



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW SOUTH WALES

COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS



floressence


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Curated by Felicity Fenner

24 October - 16 November 1996

**IVAN
DOUGHERTY
GALLERY**

The University of New South Wales  College of Fine Arts

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In a recent essay, Jeanette Winterson makes a poignant analogy between art, which “puts down its roots into the deepest hiding places of our nature”, and certain nurturing plants, like comfrey, “whose roots can penetrate far into the subsoil and unlock nutrients that would otherwise lie out of the reach of shallower bedded plants”.¹ Images of flowers have over the centuries inspired artist and audience alike, their promise of immortality temporarily suspending everyday concerns imposed by the passing of time, their consideration offering a space for reflection across a range of contexts and continents.

Floressence covers the period in Australian art from the onset of modernism to the present. Unlike 17th century Dutch art and despite there being an impressive lineage of modern and contemporary depictions of flowers in painting, printmaking and photography, 20th century Australian art is not particularly renowned for its flower imagery². When Haarlem was established as the world's centre of flower and bulb growing almost four hundred years ago, flowers were exploited for their medicinal and commercial potential. The more exotic species became expensive status symbols, artists' painted renditions of their delicate splendour rarely attracting a higher price than the blooms themselves.³ When modernism arrived in Australia almost a generation after its impact on European art, flowers and floral arrangements were painted by leaders of the movement - led by Roland Wakelin, Grace Cossington Smith and Roy de Maistre - as a means of redefining traditional subject matter in contemporary terms. By the turn of the century, R.T. Baker (1854-1941), a botanical curator with the Technological Museum (Powerhouse), and artists Lucien Henry (1850-1896) and (Marian) Ellis Rowan (1847-1922) had all made significant contributions to the acceptance of Australian native flora as an appropriate subject for the high and decorative arts, one that fostered a new spirit of national identity. It wasn't until the 1920s, however, that the flower in art grew away from its links with amateur women painters and the native flower from its connection with botanical science, being cast within a progressive artistic climate of cultural internationalism and social change.

The image of the flower in art traditionally carries expectations of metaphorical significance, eroticism and mortality (sex and death) being the most commonly sought associations. But from the end of World War One to the late 1950s, a period when the flower was ubiquitous in Australian art and from which half this exhibition is drawn, flora served two primary functions in art: it signalled the forging of a new national identity (see, for example, works here by Preston, Proctor, Feint and Nolan), and it reflected the modernist sensibility then sweeping Australian society (Wakelin, de Maistre, Cossington Smith, Olive Cotton, Weaver Hawkins, Alison Rehfisch, Herbert Badham). Abstraction came to dominate art after this time, particularly in Sydney, and, with a few exceptions by painters working in a figurative, relatively traditional mode (such as David Strachan, Sam Fullbrook and Joshua Smith), it was not until the late 1980s, when representational imagery was once again prevalent, that the notion of flowers as worthy subject matter came back into season. Brett Whiteley's iridescent *Good Morning Glory (III)* is a chronological turning point in the exhibition. Its Klein blue flowers beckon from the calligraphic hillside like festive paraphernalia scattered from the shimmering sky above.

Floressence begins in 1920 with a painting by Roland Wakelin. As a leading figure of the Sydney modernist movement, Wakelin turned to cubism and the work of Cezanne for inspiration in his landscape and still life paintings. Traditional in its composition and choice of imported flowers, *Zinnias* manifests the high keyed colours rendered with softly geometric brushstrokes that came to typify Wakelin's mature work. The avant garde standpoint of Roy de Maistre and Grace Cossington Smith was closely aligned to Wakelin's own; the paintings which represent these artists in *Floressence* testify to their importance as challengers of the nationalistic Australian aesthetic propagated by the Heidelberg and Sydney impressionists. The Cossington Smith is a particularly rigorous painting both conceptually and technically, the lowered perspective, flattened picture plane and segmented brushwork making it one of the finest examples of early Australian modernism.

