstract painting *Construction*, alongside Balson's *Construction in green* and *Construction in transparent planes*. In 1944, along with Balson, Finner and Gerald Ryan she showed six abstract works in the *Constructive Paintings* exhibition at Macquarie Galleries and she exhibited abstract works alongside Balson in 1945, 1946, 1948 and into the 1950s. We also have Crowley's statement that "the 'total' period [of abstraction] would have begun after *Exhibition 1* held at David Jones' Gallery in Market Street in 1939."²

Unfortunately, it is almost certain that most of these early abstract paintings were destroyed by Crowley, either at the time, or possibly even as late as 1971 when she was forced to vacate her George Street Studio. The lack of works by Crowley from this period has meant that it has been impossible to fully understand Crowley's progression from figuration into abstraction. However, in 2006, during the course of preparing the Grace Crowley exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia a conservator made an extraordinary discovery³. During a routine inspection of the Gallery's *Abstract 1947* she noticed that there appeared to be a painting underneath a layer of grey paint on the back of the cardboard support. An infrared examination revealed the contours of this hidden work, and by matching colours that could be seen through abraded areas of the grey paint she was able to create a digital image of this painted-over work.

I consider this work, now titled *Composition study*, to be a very early example of Crowley's abstract work, probably dating from 1940-41.⁴ In its rigid geometry and lack of transparent planes, it is dissimilar to any of Crowley's known abstract painting from 1947 onwards. In two critical respects it also relates closely to Crowley's work of the 1930s. The use of the vertical, 'portrait' format was used extensively by Crowley during the 1930s but never for her abstract paintings. Similarly, the semi-circular shape is a motif repeatedly found in Crowley's work of the 1920s and 1930s, yet disappears completely from her abstract works.⁵ A stylistic comparison with several of Balson's 1941 paintings (which I will look at later in this paper) also suggests a date of 1940-41 for *Composition study*.

Composition study appears to be a transitional work, the composition is somewhat clumsy and unbalanced, and it is possibly only an exercise rather than a finished work. Clearly Crowley did not consider it highly, which is probably why she chose to paint over it in 1947. It is not signed and therefore almost certainly was never exhibited. However, it is highly important for us as it represents the missing link in the evolution of Crowley's art – connecting the semi-figurative works shown in *Exhibition 1* in 1939 to the fully resolved and highly individual abstracts of the late 1940s. It reveals the influences shaping one of Crowley's earliest forays into complete abstraction and to see the methodical way in which she approached the problem of creating an abstract composition.

Crowley first came into contact with abstract art during her four years in Paris from 1926-1929. We know that she looked widely at modern art, seeing works by Picasso and Matisse, and in one letter back to

Australia refers to seeing “a ripping modern exhibition of Dutch work which really was a revelation.”⁶ We can only speculate whose work Crowley saw, but it is possible that she was referring to works by the Dutch de Stijl artists. From 1927-29 Crowley studied at André L’Hote’s Academy learning his method of pictorial composition based upon the golden section, the simplification of forms into geometric shapes, and the ‘passage’ of forms into each other through colour. However, in 1929, aware that she would soon be returning to Australia, Crowley also attended several lectures by Amédée Ozenfant at Ferdinand Léger’s L’Académie Moderne. More significantly, she also took several lessons with the cubist artist and theoretician Albert Gleizes in Paris and stayed at his nascent artist colony Moly-Sabata. While Gleizes never fully abandoned representation, in 1931 he was a founding member of the *Abstraction-Creation* society. In 1929, under Gleizes’s instruction, Crowley completed several gouaches and drawing based upon Gleizes’s theories of pictorial construction and these works are Crowley’s earliest experiments in abstraction.

Although after her return to Australia in 1930 Crowley initially continued to follow L’Hote’s principles in her own works and in her teaching, she also remained connected to the latest developments in abstract art in Paris through her correspondence with Anne Dangar who had become a member of Gleizes’s artistic circle. We know that in July 1933 Dangar sent Crowley several issues of the journal *Abstraction-Création*, and on behalf of Gleizes asked Crowley if she was making any non-representational work and extended an invitation to join the *Abstraction Creation* society. In 1933 Crowley and Rah Fizelle established an art school together in George Street in which Crowley taught. From 1934, the weekend sketch club at the Crowley-Fizelle School became the focal point for a group of artists interested in abstraction including Frank and Margel Hinder, Balson and theoretician Eleanore Lange. This group had access to a number of publications which featured current European abstract art – including Herbert Read’s *Art Now, Cubism and Abstract art* by Alfred Barr, and Hilla Rebay’s catalogue to the Guggenheim’s collection of non-objective paintings and *Circle: International survey of constructive art*. From about 1937 onwards, Crowley and Balson experimented with ever increasing degrees of abstraction in their figurative work.⁷ At the same time, this group began planning an exhibition to showcase the abstract direction of their art, eventuating in *Exhibition 1* which opened in September 1939. This exhibition marks a turning point for Crowley and Balson. It was the last time they exhibited figurative work and precipitated them to push their work further towards abstraction.

In early 1940, shortly after *Exhibition 1*, Crowley began a series of correspondence lessons with Albert Gleizes, through the intermediary of Anne Dangar. The idea was that Gleizes would set exercises, which Crowley would complete and send back to France, which would then be commented upon and corrected by Gleizes. Apparently only a few such exchanges occurred, cut short by the occupation of France. While we do not know the exact form of these lessons, it is possible that they were exercises in Gleizes’s principles of ‘translation and rotation’. In 1924 Gleizes had published his system of pictorial construction based upon the analysis of the image into rectangular and circular shapes. Rectangular forms would be transposed laterally (translation) and in a circular movement around an axis (rotation) to create an abstracted composition which he considered to embody both space and time. When we look at Crowley’s *Composition Study* we can clearly see Gleizes’s transposed rectangles and circles, which Crowley has used as the basic building blocks of her composition.

Yet as much as we can discern the influence of Gleizes, there is also the enduring legacy of L’Hote in the manner that Crowley has organised the disposition of elements according to an internal geometry based upon the external proportions of the image. At its most simple level, Crowley has divided the work into thirds horizontally, and in half vertically. There are numerous further notional divisions of the canvas, for example, a line can be drawn extending the outer edge of the blue triangle in the bottom left of the image to exactly the centre of the top edge. This method of placing elements within a composition, of ‘constructing’ an image, is what Crowley learnt from L’Hote, and during the 1930s at the Crowley-Fizelle art school Crowley taught the same method, lecturing her students that “our first consideration in planning a picture is the dimensions of the frame and the relation of those dimensions to smaller ones contained within the frame and controlled by it.”⁸

Visually, there are strong similarities between several of Balson’s 1941 paintings, in particular *Constructive* (1941) (Private collection Melbourne), and *Painting no. 14* (1941) (Private collection, Sydney) and Crowley’s *Composition study* (c.1941). There is the similar palette of colours, and the same vocabulary of geometric forms, which are layered upon each other. In Balson’s *Painting no. 14* we can also see some of Gleizes ‘translation and rotation’ of forms and in *Constructive* Balson has organised the composition to an internal geometry based upon the proportions of the support in a similar manner to Crowley’s construction of *Composition study*.

Composition study has clearly been based primarily upon Crowley’s understanding of the compositional theories of L’Hote and Gleizes, and late in life, when asked about the factors which influenced her development of abstract art, Crowley listed both L’Hote and Gleizes as having been important influences,

the “stepping stones in one’s development”.⁹ However, Crowley always maintained that by far the greatest influence upon her in the “problems of abstract painting” was Ralph Balson. Crowley was also at pains to point out that she had not influenced Balson. Crowley first made this claim in 1965, several months after Balson’s death when Daniel Thomas was preparing the first article devoted to Balson. In response to his questions, Crowley wrote “I am arrested by the fact that you and others take it for granted that I influenced Balson’s work” asking him “please don’t let that get into the article you are writing.”¹⁰ Thomas’s article thus repeated Crowley’s claim that “... he [Balson] was leading her into abstraction.”¹¹

Others, who knew Crowley and Balson, saw it differently. Frank Hinder, who worked closely with Balson and Crowley from 1934 to 1937-38 considered that “Balson owes a great deal to her influence.”¹² Mary Evatt, a student of Crowley’s in the 1930s and lifelong friend considered that “Balson developed his work largely under the guidance of Grace Crowley. However it is only fair to say that as she influenced him, he influenced her work just as strongly.”¹³ And Lloyd Rees who wrote, “under the influence of Grace Crowley especially, Ralph Balson was to emerge as an abstract painter of note.”¹⁴

Based on Crowley’s first-hand experience of abstraction as far back as 1929, her ongoing connection to Gleizes throughout the 1930s, and the considered application of both Gleizes and L’Hote’s methods in her *Composition study* of 1940-41, Crowley’s claim that she was ‘led’ by Balson to abstraction seems unlikely. Instead, a more useful way of considering this early period of abstraction by Balson and Crowley, and the question of mutual influence, is in terms of a productive partnership, a collaborative effort, or as Crowley expressed it, “We built on each other.”¹⁵

While in 1965 Crowley asked Daniel Thomas to “keep her out of the picture as much as possible” in fact in 1941, Crowley had very much inserted herself into the Balson picture.¹⁶ On Balson’s behalf, Crowley, with her elegant, geometric script, signed all of Balson’s paintings in the 1941 exhibition. It is an unusual act, yet highly symbolic of the closeness of the two artists at this time.