For Margaret Preston, it was indigenous imagery, specifically depictions of native flora and fauna, that best represented Australia's cultural heritage. She pioneered a genre of printmaking that invests uniquely Australian subjects with the dictums of European and Japanese picture-making techniques. Bold and unabashedly decorative, her images of native plants and flowers have been endlessly appropriated by artists and designers seeking a distinctly Australian flavour. While there is some validity to the argument that Preston's western arrangements of native flora reflects the then prevailing neo-colonialist attitude towards indigenous culture as consumable exotica, the role her work played in the acceptance of native flora not only as a subject fit for high art, but as an icon of national identity, is pivotal to the emergence of modernism in Australian art.

Social elegance and cultural progress went together in the work and lives of fashionable artists like Thea Proctor and Adrian Feint. Proctor's early work is distinguished by the flat picture plane and heavy black outline synonymous with Sydney modernist printmaking. As a young artist in Europe, Proctor studied first hand the dynamic compositions and liberating colour schemes of recent art, particularly that of Picasso and Matisse. A friend and associate of Preston and Wakelin, her images appeared often in the trend-setting *Home* magazine, as did those of Adrian Feint. Feint was an accomplished artist active in the Sydney art world from the 1920s, best known for his flowerpieces, of which the Palm Beach view in *Floressence* is typical. An illustrator, art director, interior designer and painter, he made modernism "a non-threatening, tasteful commodity" for his genteel clientele of the Bowral - Point Piper - Palm Beach axis.

On a broader scale, it was the Sydney - Melbourne axis which supported a recognisable difference in the purpose and function of the flower in art. As has been pointed out in relation to Preston's work, following World War One "Sydney's fabled hedonism and cosmopolitan affectations had already taken root, allowing 'modern' art to steer a more elegant and superficial course in

Tinseltown than in the grey St Petersburg of the south".⁴ With some exceptions, including Rupert Bunny and John Power who were both living in Europe, artists of the 1920s through to the 40s not associated with the new cubist and decorative forms of modernism tended to be those from Melbourne, encouraged by the tonalism esteemed by Max Meldrum and his followers. Clarice Beckett, Helen Lempriere and William Frater, for example, painted flowers in a more traditional mode, extolling their poetic beauty rather than invoking symbolic significance.

While floral fashion can inform artists' choice of flowers to paint, just as it did their Dutch and Flemish predecessors, the primary factors influencing an artist's choice and depiction of flowers in 20th century Australian art are political and cultural, as is revealed by Preston's recontextualisation of native species, Adrian Feint's campish modernism, Emily Kngwarreye's celebratory indigenous visions of desert flowers, Tim Maguire's post modern reinventions of Dutch 17th century flower painting and Ross Harley's digitally manipulated images, which highlight the tenuous relationship between the natural beauty of flora and the artificially conjured beauty facilitated by high technology. Other photo-based artists in Australia have also drawn upon the visual allure of artificially altered images to comment on the transience of natural beauty, specifically Olive Cotton, whose *Shasta Daisies* was contrived almost sixty years ago yet remains as fresh as the day the flowers were arranged in the studio, Anne MacDonald, whose hyper-real photographs of ceramic memento mori decorations belie a contemporary fascination with cultural kitsch, and Rosemary Laing, who combines real and artificial roses in photographic tableaux which defy boundaries of reality and fabrication. Peter Maloney's daisies juxtapose the nurturing and destructive powers of nature, the red paint seeping insidiously over the sprightly pink flowers a potent metaphor for the social and physiological ravages of AIDS.

Other younger artists in the exhibition draw on a traditionally feminine practice of utilising the flower in crafts associated with the domestic sphere: Glenys

Jackson uses floral fabrics as her canvas and Elizabeth Pulie mimics the floral patterning of commercial fabric and wallpaper designs. Donna Lougher's petite flower paintings inspired by Japanese fans and Cressida Campbell's *Daisies* woodblock reflect a western bourgeois taste for Japanese aesthetics. Others use the image of the flower in literary, theoretical and cultural appropriations. Kim Spooner's inviting bloom is deliberately erotic, taking its cue from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, while Kate Mackay is engaged in an ongoing series of floral designs, investing the modernist grid with decorative and metaphorical allusion. Stephen Nothling's flower paintings, which began as a subversive comment on bad taste, have evolved into dedicated reinterpretations of traditional floral imagery.

Artists have always called upon the flower's timeless universality to articulate social, political and cultural concerns in their artistic practice, floral imagery providing an accessible point of entry for all.⁵ As *Florescence* reveals, flowers are also eloquent subject matter in themselves, resonant symbols of the ephemeral beauties of nature, the fragility of life and as erotic metaphors for seduction and renewal. At a time when so much that is familiar has disappeared from our visual language, the flower continues to play a vital role in the visual communication of metaphorical and philosophical thought.

Felicity Fenner

- ¹ Jeanette Winterson, "Writer, Reader, Words", *Art Objects*, Random House, London, 1995, p. 35.
- ² With few exceptions, flower imagery has been largely relegated in Australia to flat art forms (painting and work on paper). For this reason and given its limited resources, the current survey excludes relief and three dimensional practice (with apologies to Robert Parr and Peter Tilley, among others).
- ³ Celia Fox, review of "Dutch Flower Paintings 1600-1750" at Dulwich Picture Gallery, England, in *House and Garden*, London, July 1996, pp. 32-34.
- ⁴ Craig Judd, "From Point Piper to Palm Beach: The Art of Adrian Feint", *Art and Australia*, vol. 32, no. 1, Spring 1994, p. 78.
- ⁵ Elizabeth Butel, *Margaret Preston*, ETT Imprint (HarperCollins), Sydney, 1995, p. 26.
- ⁶ Thanks to Nick Waterlow for sharing ideas and editorial advice.



Roland Wakelin
Still Life with Zinnias 1920
cat. no. 44



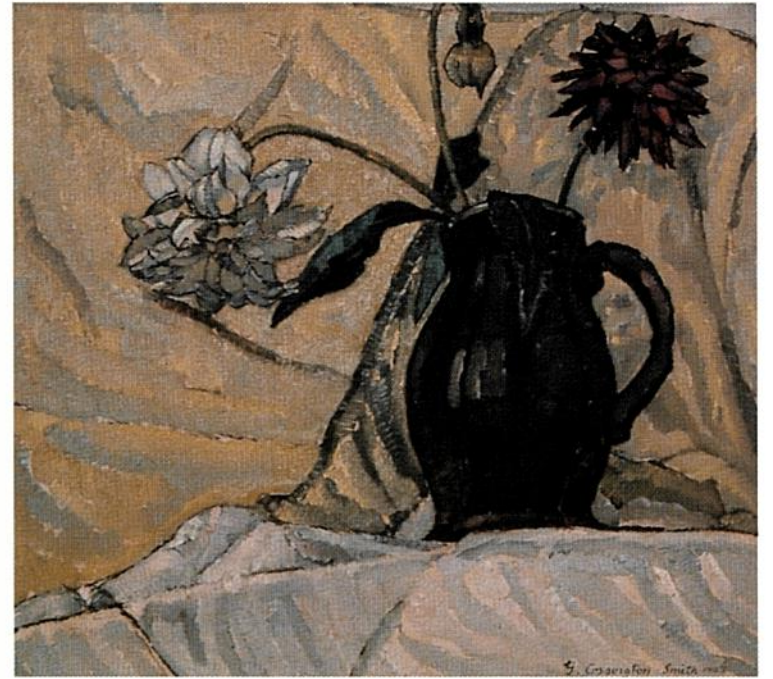
Margaret Preston
Native Fuschia 1925
cat. no. 31