Elena Taylor

Elena Taylor is Curator of Australian Painting and Sculpture at the National Gallery of Australia. She is the curator of the retrospective exhibition *Grace Crowley: Being Modern*, National Gallery of Australia 2007 and traveling in 2007-08. Her other exhibitions at the National Gallery include *Australian Surrealism: the Agapitos/Wilson collection* in 2008 and the *National Sculpture Prize and Exhibition* in 2001, 2003 and 2005. Taylor was previously Curator of Art at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra and has written and lectured on many aspects of twentieth-century Australian art.

- 1 An unsigned and undated abstract painting by Crowley is known in a private collection. While stylistically it resembles Crowley’s 1947 paintings, her use of metallic paint is unusual and may indicate an earlier date for this work.
- 2 Crowley, Grace, “Undated draft letter to Peter Pinson 1979,” *Grace Crowley papers*, AGNSW Research Library and Archive, MS 1980.1.
- 3 For a full discussion see Brunoro, Kim, “Discovering a Grace Crowley Painting,” *artonline* (summer 2006): 28-29
- 4 Images of the works that are being discussed can be found in the following publication: Taylor, Elena, *Grace Crowley: Being Modern*, exh. cat. (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2006)
- 5 I am grateful for Daniel Thomas for bringing this motif to my attention.
- 6 Crowley, Grace, Letter to Julian Ashton, “Letters from Abroad: Learning in Paris” *Undergrowth*, (May-June 1927)
- 7 As Daniel Thomas has argued in opening address to this symposium, in the late 1930s, Crowley and Balson looked closely at Matisse and were influenced by his liberated colour and abstracted forms.
- 8 Crowley, Grace, “Lecture Notes c.1936,” *Grace Crowley papers*, AGNSW Research Library and Archive, MS 1980.1.
- 9 Crowley, Grace, “Undated Draft Letter to Peter Pinson, 1979,” *Grace Crowley papers*, AGNSW Research Library and Archive, MS 1980.1.
- 10 Crowley, Grace, “Letter to Daniel Thomas 24 January 1965”, *Grace Crowley papers*, AGNSW Research Library and Archive, MS 1980.1.
- 11 Thomas, Daniel, “Ralph Balson,” *Art and Australia* 2 (March 1965): 255
- 12 Hinder, Frank, “Annotated diary of 1938,” *Frank Hinder papers*, AGNSW Library and Research Archive. I am grateful to ADS Donaldson for bringing this statement to my attention.
- 13 Evatt, Mary Alice, “The Crowley-Fizelle Art School,” *Quarterly Art Gallery of New South Wales* (October 1966): 315
- 14 Rees, Lloyd, *The small treasures of a lifetime*, (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1969): 94
- 15 Crowley, Grace, “Grace Crowley speaks about Ralph Balson,” 1966, Hazel de Berg Collection, sound recording, National Library of Australia
- 16 Crowley, Grace, “Letter to Daniel Thomas,” 24 January 1965, *Grace Crowley papers*, AGNSW Research Library and Archive, MS 1980.1.

METAL GURU: RALPH BALSON'S 1941 EXHIBITION AT ANTHONY HORDERNS' FINE ART GALLERIES, SYDNEY

In 2005 Rex Butler and I presented a paper at the Annual Conference of the Association of Australian and New Zealand Art Historians in Sydney, which was published last year as 'A Short History of UnAustralian Art' in an abbreviated form by the Contemporary Art Society of South Australia in the book *Visual Animals*. That paper in turn had been developed out of a conversation between Butler, David Pestorius and myself, which had at its heart an exhibition whose working title was 'UnAustralian Art'.

In our history we outline a parallel and complementary history of 20th century Australian art to those that have been written by, and after, Bernard Smith. For us these 'Australianist' narratives rely on a narrow and incomplete understanding of the experience of Australian artists in the 20th century. For Smith, Australian art is made by Australians, in Australia, about Australia. It is made by men, mostly from Melbourne, for whom London remained the indexical centre yet for whom the Australian landscape remained the central concern. Thus the 'Australianist' accounts of the 20th century were built on the achievements of Streeton and Roberts and were amplified by Dobell, Drysdale, Nolan, Boyd and Williams. They are masculinist, Anglophonic, Melbourne-centric and representational. They rely on what Smith dubbed the "genius loci", the demand that work be from and of place, as if it could be anything else. What Smith, Hughes and those that followed them ignored, and what our UnAustralian account cannot, is the contribution to our art by women, by our abstract, surrealist and Indigenous artists, by our émigré artists, by our expatriate artists, and by the artists of Papunya, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, and Hobart, many of whom allied themselves to the art of continental Europe, and to Paris in particular.

Thus our 'Short History of UnAustralian Art' is divided up into six overlapping periods. The period between 1900 and 1930 we call 'French, Floral and Female'; the period between 1920 and 1940 we call 'Stay, Go or Come'; the period between 1940 to 1960 we call 'Surrealism or Abstraction'; the period between 1940 and 1960, and 1950 and 1970, are characterised by a reorientation away from Europe and towards America and sometimes Asia; and the period 1970 to 2000 we call 'Post-Object, Post-Aboriginal'. These periods are book ended by the period before 1900, which we call the 'Pre-Australian', and the period after 2000, which we call the 'Post-Australian'. It is a feature of this history that it rejects a straightforward chronological approach, that it embraces competing movements and that it attempts to do away with any simple division between major and minor artists. It also, and this is important, wants to understand the experience of Australian artists in the 20th century as much from the outside in as from the inside out.

What would this mean? I want to demonstrate how we might begin to rethink our histories, and I want to do this in relation to Ralph Balson's 1941 exhibition at Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries in Sydney. We rightfully celebrate this exhibition, as has often been said, for being "the first one-person exhibition of entirely abstract art in Australia". But from an UnAustralian point of view, 'from the outside in as much as the inside out', what is the importance or significance of Balson's exhibition?

First of all, in calling on the chronologies, that this is not the same thing as the first exhibited abstract painting in Australia. In 1937 Frank Hinder exhibited *Construction*, two works titled *Composition*, and three works titled *Abstraction* in his one-person exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery in Sydney. Furthermore Sam Atyeo's *Organised Line to Yellow*, now part of the collection of National Gallery, was exhibited in the first Contemporary Art Group Exhibition in Melbourne in 1934. Bernard Smith called this work "one of the first truly non-objective paintings produced in Melbourne",¹ and Jennifer Phipps called it "the first abstract painting in Melbourne".² The same painting, which is currently on view in Sydney, is plainly no such thing on any considered viewing, or even passing glance. This painting is self evidently a portrait, and the fact that the claims for this painting as being abstract have been able to stand for so long is indicative of the power of the 'Australianist' accounts. The irony is that Atyeo did produce truly abstract work in Melbourne, dated at least from 1932, though it is not clear if he ever exhibited this work.³

Secondly note that "the first one-person exhibition of entirely abstract art in Australia" is not the same thing as the first one-person exhibition of entirely abstract painting by an Australian. In 1934 J.W. Power was one of the few artists associated with Abstraction Création to have his own one-person exhibition in their space on the Avenue Wagram in Paris. It is possible that one of Power's earlier one-person exhibitions with Leonce Rosenberg at his Galerie de l'Effort Moderne was also abstract, but for now that remains unclear. Of course Abstraction Création, a group of artists which besides John Power included Josef Albers, Max Bill, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Cesar Domela, Otto Freundlich, Fritz Glarner, Albert Gleizes, Auguste Herbin, Wassily Kandinsky, Frantisek Kupka, Kurt Schwitters, Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Leon Tutundjian and Edward Wadsworth, for example, and, contrary to some accounts,⁴ was also the home of abstract artists from both the geometric and the surrealist tendencies within abstraction. This meant that Jean Arp and Paule Vezelay, for example, shared the wall with Piet Mondrian and Laszlo

Moholy-Nagy. In addition to this, in that same year, 1934, Power exhibited in a small group exhibition with Barbara Hepworth, Etienne Beothy, Henri Jean Closon, Louis Fernandez, Jean Helion, Enrico Prampolini, Kurt Seligman, Sophie Tauber-Arp and Georges Valmier, perhaps the first occasion an Australian artist contributed a work to an entirely abstract group exhibition, in this case of the more biomorphic tendency within Abstraction Création.

If we reread the history of art and Australia as much from the outside in as from the inside out, we not only recognise the place of Balson's exhibition in Australian art history, but we raise the question as to the place of Balson's exhibition in a notional world art history. What, in these terms, would be the significance of Balson's exhibition?

In my view Ralph Balson's work in his exhibition at Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries in Sydney placed him at the forefront of abstract art in 1941 not because of his then emerging talents as a colourist but because of his remarkable use of metallic paint. From an UnAustralian point of view this decision is the single biggest frame for understanding the 1941 exhibition. Balson's activation of this material marks him as an early adopter of high technology. His willingness to do so allows us to characterise him as genuinely experimental, and it is this exploration of paint, his material at work by day as well as in the studio by night, which places him as a pioneer of painting in the 20th century.

It would be important then to reflect, however briefly, on the history of metallic paints in art. The use of gold paint or gold lacquer have been used "from the earliest times throughout the Near and Far East, in China and Japan, in Egypt, and in Greece and Rome".⁵ In the Byzantine it was "[e]xtensively used for architectural enrichment and decoration",⁶ and was associated with religious imagery. The medieval period made use of gold in illuminated manuscripts, and it was "a common feature of panel paintings until the Renaissance".⁷ Then it began to wane. It was only "occasionally used in the late 15th century for highlights and to emphasise details"⁸ by Bellini and Mantegna, for example, but "from the 16th century onwards its use became rare except for special purposes".⁹

It is also important perhaps to remember that until the mid 20th century most paints were in a sense metallic, based as they were predominately on lead but also containing numerous other metals. In this sense painting has always been metallic. In the last century perhaps the three painters most associated with metallic surfaces were the Americans – Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol. Pollock included trailed silver paint in his works from 1947, and Stella first used aluminium paint in 1960, followed later that year and in 1961 by the use of copper paint, and in 1963 by the use of metallic purple paint and zinc chromate, and Stella continued to use various metallic paints beyond 1965. Perhaps it could be said that Warhol, at least from the American point of view, had the final word with his glorious series of 'piss paintings' from 1978, each called *Oxidation painting*. Less well known in Australia are the Italians Lucio Fontana, who produced works of pierced silver fields of paint such as *Spatial concept* of 1960, and Enrico Castellani who created raised relief surfaces of silver paint such as *Superficie argento* (1964). These well and lesser-known examples of the use of metallics post date Balson however, so who then preceded him?

In Sydney of course we are familiar with the work of the pioneering German constructivist Eric Buchholz. Buchholz's *Zeichen P – sign P* (1922) has hung more or less off and on since its acquisition by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1991. We are right to look at the work of the European constructivists, the Central and Eastern avant-garde, as it is there that our lineage might begin. Perhaps the first work to integrate metal onto the two-dimensional picture plane was Vladimir Tatlin's *Painterly Relief* (1913-14), which is entirely made up from sheets of metal collaged in various ways onto a surface. Then perhaps we might think of Moholy-Nagy's *The great aluminium picture* (1926) or his *Copper Painting* (1937). Even the grey shapes in El Lissitzky's *Prouns* seem to refer to a real architectural world outside the painting, as a result of which his areas of grey can be read as images of metal, of steel. It is here, on the European continent, at the intersection of the first-last days of the painting as a commodity and the materialist discourse of revolutionary aesthetics that we find Balson's precursors. The remarkable thing of course is that Balson could have known none of it. Reproductions of the work of the Eastern avant-garde were very scarce in the English-speaking art world until Alfred Barr's *Cubism and Abstract Art* was first published in 1936. To my mind, Balson had no knowledge of the use of metallic paint in the work of any other artist in the 20th century prior to his using it. Balson's use of gold, silver and bronze paints is an outcome of a genuinely experimental approach to painting, a consequence of a radical rethinking of paint in the space of modernist painting.¹⁰ It might even be argued that Balson in some senses retreated from this position, as it was so difficult and 'unartistic'.

How then did Ralph Balson come to this material? In her catalogue essay for *R-Balson-41*, 'A new realm of visual experience', Deborah Edwards characterises Balson's exhibition as "a leap"¹¹ and later as "an epiphany"¹² when it was no such thing at all. Prophetically Eleonore Lange in her 'Foreword' for *Exhibition 1*, which was mounted by the George Street Group in 1939, announced that the Sydney artists were

engaged in a process which “leads step by step to ‘abstract Art’”.¹³ Balson’s 1941 exhibition is not a wild stab in the dark, but is instead a thoroughly worked through and thought out position, the product of years of painting, reading and talking. That is, it was achieved step by step. In Edwards’ essay, the title mistakes the expression used by Lange in her ‘Foreword’,¹⁴ she suggests in a footnote that Balson’s 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”.¹⁵ Buried in Edwards’ footnotes is the ‘evidence’ for the hidden charge of her essay, which is that in some ways Balson’s 1941 exhibition, perhaps even all Balson’s work, is ‘decorative’. If proof were needed, the paint we are advised it is claimed was bought in a trade supply shop. It is a theme that recurs in the body of her text where she writes of Balson’s use of metallic paint, where “allusions to the machine were surely always subsumed to the decorative, the theatrical and light reflecting”.¹⁶ Later, she writes, “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’”.¹⁷

For Edwards, Balson ultimately fell off the edge into the decorative, into that which is essentially not art. The /criticism of abstract painting as decorative is well analysed by David Batchelor in his book *Chromophobia*, originally published in 2000. In it Batchelor finds evidence in our culture of what he calls a “loathing of colour, this fear of corruption through colour”,¹⁸ a fear he calls “chromophobia”. It manifests itself, Batchelor says, “in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity. More specifically, this purging of colour is usually accomplished in one of two ways. In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body - usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic”.¹⁹ So while Edwards can see that colour is important to Balson, her Balson finally only “embraces and extends the terms of the ‘decorative’”, and is therefore always bound and obliged to these terms. This, for Edwards, is Balson’s fall.

But what if Ralph Balson didn’t buy his paint from the art and craft supply shop? Aren’t we in fact struck when we look closely at Balson’s 1941 work by just how many golds there are, how many different silvers and bronzes Balson used? Do these look like standardised paints? In fact at the moment we are in no position to know exactly how or from where Balson sourced his paint, so let us venture a little speculation. Mindful that Balson was himself a painter by trade, and besides also speaking to the conservator Margaret Sawecki from the Art Gallery of New South Wales, I have been able to speak to Alf Rankin, formerly of the Painters and Decorators Union, and to Ken Virtue of Dulux, formerly the British Australian Lead Manufacturers (B.A.L.M).

Ken Virtue advised me that in the early 1930s B.A.L.M. introduced to Australia their range of household alkyd enamels, known as ‘Dulux Super Enamels’ and that by 1935, following the acquisition of the rights from an American company, they offered a ‘Silver Sheen’, ‘Gold Sheen’, and ‘Bronze Sheen’, to trade and public alike.²⁰ Did Balson then mix and remix readymade household paint for his 1941 work? Is he therefore a kind of forerunner for Pollock who used similar materials in his paintings some six years later?

Alf Rankin also advised me that metallic paints were commercially available in the 1930s, but that in his view, if a professional trade painter wanted to use metallic paints he would simply have made the paint himself.²¹ For Rankin, every trade painter had the knowledge and materials to make a small batch of just about any paint, and was indeed called upon to do so regularly in those days. Did Balson then make, even invent the paint in his paintings from 1941? Is he therefore a kind of pre-industrial artist, dependent on nearly arcane knowledge, in particular of chemistry, in order to mix his paints? Is he therefore a kind of forerunner for Yves Klein who in 1959 presented to the world his IKB, his International Klein Blue?

Of course, this question is made more complex when we know that he was not the only abstract artist around this time in Australia to be using silver paint. It is little known but somehow almost inevitable that Balson’s other artistic half, Grace Crowley, also used metallic paint in at least one undated painting known to be held in a private Sydney collection. Crowley thus extended the small tradition begun by Balson, a tradition continued in Australia by painters such as Michael Taylor, Robert MacPherson, Janet Burchill and myself.

‘From the inside out’ we are right to celebrate Ralph Balson’s long neglected and nearly invisible 1941 exhibition as the first by an Australian artist of entirely abstract painting, but ‘from the outside in’, from an UnAustralian perspective, we can also celebrate his exhibition because he extended the use of metallic paint in abstract painting. From a world art historical perspective this decision places him at the forefront of the adoption, adaptation and exploration of new materials in the history of painting in the 20th century. It was Ralph Balson’s gift to make the unusual and radical seem so already and complete.