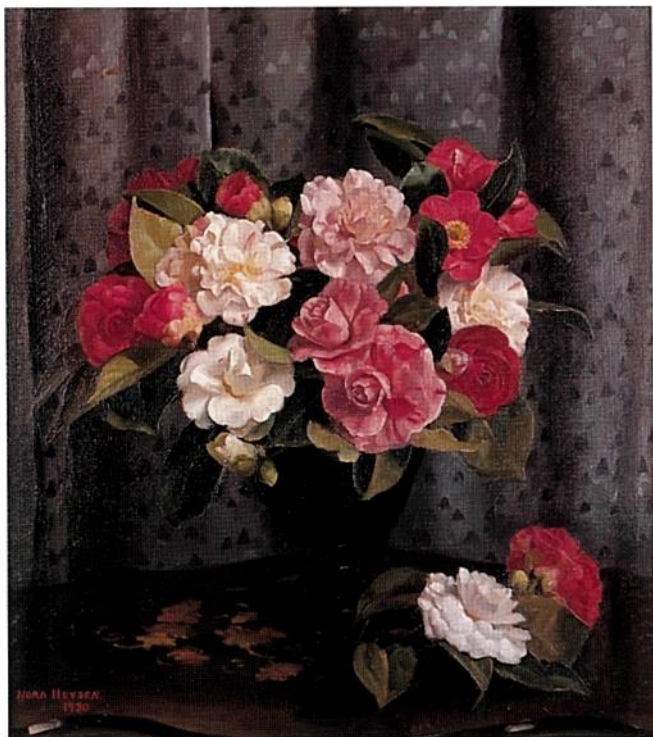
Thea Proctor
The Rose 1927
cat. no. 33



Rupert Bunny
Flowers in a Hungarian Jar
c.1927/29-1932 cat. no. 3



Grace Cossington Smith
Dahlias in a Jug c.1927
cat. no. 38



Nora Heysen
Camellias 1930
cat. no. 16



Gladys Gibbons
Lilies c.1933-34
cat. no. 13



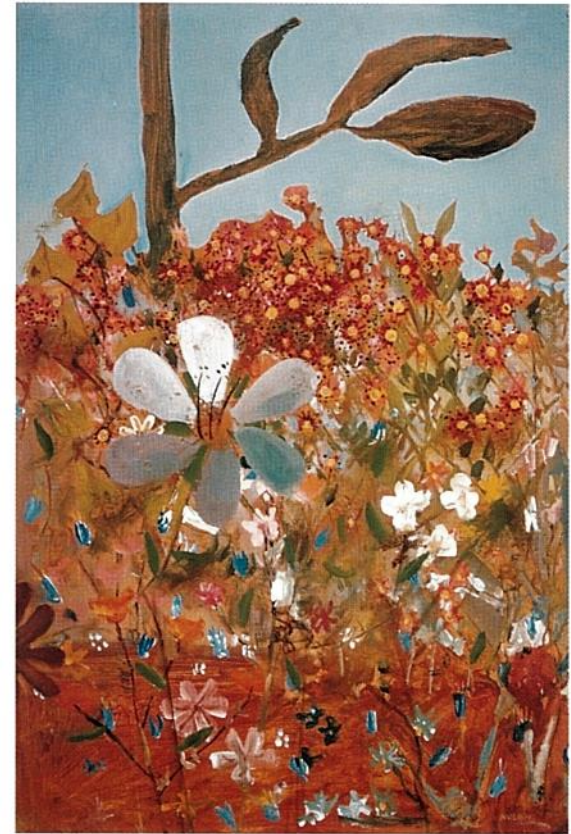
Clarice Beckett
Still Life - Magnolia in an Oriental
Vase c.1930 cat. no. 2