A.D.S. Donaldson

A.D.S. Donaldson has been a practising artist since the mid-1980s. He completed his undergraduate training at Sydney College of the Arts and then in the early 1990s he studied with Professor Klaus Rinke at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and with Professor Claus Carstensen the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. In 2005 he was enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris where he completed research on the Sydney artist Mary Webb for his PhD at the University of Sydney. A.D.S. Donaldson exhibits locally, nationally and internationally and his work is represented in various museums and collections in Australia including the National Gallery of Australia and the Museum of Contemporary Art. He lives and works in Sydney.

- 1 Smith, Bernard, *Australian Painting 1788-1990*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992): 210
- 2 Phipps, Jennifer, *Atyeo*, (Bulleen, VIC: Heidi Park and Art Gallery, 1983): 9
- 3 We might think of Atyeo’s *Lyra* dated 1932. I have been unable to locate a catalogue for Atyeo’s exhibition at Cynthia Reed’s Modern Furniture Shop in 1933.
- 4 Deborah Edwards, “A new realm of visual experience,” *R-Balson-/41 – Anthony Horderns’ Fine Art Gallery*, exh. cat. (Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA, UNSW, 2008): 37
- 5 Osborne, Harold, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970): 487
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 If we try to think who might be contemporaneous with Balson perhaps the closest would be Felix Del Marle who used silver paint in *Composition* (1948-50).
- 11 Edwards, 36.
- 12 *ibid.*, 37.
- 13 Eleonore Lange, “Foreword,” *Exhibition 1*, exh. cat. Sydney, 1939, unpaginated.
- 14 *ibid.* The expression Lange used was “a new realm of visual *existence*”. My italics.
- 15 Edwards, 42.
- 16 *ibid.*, 39.
- 17 *ibid.*, 39-40.
- 18 Batchelor, David, *Chromophobia*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2000): 22.
- 19 *ibid.*, 22-23.
- 20 Ken Virtue in conversation with the author on 11 August 2008
- 21 Alf Rankin in conversation with the author on 7 August 2008

THE INEXPLICABLE BALSON

Ralph Balson's art presents a problem of narration. The taciturn abstract painter faced the same difficulty in relating a compelling story to his work. I must admit I face a similar issue whenever I try to locate his work in survey courses on Australian art. There are myriad narratives to weave around a discussion of, for example, Streeton or Roberts, Tucker or Nolan, Preston or Hinder and the list goes on: Davila, Tillers, Gordon Bennett, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Emily Kngwarreye or Richard Bell. This is not to belittle the achievements or to diminish the issues involved in these practices; it is simply to point out that there is a surfeit of things to say in each of these cases. The issue is not about complexity, but legibility: histories congeal around art that lends itself to stories that prove conducive to weaving broader narratives.

Explanatory narratives do not easily stick to Balson's seemingly obdurate and opaque abstraction. Even Anne Dangar and Grace Crowley are relatively easier to discuss because they traveled and had direct contact with international Modernism. They also became proselytisers of aesthetic systems that they were exposed to through such contact. By comparison, Balson only traveled at the end of his life and thus had direct contact with international artists and practices very late in life. The story then would be of mediated influences through books or associates (Crowley, Dangar, Mary Webb and the Hinders), which is not necessarily good or bad. It just does not leave one with much to say—except to consider his paintings, which raises the paramount issue of why his art practice developed to the extent it did? How was he able to keep pushing the parameters of his abstraction in such isolated circumstances?

The attempted reconstitution of Balson's 1941 solo exhibition of abstract painting at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, *R-Balson-/41 – Anthony Hordern's Fine Art Galleries*, curated by Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth—combined with a similar reassembly of the original de Maistre and Wakelin *Colour in Art* exhibition—provides a rare opportunity to reflect on key moments in the development of modernist practice in Australia, particularly the difficult and thorny issue of non-objective art.¹ What the reconstruction of the 1941 Balson exhibition reveals is not so much one seamless and coherent body of work, but a sense of visual vibrancy that develops and builds across a set of individual works.

With works like *Constructive* (1941) (*R-Balson-/41* 2008 catalogue p7) or the two works simply titled, *Painting*, (pp 9 & 11) the compositions appear stolidly block-like. The latter work, *Painting* (1941) (p11), in the Art Gallery of New South Wales' Collection, even appears architectonic to the degree that it might evoke an industrial landscape of factories or warehouses. What is telling, however, is Balson's willingness to *risk colour*. This block-like compositional style is reinforced by sometimes audacious, sometimes strangely awkward passages of colour: a heavy reddish-brown sphere set against ponderous brown-grey and green rectangles (*Painting* (1941), p9) or pinks, flesh colour, pale browns and a muted yellow all in close proximity and seemingly defying all conventional wisdom and good taste (*Painting* (1941)). The use of metallic paints presents more risks: for example, silver diagonal bars extend into and almost disappear into a very similar silver backdrop or very light silver diagonal bars placed seemingly indistinctly upon an equally light gold blocks (refer the two works titled, *Painting* (1941) pp 21 & 25).²

Throughout the exhibition, one can detect a push and pull effect between the almost inert, flattening of metallic colours that contrasts with the highly wrought, faktura-like focus on paint in all its expressive forms and technical varieties. As Bruce Adams notes, "Industrial metallic paints depersonalized the surfaces of these geometric compositions, but paradoxically, Balson's abstract works retained a directly painted, hand-crafted look."³ These experiments culminate in some extremely vivid canvases that sing with energy. (*Untitled (Geometric Shapes)* (1941), p33; *Painting no. 17* (1941), p35). The reconstruction of the 1941 exhibition therefore shows how Balson takes risks (not always successfully) as he dismantles the figure-ground opposition in his work and explores new options. Like Mondrian, who he praised as "the only really abstract painter," Balson ultimately seeks an outcome that will be dynamic, not static—even though it is impossible to reduce Balson's paintings simply to Mondrian's influence.⁴

The *R-Balson-/41* thus presents a rare critical-creative opportunity to forge new insights into rather enigmatic Balson legacy. In her catalogue essay, Deborah Edwards, the author and curator of two wonderful examinations of Balson's fellow modernists, Preston and Klippel, dismisses one option: that of narrating a story about the artist innovator who was barely understood or appreciated in his lifetime.⁵ Perhaps wisely so—such an explanation does not advance our understanding very fruitfully, and usually serves primarily as a marketing device. Oddly enough, however, Edwards draws virtually the opposite conclusion. She argues instead that there has been a "mythologising of Balson" and furthermore there has been a "tendency to lionise Balson" as a "heroic precursor" and as the "perennial, although venerated outsider."⁶

Let's assume this reading is correct and, in the process, Balson convinced or cajoled Grace Crowley into effacing herself and her art due to Balson's overwhelmingly urge to mythologise his role as a trailblazer.

By any objective measure, this strategy can only be deemed a failure. The entire 1941 exhibition still remained at Balson's home, in storage, unsold, some thoroughly decayed, when he died in August 1964.⁷ Furthermore, the first article exclusively devoted to his work was published only after his death, by which time he had only sold roughly ten paintings in his entire career.⁸ In the wake of Daniel Thomas's 1965 essay, less than a handful of studies have focused on his work—that is, up to and including the current 2008 *R-Balson-/41* show in which the Balson "mythologising" is rebuked.⁹

Aside from these few specific studies of his art, it is very difficult to find a general account of Australian art history that offers a convincing, sustained or sympathetic analysis of his work. The analysis of Balson found, for example, in Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788-1970* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press), 1962/1978 is cursory and largely confined to discussions of the ambivalent reception of abstraction in Australian art, thus echoing Smith's own hesitance with abstract art. At one point, Smith even refers to the painter as "Frank Balson," perhaps conflating him with Frank Hinder.¹⁰ In 1966, in perhaps the first of many subsequent survey histories of Australian art that would largely imitate the general art-historical formula established by Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788-1970*, Robert Hughes takes aim at Balson and disparages his musings on science and art as "pseudo-scientific verbiage."¹¹

This is hardly encouraging stuff. Hughes does not even bother to clarify how a superior or more accurate understanding of science would repudiate such artistic waffling. Sure, Balson's remarks are a little woolly, and the prose awkward, but there is nothing to justify this abrupt dismissal. The challenge Balson faced was to find a way of locating his work and practice in some convincing art-historical trajectory when his type of abstraction doesn't prove readily conducive to contextualising narratives. The conundrum of such art is that it prompts certain critical risks: on the one hand, it constantly forces one back to the evidence of the work, which can be a good attribute, but does that condemn inquiry to a perpetual formalist analysis that strives to unearth its core secret explicable only in its own terms?¹² On the other hand, and perhaps worse, the perceived imperviousness of the art exposes it to the risk of having any grand speculation projected onto the paintings.

The scientific justification of his practice is most clearly delineated in the letter Balson wrote to Daniel Thomas (dated 29 March 1960) in which he broadly explains his abstract art in terms of perceptual challenges that accompany historical, technological as well as scientific transformations.¹³ Questions abound. Did Balson feel compelled to provide a justification, any justification when writing this letter, because he found that belatedly Australian art institutions had become sympathetic to modern art—let alone abstract art—and thus he felt compelled not to let the opportunity slip, even if he risked the accusation of "pseudo-scientific verbiage"? Had he also felt that his earlier decision to embark on the path to complete abstraction had cut him off like a lonely space explorer drifting into the depths of the unknown? Or, perhaps even an astronaut cut off from the mother ship—Australian art—like the poor sods set adrift by the demented computer, HAL, in *2001: A Space Odyssey*? Most important of all, was the explanation a consequence of his practice or did it provide an impetus to follow a particular direction—that is, a justification derived from the work itself or a justification found later *for* the art? In other words, is it Balson's own grand speculation that had little to do with his work, as Hughes also implies?

While the recourse to scientific explanations was not unusual in art, particularly in early Modernism, Balson is primarily concerned with justifying the paradigm switch that sees art shift from portraying a reality that is observable by human perception to an art that responds to the realization of a reality that largely eludes human perception. Of course, he believes this challenge is best addressed by abstract art. He suggests that art, if it is to fulfill an age-old ambition of articulating a "world," then it must respond to the discoveries of science—in particular, to the realisation that there is a sub-atomic world that cannot be accessed by human observation. In effect, Balson's position straddles two contrasting explanations of modern art offered by earlier Australian modernists. On the one hand, there were those who sought to equate modern art with modernity as its cultural equivalent, examples being John D. Moore ("Thoughts in Reference to Modern Art," *Undergrowth*, 1927) and Anne Dangar ("By Way of Reply" and "To-day," 1928-29, both for *Undergrowth*). On the other hand, there is the example of Adrian Lawlor, who tentatively and rather obscurely questions whether modern art communicates in a conventional manner at all.¹⁴ In fact, the argument found in Balson's letter to Thomas brings these differing explanations into an active tension, which is an intriguing outcome. Yet it is an outcome that I believe it can shed new light on his abstract paintings, so I wish to offer some pointers in the direction of such a reading:

1. First of all, we know that Balson had been reading about Einstein's Theory of Relativity since at least 1948.¹⁵ He explains to Thomas that we might conceive of his art as a practice that responds to a world devoid of absolutes: "The Concept of Relativity, the Vision of it I get as a Painter fascinates me. A Universe without beginning, without End, a continuous creating, destroying and expanding

Movement (the Space Age), its one Constant the Speed of Light.”¹⁶ This vertiginous image of continuous creating and destroying recalls Schwitters’ concepts of similarly constant interplay between forming and deforming (*Formung* and *Entformung*).¹⁷ Balson notes another artistic affinity: that between “the destruction of the Absolute, the Static, a Mathematical Abstract Concept” and “Cubism and its breaking up of Form.” (p. 701)

2. By drawing this analogy, Balson seeks to show how the task of painting has been transformed. Why? If historically art has sought to express some universal truth, or as Balson puts it in his letter to Thomas, a “Concept of the Universe,” then he also recognises that humans have also traditionally sought to comprehend their “universe” within the range of their own sense perception. Long before relativity and quantum, however, investigations into the nature of light had shown that the scope and range of human sense perception only picked up a limited, external manifestation of light—hence Balson cites the example of the Impressionists: “their rejection of Man and a groping towards an understanding of the Source of Life, Light and its division into a Spectrum.” (p. 701) Twentieth century physics further exposed a gap between the true nature of the universe and our limited perceptual means as humans: “the very narrow band, the Spectrum”—in other words, our limited range between ultra-violet and infra-red. Abstract art must respond to the realisation of a “reality” that is not directly available to our perception—“the energy of the atoms that reach us from the Sun.” (p702)

3. The analogy between art and science does not, however, expose a straightforward, one-to-one relationship or illustrative analogy. Instead, what conjoins their efforts is a mutual willingness to challenge assumed or traditional expectations. A fundamental tenet of modern science since Galileo is highlighting the discrepancy between what one might expect to occur (and thus assume to be correct) and what actually transpires (through observation and testing). Thereby the science-art equation is better viewed as sustained by the breaking up of form (or matter) and, as a consequence, a shared challenge to presumptions about why and how we regard something as being comprehensible.

Just prior to Balson’s letter to Thomas of 1960, Werner Heisenberg published his book, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York, 1958) in which he argues a very similar case about absolute and fixed concepts. Heisenberg repudiated that “dogmatic realism” was necessary to natural science, even though he concedes, “every scientist who does research work feels that he is looking for something that is objectively true.” Yet Heisenberg countered that, even with “the simplest and most general” concepts, like “existence” and “space and time,” we will “practically never know precisely the limits of their applicability.” Concepts such as these “can be practically a priori,” he argues, but “further limitations of their applicability may be found in the future.” Heisenberg therefore opts for a “practical realism” that acknowledges that content may not always be dependent “on the conditions under which it can be verified.”¹⁸

4. This means that there is no simple analogy either between Balson’s paintings and relativity or quantum. The radical break up of form since Cubism can be read in the face of these daunting realisations of our diminished grasp (which also grants us an extraordinarily extended comprehension or understanding). Balson believes such a realisation can actually renew the task of painting, but the renewed outlook stems from confronting limitations, not uncovering some powerful essence of art: all we can ever hope to achieve is to “reach a small amount of the Rhythm and Relativity of the Universe with the Substance of Paint.” (p. 702) In other words, all a painter has to work with is paint and its materiality in the face of a daunting new challenge for art, which may still strive to depict a universe, but it is a universe we know is not simply amenable to our perceptual comprehension. Paint was the only “matter” Balson could fall back on and rely upon; it was his only means available. He was an avid colour-paint experimenter. When he finally visited Paris, the treatment of colour and materials was the main thing that caught his attention when he reported back to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, this time to Hal Missingham: “The Surrealist tendency is about equal to the purely Abstract in importance with both experimenting with textures, fabrics and plastic material, most low and sombre in colour.”¹⁹

5. The art-science analogy does, however, compel a different consideration of space in modern art. By systematically working to overcome the figure-ground opposition in his art, Balson does follow a similar trajectory to Mondrian with just as much rigour. I’ve already mentioned that a key axiom of the Dutch painter—in fact, de Stijl in general—was to create works that were dynamic, not static. Another key factor was the impetus toward a new idea of space, once the same opposition was fully abstracted: the focus thereafter rested on the all-over effect of the picture plane. As El Lissitzky pointed out much earlier, these motivations derived from the realisation that “Perspective has comprehended space according to the concept of Euclidean geometry as a constant three-

dimensional state. It has fitted the world into a cube ...”²⁰ Furthermore, as Sydney’s pre-eminent modernist architect, Harry Seidler remarked in a lecture in the exhibition, *Modern Times: the untold story of modernism in Australia*, Mondrian inaugurated a new aesthetic principle with his emphasis on dynamic symmetry, which no longer sought the classic axioms of order, balance and equalisation.²¹

6. Vilém Flusser imaginatively responded to the implications of these new approaches in his essay, “Line & Surface” (1973).²² The emphasis on line is most vividly conveyed, Flusser argues, by alphabetical writing with its linear, chronological sequencing from left to right. The linear focus suggests “one aims at getting somewhere.” (p23) Lines thus also underpin official discourse as the emblem of historical thinking, according to Flusser: “until recently, official Western thought has expressed itself much more in lines than written surfaces.” (p25)

So what about surfaces? They convey an all over effect or the random, swirling effect of the wandering eye. Synthesis is followed by analysis with surfaces. Films therefore are hybrid forms, being both surface-like and compelled by a narrative, which one must follow like a text. (p24) Visually, films are surfaces, but they are spatial to the ear. (p25) Many avant-garde film pioneers like Viking Eggeling sought to avoid this hybridity and instead sought to create film as a kind of pure surface. Flusser’s big claims are that surfaces lend themselves to being “devised or manipulated by the reader,” thus they are “partially reversible” and thereby they may “imply a radically new meaning of the term *historical freedom*.” (p25)

7. Flusser may project too much, but these are evocative propositions. He notes the constant movement and mobility of the surface, which is clearly an effect Balson sought to incite, suggesting an active, almost floating sense perception. For Flusser, it meant thinking about the work as something that is not complete, not a fixed or composed unity (like Seidler implies of Mondrian’s asymmetry). Instead, there is the sense of assembling and re-assembling, and as mentioned before, forming and de-forming. It suggests a different orientation to the world and a different concept of sense perception; it is one that is continually being made and unmade, which is perhaps why Flusser suggests that art no longer produces “things (“oeuvres”), but would [instead] propose models.” (p34)