Olive Cotton
Shasta Daisies 1937
cat. no. 6



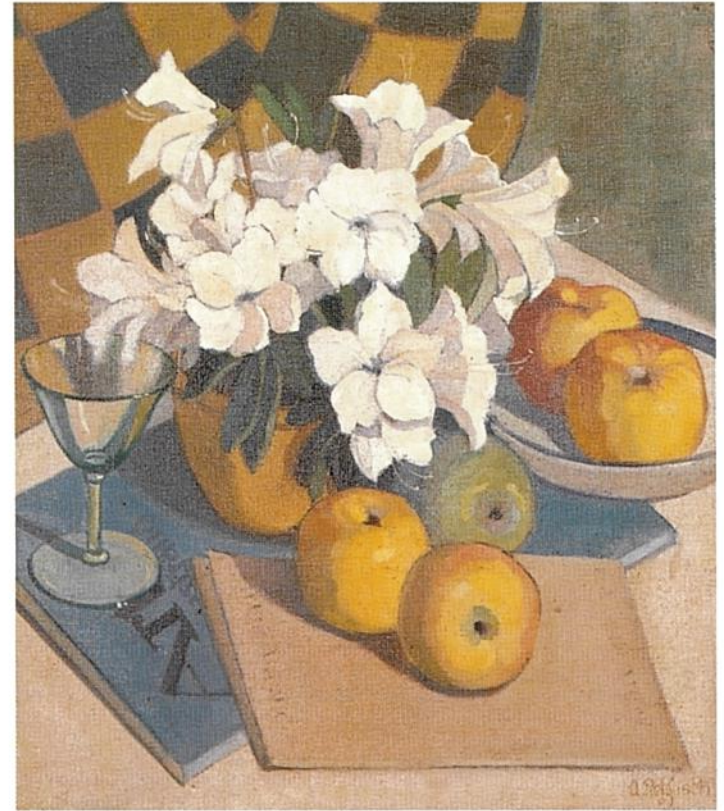
Adrian Feint
Flowerpiece Palm Beach 1948
cat. no. 10



Sidney Nolan
Desert Flowers c.1949
cat. no. 28



William Frater
White Camelias c.1950
cat. no. 11



Alison Rehfish
Azaleas and Apples
cat. no. 35



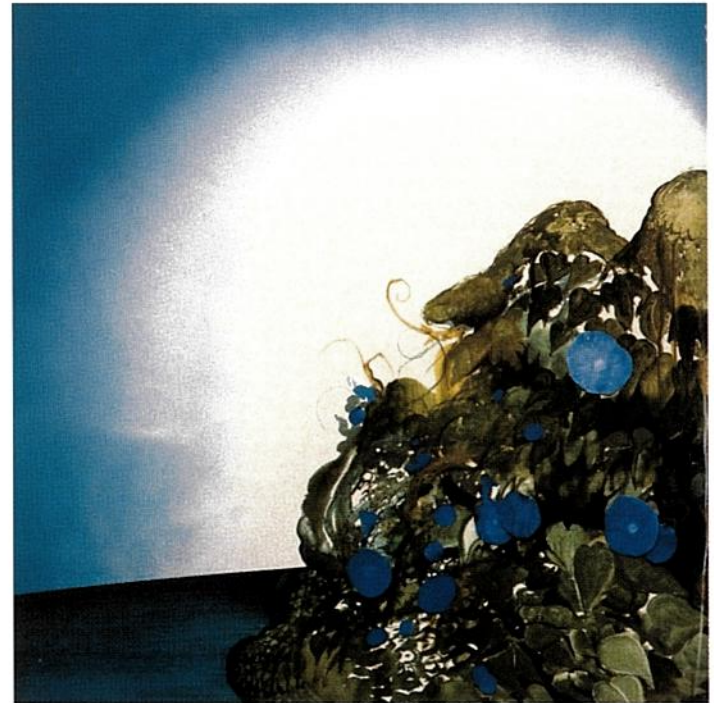
David Strachan
Orange Blossom 1965
cat. no. 42