8. All these points suggest that if Balson was a restless painter, then it cannot be exclusively explained away by his zeal for independence and autonomy—in other words, his eye for self-aggrandisement and mythologising. Instead these precepts make it clear why Balson did not warm to the post-Cubist practices of André L’Hote or the ponderous Albert Gleizes. Their schematic, system-building interpretations of Cubism culminate in a kind of stolid Cubist classicism. This is not to say that what Balson dismissed was not also influential on him—at least, for a time—as perhaps was the “mathematical systematisation outlined by [Eleonore] Lange” that Balson too dismissed as “silly.”²³

The dogged Balson kept pursuing issues that arose from his painting heedless of compromise. His practice was not always readily explicable in terms that were conducive to the telling, then or now. Yet this alone is one good reason to return to such work—because it continues to trouble its critical reception, which splits into either dismissive rebuttals or heroic historicism. Balson was not always successful, as I have argued, but the event of the 2008 *R-Balson-41* exhibition reveals that, apart from some notable exceptions (see notes 8 & 9), we still have a long way to go in making discerning critical assessments, which do fall into these bifurcated assessments. While immersed in issues of painting, Balson also faced up to a challenge that he felt had compromised the age-old underpinnings of painting. Yet he felt the daunting challenges offered a way of re-igniting those ambitions. Whether we respond today with the same answers, and with the same conviction, as Balson is another matter. The legacy of Balson rests with the proposition that we must keep facing up to the challenge of renewing our critical precepts and our perceptual suppositions, even when it risks more secure understandings.

Dr Andrew McNamara

Dr Andrew McNamara teaches art history and theory at QUT, Art and Design, Creative Industries faculty. With Ann Stephen and Philip Goad, he published *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967* (Miegunyah Press/Melbourne University Publishing, December 2006) and *Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia* (August 2008). McNamara writes on Australian and indigenous art, contemporary art as well as on the socio-cultural impact of the modernist aesthetic legacy. He is the coordinator of a new research grouping at QUT: the arts media, design and modernity (AMDM) research group. His writings are published in Europe, the USA as well as in Australia. He is also currently one of the editors of the Australian and New Zealand *Journal of Art*.

- 1 Both exhibitions were held at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, but my remarks refer solely to the Balson exhibition, which I was asked to address. All page references therefore apply to *R-Balson/41 – Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries*, curated by Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, The University of New South Wales, 22 August-27 September 2008. Nick Waterlow puts the exhibition's significance into focus by referring to the exhibition as "the first solo exhibition of non-objective painting in this country." (p2) Any analysis of the 1941 exhibition must be somewhat qualified due to the fact that, as Chambers and Whitworth note, 13 out of the original 21 paintings are displayed; the location of 9 works are unknown. (p3)
 - 2 Another difficulty is that *Painting* (1941) (p25) is one of the nine works whose location is unknown and appears on the basis of a photograph taken after Balson's death. Refer Chambers and Whitworth, "Introduction," p. 3. In addition, some of these effects are difficult to assess today as many areas of metallic paint have dissipated and faded. In the case of *Painting* (1941) (p21), the catalogue is deceptive because the contrast of the diagonal bars that stretch into silver "ground" is far more emphatic in the photograph than in the existing painting.
 - 3 Bruce Adams, *Ralph Balson: A Retrospective*, (Bulleen, VIC: Heide Park and Art Gallery, 1989): 24.
 - 4 Balson to Michel Seuphor, 1955; cited in *ibid.*, 52. Seuphor published the first monograph on Mondrian the following year (1956), *Piet Mondrian: sa vie, son oeuvre (Piet Mondrian: Life and Work)*. 1955 was also the year Balson retired as a housepainter and embarked on a series of "spotty" works eventually titled the *Non-Objective Paintings* or *Non-Objective Abstracts*; refer Adams, 52.
 - 5 Deborah Edwards (and Rose Peel with Denise Mimmocchi), *Margaret Preston*, exh. cat. (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005) and Deborah Edwards, *Robert Klippel*, exh. cat. (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2002)
 - 6 Deborah Edwards, "A New Realm of Visual Experience," *R-Balson/41 – Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries*, exh. cat.: 40-41 (respectively).
 - 7 Chambers and Whitworth note that "recent research suggests that a number deteriorated beyond restoration during their long period in storage," "Introduction," *ibid.*, p. 3.
 - 8 Daniel Thomas, "Ralph Balson," *Art and Australia* 2. 4 (March 1965). Balson died in August 1964.
 - 9 Previous studies include Bruce Adams, "Metaphors of Scientific Idealism: The Theoretical Background to Paintings of Ralph Balson," in Anthony Bradley and Terry Smith, eds., *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith*, (Melbourne: Oxford, 1980); Paul McGillick, "The Importance of Ralph Balson," *Art and Literature* 22 (October 1981): 5-17; the already mentioned Bruce Adams, *Ralph Balson: A Retrospective* exh. cat. (Bulleen, VIC: Heide Park and Art Gallery, 1989); David Pestorius, "High Achievement or Creative Byway: the Erratic Reception of Ralph Balson's 'Matter' Paintings," *Master of Arts (MA)*, QUT, 2003.
- Evidence of the Balson mythology Edwards presents is itself highly equivocal judging by the evidence presented in her final two or three paragraphs. (p. 41) In footnote 34, for example, it is stated Balson's work "was acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in the 1950s," implying continuous support. This is misleading. Works acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales are: *Painting no. 19* (1957), *Painting no. 9* (1959) and *Painting no. 32* (1961)—hardly a ringing endorsement. Refer Pestorius, "High Achievement or Creative Byway: the Erratic Reception of Ralph Balson's 'Matter' Paintings,": 44.
- 10 Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1970*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press): 419. While it is understandable that the odd mistake can be made in such a large publication, it is surprising that this error stood uncorrected in many subsequent editions of this book.
 - 11 Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, (VIC: Penguin, 1966): 70. Perhaps Hughes felt that if he was echoing Smith's paradigm too closely, then the best way to differentiate his work was to sound bold and audacious. Whatever the reason, he barely engages with Balson's art, so the dismissal reads as quite extreme.
 - 12 I would argue that this route of close formal and comparative analysis of the still available work of Balson and Crowley needs to be undertaken before one can conclude that Crowley is misguided in her own assessment that: "As far as abstract work was concerned I owe more to Balson than to anyone else." Refer Edwards, "A New Realm of Visual Experience," 41. This task has not been adequately undertaken to date. In any event, such an analysis can only provide one of two possible conclusions: one, Crowley was correct in her assessment and Balson, from humble beginnings, became a significant abstract painter or, alternatively, she subsumed her role as an artist in order to elevate Balson inordinately. While I am sympathetic to the motivations of this analysis, at the same time I fear that such analysis can only end up further perpetuating the history of the reception of this work as *disparagement*—that is, more of the disparaging assessments that significantly marred the reception of the art of both Crowley and Balson in their lifetimes. Ultimately such an analysis fails to advance our understanding of the art.
 - 13 Balson archive, Art Gallery of NSW archives; reprinted in *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967*, eds. Ann Stephen Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad, (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press/Melbourne University Press, 2006): 701-2.
 - 14 Refer *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967*, 68-71. (Moore), 77-81 (Dangar) and 141-48 (Lawlor).
 - 15 Adams, 50.
 - 16 "Letter to Daniel Thomas," 1960, in *Modernism & Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967*, 702. The following references to this text appear in brackets.
 - 17 Refer Elizabeth Burns Gamard, *Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau: The Cathedral of Erotic Misery* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000): 9 *passim*.
 - 18 Werner Heisenberg, "The Development of Philosophical Ideas since Descartes in Comparison with the New Situation in Quantum Theory," in Alfred I. Tauber, ed., *Science and the Quest for Reality*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 129, 136.
 - 19 Balson, "Letter to Hal Missingham, 23 September 1960"; Balson Archive, Art Gallery of NSW. Balson is reporting on the May Salon at The Museum of Modern Art, Paris. It is interesting to note how Balson would reduce colour so substantially in his own works in the final years of his life.
 - 20 Cited in Yve-Alain Bois, "From -∞ to 0 to +∞: Axonometry, or Lissitzky's mathematical paradigm," *El Lissitzky 1890-1941: architect, painter, photographer, typographer*, (Eindhoven: Municipal Van Abbemuseum, 1990): 30.
 - 21 The screening is of Harry Seidler, "Interactions: Art & Architecture," Faculty of Architecture lecture, University of NSW, Sydney, 1980. It was no doubt their shared interest in Mondrian that motivated Seidler to launch one of Balson's exhibitions in the 1950s. Refer the exhibition, *Modern Times: the untold story of modernism in Australia*, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, August 2008-February 2009; Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, March-July 2009 and State Library of Queensland, Brisbane, July-October 2009.
 - 22 Vilém Flusser, *Writings*, Andreas Ströhl, ed., trans. Erik Eisel (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). All references in brackets.
 - 23 Edwards, "A New Realm of Visual Experience," 43, n30.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE USES OF THE TRADITIONAL AND THE MODERN IN AUSTRALIAN VISUAL CULTURE, 1937 TO 1968

Twentieth century Australian art is often built around beacon events seen to mark Modernism's progress in Australian culture and society. As Australia's first one-person exhibition of non-objective art, Ralph Balson's 1941 exhibition at Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries, Sydney, is rightly identified as a landmark occasion.¹ Yet such first-time events were often poorly recognised in their day for a lack of relevant frames of reference. The critical response to Balson's 1941 exhibition was muted, not vehement, as one might have expected given the depth of the modernist/ traditionalist controversy in Australia, the significance of the unprecedented non-objectivity of Balson's work apparently not grasped.² None of the paintings in the exhibition were sold, remaining in the artist's possession at his death in 1964.³ It was not until the 1960s that Balson's place in Australian art history began to be acknowledged, partly prompted by a need to construct a local history for the upsurge in contemporary Australian abstraction.

For much of the twentieth century an instrumental cultural elite portrayed Modernism as an unwelcome foreign import into Australia, endorsing pastoral landscape as Australia's authentic, national visual culture. This situation sheds some light on the long silence around Ralph Balson's work, but comparing the uses of art and design as vehicles of Australian national self-representation in international contexts reveals a more complex attitude to modernist aesthetics. Australia's presentations at the international exhibitions in Paris in 1937, New York in 1939, Montreal in 1967 and the 1958 Venice Biennale span a period approximating that between Balson's 1941 solo exhibition and his belated acknowledgment as a pioneer of Australian abstraction. The four events highlight the conflicting representational modalities involved in being Australian and being modern for much of the twentieth century, a paradoxical aspect of Australian history in the twentieth century being the use of tradition to support the modernising construct of 'the nation'. The convention of pastoral landscape painting is used to support claims for modern Australia's national *distinctiveness*, while fine art is treated as a special cultural sphere in need of segregation from the modern. By contrast, in some of the same examples a standard modernist or modernistic design can be found representing Australia as *like* other modern nations, there being little concern about the nationalistic character of Australian design in these instances, modern design appearing to be naturalised in Australia through its basis in broad, socio-economic processes of consumption and reproduction.

Andreas Fickers describes international exhibitions as "politically and symbolically charged showcases of modernity" in which national self-representation is packaged for a specific political and geographic context.⁴ The 1937 Paris exposition sought to build a bridge between high culture and industrialisation through its emphasis on the nature of art and technology in modern life. Although Australia had sought to strengthen national and economic security by accelerating industrialisation since the 1920s, the relationship of primary producer-manufacturer complementarity it enjoyed with Great Britain meant the Australian government initially saw little point in participating in Paris. Certainly, the Paris organising committee's veto on the display of primary products influenced diplomatic advice to Earle Page, Minister for Commerce, that Australian attendance was unlikely to produce "direct trade results".⁵ It was only later that the Commonwealth government saw a broader, promotional goal in attending Paris, the exposition now described as an opportunity to "dispel European ignorance of Australia" and "remove the idea that Australians lack culture".⁶

In Paris, Australia's use of art and material goods as tools of international cultural communication spanned both what was included and excluded. In keeping with most other pavilions, Australia's pavilion was a modernistic rotunda in stucco and glass tiles designed by Stephenson, Meldrum and Turner, but the overall image projected by Australia was conflicted. Despite the organiser's guidelines, the exhibits were mostly basic displays of primary products such as wool, metals and timber.⁷ Although Paris was an international centre of modern art, the art in the Australian pavilion was mainly pastoral landscape paintings by artists including Elioth Gruner, Hans Heysen, Robert Johnson, Kenneth MacQueen and John Rowell. These reflected support in official circles for traditional forms of art and distinctively Australian themes, reinforcing the idea of the modern Australian nation as built on rural production as opposed to industrialisation, a politicised subtext here being modern art's representation by Australian cultural conservatives as a foreign influence, tainted with decadence and despair. The Australian exhibit was criticised in the press and some government reports as mediocre and poorly pitched by comparison to many other nations that had used modern techniques of exhibition design.⁸ In other government reports, however, criticism of the inappropriateness of the painting selection in particular was deflected by accounts of the popularity of the work with pavilion visitors in eschewing Modernism.⁹

The 1939 New York World's Fair initiated a new, thematic model for international exhibitions, reframing expos as a conduit for addressing issues and ideas relevant to contemporary society rather than for exclusive national self-representation.¹⁰ The harsh judgement of Australia's Paris exhibit, combined with New York's intended emphasis on a utopian vision of the world of tomorrow, challenged the Australian

government to do better. As in Paris, Australia's New York exhibit reveals a disparity in Australian attitudes to art and design, as noted in a September 1929 editorial in *Art in Australia*, which commented that in Australia seemingly "anything 'modern' can be appreciated except pictures".¹¹ The commercially-successful graphic designer Douglas Annand devised Australia's New York exhibit, despite some doubts in government about the appropriateness of Modernism in representing Australia.¹² Annand's application of modern exhibition design, including oversized photographs in a direct, modern style, linked Australian progress to integrated primary production and manufacturing sectors, supported by modern infrastructure such as rail and electricity. While works of modern art, including those of Adrian Feint and Margaret Preston, were part of the exhibit they were physically and symbolically incorporated into the design, rather than appearing as privileged objects of high art as in Paris, the modernism of the pavilion seemingly being acceptable in focusing on Australia's economic development.

By contrast, an invitation for Australia to participate in the 1958 Venice Biennale required a selection of work from the sphere of fine art where the obverse was demanded by Australian cultural conservatives. The Contemporary Art Society had campaigned tirelessly for Australia to be included in the 1958 exhibition, but the invitation to participate was made at a governmental level.¹³ In 1958, the government-appointed Contemporary Art Advisory Board (CAAB) selected artworks for official overseas exhibitions. Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies, who saw the Heidelberg landscape tradition as the only true Australian art, appointed all CAAB members, preserving the link between national self-portrayal and traditional art forms and themes on the basis of the Australian exceptionalist discourse.¹⁴ This resulted in a group of Arthur Streeton landscapes being sent to the international showcase for advanced art, despite warnings this would make Australia look culturally backward.¹⁵ The exhibit, which also included some Arthur Boyd landscapes, attracted the expected strong negative criticism for its anachronism. The CAAB declined an invitation to the 1960 Biennale and Australia was not again officially represented at Venice until 1978.¹⁶ Menzies attended the meeting in 1959 at which it was decided not to attend the 1960 Biennale. Rejecting the idea there were criteria of significance in art outside national specificity, Menzies stated he was "against sending art abroad of modernist stuff that meant nothing... This is not Australian art. It could have been painted anywhere."¹⁷

Menzies expressed no such opposition to Australia's representation through modernist design when Cabinet approved the design for Australia's Expo '67 pavilion in January 1966.¹⁸ Despite his approaching retirement, however, he had already appointed Robert Campbell, CAAB member and Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, to select artworks for the Montreal pavilion, continuing the differentiation between art and design in Australia's self-portrayal in international contexts.¹⁹ The pavilion design was a simple, rectangular box in glass and steel. Its spacious interior, which varied in character between a hotel lobby, a corporate foyer, a living room and a gallery of modern art, contained few actual exhibits. Its main feature was a salon-style arrangement of 240 lounge chairs designed by Grant Featherston. Visitors sat in the chairs to hear short, taped interviews with prominent Australians delivered through speakers in the chairs' headrests.

The selection of art for the pavilion was finalized in June 1966, five months after Menzies left office.²⁰ Robert Campbell's choices were informed by discussions with exhibits designer Robin Boyd, who sought to use art strategically in the pavilion to counteract the impression that Australia was a 'young' and culturally unsophisticated country.²¹ The 27 Australian paintings that went to Montreal were a group of figurative, landscape and abstract works by established modernists including Arthur Boyd, Elwyn Lynn, Leonard French, William Dobell, Roger Kemp, Sidney Nolan, John Olsen, Stanislaus Rapotec and Fred Williams. The selection did not meet with complete approval, Sir Valston Hancock, Commissioner-General for Expo '67, rejecting the use of 'abstract and symbolic paintings', which failed to reflect the unique qualities of the Australian landscape and people, Hancock commenting that, "Australians, like the rest of the world, have been 'spoofed' by the form of modern art."²²

Press reports noted the progressiveness of the art in the Montreal pavilion, but without this being controversial.²³ By 1967, the focus of Australian art was moving increasingly to international trends. In 1968, the National Gallery of Victoria presented *The Field*, a major survey of recent Australian abstraction that aimed to expose a new audience, attracted by the gallery's new modernist building, to new art.²⁴ In the exhibition catalogue, the critic Patrick McCaughey strove to validate the recent Australian abstraction by representing it as heir to an important international tradition in abstract art while refuting the charge that abstraction lacked relevance to Australia in failing to reflect the 'look' and 'feel' of the country.²⁵ In seeking to ground 'international' Australian abstraction in the national realm, the final paragraph of McCaughey's essay provided the work in the exhibition with a cursory local provenance, supplementing the formidable international one he had created throughout the essay. Here McCaughey listed only three earlier Australian abstractionists: Ralph Balson, Roger Kemp and Robert Klippel. He noted their lack of recognition, but effectively reinforced this by failing to write anything about the nature of their contribution or the emergent streams of abstraction that had developed in Australia from the early twentieth century.