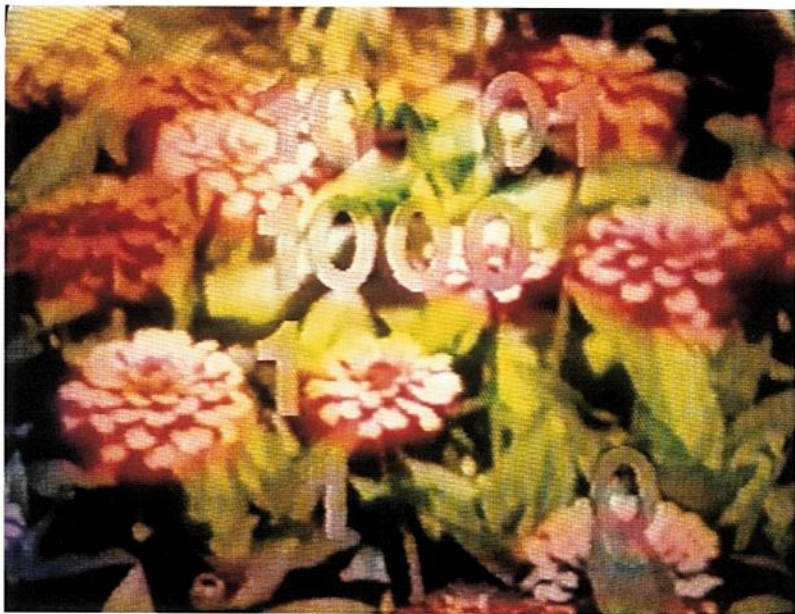
Joshua Smith
Still Life on Ice Chest 1973
cat. no. 39



Anne MacDonald
Flowers of Evil 1990
cat. no. 23



Brett Whiteley
Good Morning Glory (II), Byron Bay c.1989-90 cat. no. 45



Ross Harley
Digital Garden 1992-93
cat. no. 14



Elizabeth Pulie
Fifty Five 1992
cat. no. 34



Peter Maloney
Infected 1996
 cat. no. 26

list of works

- Herbert Badham** (1899-1961)
- 1 *Still Life* 1958
 oil on canvas board
 36.4 x 29.4 cm
 signed and dated l.r.: H. Badham '58
 private collection, Sydney
- Clarice Beckett** (1887-1935)
- 2 *Still Life - Magnolia in an Oriental Vase* c.1930
 oil on cardboard
 55.5 x 48.5 cm
 signed l.r.: C. Beckett
 private collection, Sydney
- Rupert Bunny** (1864-1947)
- 3 *Flowers in a Hungarian Jar*
 c.1927/29-1932
 oil on canvas
 66.5 x 45.0 cm
 monogram l.l.: R.C.W.B.
 private collection, Sydney
- Cressida Campbell** (b. 1960)
- 4 *Daisies* 1994
 woodblock (watercolour on carved ply)
 26.7 x 27.0 cm
 collection Mr & Mrs D. Matchett, Sydney
- Margaret Coen** (b. 1913)
- 5 *Rhododendrons*
 watercolour
 38.4 x 37.2 cm
 signed and dated l.l.
 The Howard Hinton Collection
 New England Regional Art Museum
- Olive Cotton** (b.1911)
- 6 *Shasta Daisies* 1937
 gelatin silver photograph
 39.8 x 28.0 cm
 signed and dated l.r.: Olive Cotton '37
 courtesy the artist & Josef Lebovic
 Gallery, Sydney
- Roy de Maistre** (1894-1968)
- 7 *Daffodils* 1926
 oil on three layer plywood
 45.5 x 37.5 cm
 The Howard Hinton Collection
 New England Regional Art Museum
- Max Dupain** (1911-1992)
- 8 *Magnolia* 1982
 silver gelatin print
 39.5 x 50.5 cm
 private collection, Sydney
 courtesy Josef Lebovic Gallery, Sydney
- Helen Eager** (b. 1952)
- 9 *Wild Flowers* 1983
 50.0 x 60.0 cm
 pastel over lithograph
 courtesy Watters Gallery, Sydney
- Adrian Feint** (1894-1971)
- 10 *Flowerpiece Palm Beach* 1948
 oil on canvas
 60.0 x 54.9 cm
 signed and dated l.l.: Adrian Feint 1948
 collection: S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
 National Trust of Australia (NSW)
- William Frater** (1890-1974)
- 11 *White Camellias* c.1950s
 oil on board
 56.0 x 39.5 cm
 signed l.l.: William Frater
 private collection, Sydney
- Sam Fullbrook** (b. 1922)
- 12 *Flower Piece No.1* 1973
 oil on canvas
 106.5 x 96.5 cm
 signed l.r.
 private collection, Sydney

- Gladys Gibbons** (1903-1969)
13 *Lilies* c.1933-34
 colour linocut
 13.75 x 14.0 cm
 signed l.r.: Gladys Gibbons inscribed l.l.:
 lillies [sic]
 collection: S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
 National Trust of Australia (NSW)
- Ross Harley** (b. 1961)
14 *Digital Garden I* 1992 and 1993
Green Machine 1993
 video
 courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery
- Weaver Hawkins** (1893-1977)
15 *A Group Harmony* 1947
 oil on canvas
 60.5 x 45.0 cm
 signed and dated l.l.: Raokin '47
 verso: pencil on canvas: Weaver-
 Hawkins 'A Group Harmony'
 private collection, Sydney
- Nora Heysen** (b. 1911)
16 *Camellias* 1930
 oil on canvas
 49.0 x 44.0 cm
 signed l.l.
 collection: Tamworth City Gallery
- Glenys Jackson** (b. 1941)
17 *Flowers of Emptiness* 1995
 ink, acrylic on fabric
 24.0 x 24.0 cm
 courtesy Access Gallery, Sydney
- Emily Kame Kngwarreye**
 (c.1910-1996)
18 *Untitled (Alhalkere)* 1994
 acrylic on canvas
 233.2 x 79.2 cm
 courtesy Utopia Art Sydney
- Rosemary Laing** (b. 1959)
19 *from Paradise work (work 3)* 1990
 cibachrome, clear and translucent
 plexiglass
 80.0 x 240.0 cm
 collection: Lizzy Marshall, Sydney
- Helen Lempriere** (1907-1991)
20 *Still Life with Green Bottle* 1933
 oil on board
 46.0 x 38.0 cm
 signed l.l.: H. Lempriere
 verso inscribed: April 1933
 private collection, Sydney
- Donna Lougher** (b. 1964)
21 *Daisies and Small Insect* 1995
 acrylic paint on canvas
 21.0 x 23.0 cm
 courtesy the artist
- 22** *Daisies* 1995
 acrylic paint on canvas
 21.0 x 23.0 cm
 courtesy the artist
- Anne MacDonald** (b. 1960)
23 *Flowers of Evil* 1990
 Type C colour photographs
 each 53.0 x 53.0 cm
 courtesy Roslyn Oxley9, Sydney
- Kate Mackay** (b. 1961)
24 *same painting - orange* 1996
 oil on canvas
 167.0 x 167.0 cm
 courtesy the artist
- Tim Maguire** (b. 1958)
25 *Flower Piece* 1995
 oil on paper, laminated on canvas
 152.5 x 112.0 cm
 signed and dated l.r.: Maguire 95
 private collection, Sydney
- Peter Maloney** (b.1953)
26 *Infected* 1996
 rephotographed painted photographs
 each 74.0 x 49.0 cm
 courtesy Legge Gallery, Sydney
- Max Meldrum** (1875-1955)
27 *Yellow Roses and Yellow Chinese
 Robe*
 oil on cardboard
 39.0 x 28.5 cm
 private collection, Sydney
- Sidney Nolan** (1917-1992)
28 *Desert Flowers* c.1949
 ripolin on hardboard
 90.5 x 59.8 cm
 signed l.r.: Nolan
 collection: Newcastle Region Art
 Gallery
- Stephen Nothling** (b. 1962)
29 *Roses over Lapstone* 1996
 oil on plywood
 122.0 x 244.0 cm
 signed l.l. centre
 courtesy Eva Breuer Art Dealer,
 Sydney
- John Power** (1881-1943)
30 *Flower Landscape with sun* c.1925
 oil on canvas
 68.5 x 79.5 cm
 collection: Museum of Contemporary
 Art, Sydney
- Margaret Preston** (1875-1963)
31 *Native Fuschia* 1925
 woodblock print
 49.8 x 31.0 cm
 signed on block l.r.: MP,
 in pencil below l.r.: Margaret Preston
 10th (proof) Native Fuschia
 collection: S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
 National Trust of Australia (NSW)
- Margaret Preston** (1875-1963)
32 *Australian Native Flowers* c.1933
 hand coloured woodcut
 43.5 x 42.5 cm
 signed on image l.l.: M.P.
 in pencil below l.r.: Margaret Preston
 collection Newcastle Region Art Gallery
- Thea Proctor** (1879-1966)
33 *The Rose* 1927
 hand coloured woodcut
 21.9 x 20.7 cm
 signed l.r.: Thea Proctor
 inscribed below l.l.: The Rose
 collection S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
 National Trust of Australia (NSW)
- Elizabeth Pulie** (b. 1968)
34 *Fifty Five* 1992
 acrylic on canvas
 160.0 x 80.0 cm
 courtesy Sutton Gallery, Melbourne
- Alison Rehfish** (1900-1975)
35 *Azaleas and Apples*
 oil on canvas laid down
 38.0 x 33.5 cm
 signed l.r.: A. Rehfish
 private collection, Sydney
- Elsa Russell** (b. 1909)
36 *Still Life - Snow Drops* c.1930s
 oil on cardboard
 54.7 x 37.0 cm
 signed l.l. and l.r.: E. Russell
 private collection, Sydney
- Albert Sherman** (1882-1971)
37 *Golden Harmony*
 oil on canvas
 63.0 x 63.0 cm
 signed l.r.: Albert Sherman
 collection: Tamworth City Gallery