The last sentence of McCaughey's essay described *The Field* as a landmark event in Australian art history, indicating "Australian art... making yet another of its hopeful starts in search of a modernist tradition."²⁶ This was not the case. Modernism and the institution of art came under sustained attack from Conceptual Art, examples of which had incongruously found their way into *The Field* through the work of Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden. Mostly, *The Field* marked Australian art moving towards the present system in which diverse contemporary developments are quickly codified through the integrated operations of museums and galleries, curatorial practices, media criticism, art theory and art history; a coordinated structure of validation and publicity Ralph Balson's work lacked in 1941. Certainly, in the middle decades of the twentieth century an instrumental cultural elite sought to control Australian fine art by accentuating the divide between traditionalism and modernism. The emergence of a late-modern reflexivity in Australian art in the late 1960s and 1970s, critical of what modernism had become, further complicated the process of understanding the place of modernist abstraction in twentieth century Australian art, the outbreak and the normalisation of diverse hybrid and new media forms in 1970s art severely testing the legitimacy and relevance of painting.

While many have contributed to uncovering the duration and scope of non-objective painting in Australia, including in the work of individual artists like Ralph Balson, this has been a strategic enterprise for those with a deep investment in non-objective practices, witness key curatorial projects by John Nixon and David Pestorius in the 1980s and 1990s. In the late 1970s and 1980s, when there was virtually no private market for critically conceived work and only intermittent interest from public institutions, Nixon's work as a gallerist demonstrated the importance of a vanguard practice for artists through professionalism. Initially this involved documenting contemporary work, so it would be possible to show that a history of radical art existed in Australia in the future. This was extended to presenting the work of neglected historical figures of non-objectivity like Ralph Balson, to show that such a history already existed.²⁷ A number of Nixon's curatorial projects have also sought to exemplify intergenerational relations among Australian abstract artists and hence signify historical continuity and faith in the future. Today, both the current and historical practice of non-objective art in Australia has a profile and the sharp ontological distinctions between modernism and Australianness no longer operate to invalidate abstraction. Yet, the conception of the 2008 German exhibition, *Australia. Contemporary non-objective art*, suggests that 'the knowledge and awareness' of Australian art continues to be based on restricted premises in challenging German audiences to accept that non-objective art could have been an important part of its history.²⁸

Dr Carolyn Barnes

Dr Carolyn Barnes is a Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Design, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia, where she is involved in a range of research projects investigating the role of art and design in public communication. These include the role of design in national self-representation in Australia's pavilions at world expositions; the use of participatory design as a resource for public information campaigns and design's role in brokering knowledge, meaning and visitor experience in the contemporary museum. Carolyn holds a PhD from the University of Melbourne and is an assistant editor of the *International Journal of Design*. Her monograph on the Hong Kong Australian artist John Young was published by Craftsman House / Thames & Hudson in 2005.

- 1 See, for example, Pestorius, David, "Geometric Painting in Australia 1941-1997," *Geometric Painting in Australia 1941-1997*, exh. cat. (Brisbane: Queensland University Art Museum, 1997): 13.
- 2 Edwards, Deborah, "A New Realm of Visual Experience," *R-Balson/41 – Anthony Hordern's Fine Art Galleries*, eds. Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth. exh. cat. (Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA, UNSW, 2008): 41.
- 3 Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth, "Introduction," *R-Balson/41 – Anthony Hordern's Fine Art Galleries*, eds. Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth. exh. cat. (Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, COFA, UNSW, 2008): 3.
- 4 A. Fickers, "Presenting the "window on the world" to the world. Competing narratives of the presentation of television at the world's fairs in Paris (1937) and New York (1939)," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 28. 3 (2008): 292.
- 5 "Memorandum Circulated by the Minister for Commerce Concerning the Paris International Exhibition of Arts and Crafts in Modern Life," undated, Paris Exhibition 1937 Organisation Pt. III, A601, 666/6/11, National Archives of Australia [hereafter NAA], Canberra.
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 J.F. Murphy, Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department, "Memorandum Paris Exhibition 1937," 17 December 1936, Paris Exhibition 1937 Organisation Pt.1, A601, 666/6/4, NAA, Canberra.
- 8 These are collected in A601, 666/6/11, NAA.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 See J. Gilbert, "World's fairs as historical events," in R. W. Rydell and N. E. Gwinn (eds), *Fair Representations. World Fairs and the Modern World*, (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1994): 13-27.
- 11 "Editorial," *Art in Australia*, 3.29 (September 1928), no pagination.
- 12 See P. Goad, "Pavilions and national identity: Finland and Australia at the 1939 New York World's Fair," *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians*, (Auckland and Sydney, 1996): 32-45.
- 13 S. Scott, "Imaging a Nation: Australia's Representation at the Venice Biennale, 1958," *Journal of Australian Studies*, 79 (September 2003): 54.
- 14 *ibid.*

- 15 Sarah Scott, "Imaging a Nation: Australia's Representation at the Venice Biennale, 1958," *Journal of Australian Studies*, 79 (September 2003): 53–66, 225–229.
- 16 *ibid.*, 62.
- 17 "Art Exhibitions Abroad," initialled by W.R. Cumming, Meeting between R. Menzies and Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, 3 August 1959, NAA: A463/61, 59/5000, CAAB files, quoted in Scott, 62.
- 18 J. Maccormick, "Letter to Geoffrey Searle," Archive of James Maccormick [hereafter AJM], 2 April 1996.
- 19 Letter by T.J. McMahon, Executive Officer of the Australian Exhibit Organisation to W.C. Wentworth M.P., 13 May 1966, "Expo '67 Australian Artists – Works for Inclusion in Art Gallery Section," NAA: A463, 1965/5070.
- 20 J. Maccormick, *Australian Pavilion, Expo '67*. AJM: 6.
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 V.B. Hancock, Note for File, 4 July 1966, NAA: A463, 1965/5070.
- 23 "Soft-Spoken chairs," *Life Australia*, 32.
- 24 See N. R. Seddon, President of the Council of Trustees of the NGV, in *The Field*, exh. cat. (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1968): 1.
- 25 P. McCaughey, "Experience and the New Abstraction," *The Field*, exh. cat. 88-90.
- 26 *ibid.*, 90.
- 27 This exhibition was *Ralph Balson: Ten Constructive Paintings 1940-1950*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, October 1980.
- 28 C. Dahlhausen, "Long Distance Call", in C. Dahlhausen, H. M. Schmidt and D. Weste (eds), *Australia. Contemporary non-objective art*, (Bremen: Hachmannediton, 2008): 5-6.

COLOUR IN ART – REVISITING 1919

Curators: Nick Waterlow and Annabel Pegus

Ivan Dougherty Gallery
College of Fine Arts
The University of New South Wales, Australia
22 August – 27 September 2008

Heide Museum of Modern Art, Victoria
23 March 2009 – 12 July 2009

State Library of Queensland
31 July 2009 – 25 October 2009

R-BALSON-/41 – ANTHONY HORDERNS' FINE ART GALLERIES

Curators: Nicholas Chambers and Michael Whitworth

Ivan Dougherty Gallery
College of Fine Arts
The University of New South Wales, Australia
22 August – 27 September 2008

SYMPOSIUM PAPERS

Symposium: 23 August 2008

Contributors: Dr Daniel Thomas AM, Dr Heather Johnson, Dr Deborah Hart, Dr Jenny McFarlane, Niels Hutchison, Christopher Dean, Deborah Edwards, Elena Taylor, A.D.S. Donaldson, Dr Andrew McNamara, Dr Carolyn Barnes.

Design: Sally Robinson
Printer: Southern Colour, Sydney
ISBN: 978 0 7334 2705-3

Publishe by Ivan Dougherty Gallery
© Ivan Dougherty Gallery 2008
College of Fine Arts
Selwyn Street, Paddington NSW 2021
www.cofa.unsw.edu.au/galleries/idg
The University of New South Wales

All symposium papers are © the author.

All rights reserved. This publication is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system or transmitted by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without written permission.

(COVER IMAGE) Roland Wakelin *Synchromy in orange major* 1919 (detail) oil on cardboard
30.0 x 40.0 cm Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales Bequest of Mervyn Horton 1983
© Reproduced with permission Photograph: Jenni Carter