Grace Cossington Smith (1892-1984)
38 *Dahlias in a Jug* c.1927
oil on canvas on pulpboard
36.8 x 40.0 cm
signed and dated l.r.: G Cossington
Smith 1927
private collection, Sydney

Joshua Smith (1905-1995)
39 *Still Life on Ice Chest* 1973
oil on board
69.5 x 63.5 cm
signed and dated l.r.: Joshua Smith '73
private collection, Sydney

Kim Spooner (b. 1955)
40 *dreams take flight* 1995
encaustic on linen
150.0 x 100.0 cm
signed l.r.
courtesy Christine Abrahams Gallery,
Melbourne

Ethel A. Stephens (c.1880-1944)
41 *Still Life* c. 1920s
oil on canvas laid down on plywood
37.0 x 49.0 cm
private collection, Sydney

David Strachan (1919-1970)
42 *Orange Blossom* 1965
oil on canvas
46.2 x 61.1 cm
signed u.r.: d. Strachan
collection: Newcastle Region Art
Gallery

Dorothy Thornhill (1910-1987)
43 *Phlox* 1940
oil on canvas
54.5 x 44.5 cm
signed and dated l.r.: D. Thornhill '40
private collection, Sydney

Roland Wakelin (1887-1971)
44 *Still Life with Zinnias* 1920
oil on cardboard
45.5 x 56.0 cm
signed and dated l.r.: R. Wakelin '20
collection: University of Sydney

Brett Whiteley (1939-1992)
45 *Good Morning Glory (II), Byron Bay*
c.1989-90
oil and mixed media on canvas
76.0 x 76.0 cm
private collection, Sydney

Eric Wilson (1911-1947)
46 *Lupins and Snapdragons* 1935
oil on canvas
46.2 x 37.8 cm
The Howard Hinton Collection
New England Regional Art Museum

Edwina Wrobel (b. 1962)
47 *Wild Flowers* 1989
oil on canvas
50.0 x 37.0 cm
signed l.r.
private collection, Sydney

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