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The final one-time member of the Perth Group, Tom Gibbons (b.1928) took a very different view of the visual arts to that of his colleagues. Gibbons was an academic and a writer who arrived in Perth in 1955 from Britain, bringing with him something of the open-minded attitude to the arts and popular culture as a resource which was to become so dominant in the swinging sixties.

Gibbons worked with the personalities and icons of popular culture in the context of a highly literate irony. He was a Pop artist, but one with an informed and extremely subtle vision. In 1981 he remarked in an exhibition catalogue that there was nothing new:

in juxtaposing illusion and reality. All that's new is the way in which the accelerating 'information explosion' of the late twentieth century, together with such gadgets as colour-Xerox-machines and air brushes...has most enjoyably added to the complexity of this endless ironic serio-comic game.\(^{12}\)

Gibbons understood contemporary artistic work as a game that must be engaged with a fair amount of chance. His earlier images often have the blank look of icons or corporate logos that take their meaning from their relocation in the context of an art gallery. His *Stanley's Magical Moment* (1971), was originally in the Graylands collection. It shows Laurel and Hardy in a posed still from one of their movies. Gibbons has painted the black and white image in light and dark vertical stripes that mimic a format from popular culture. They form an animated optical illusion, which echoes the flicker of the projected image and perhaps that classic movie cliché, the shot through shadows cast by a venetian blind. Certainly this is an image that invokes nostalgic reveries and memories of simple moments. Bryant McDiven later recalled that "Tom Gibbons' *Stanley's Magical Moment*, a portrait study of Laurel and Hardy, is worth a mention as it became a sort of icon for the students. Every time we had a fire drill and had to evacuate the buildings and grab the most valuable things, somehow Laurel and Hardy were rescued first."\(^{13}\)

Gibbons' *Regal Zonophone Variations* (1972), was originally in the Claremont Teachers' College collection. In both its design and its title it plumbs the resources of popular culture far deeper than even *Stanley's Magical Moment*. Regal Zonophone was a British record company. The Regal Zonophone label was created by EMI back in the 1930s when it merged its two budget labels—Zonophone and Regal. It provided musical hall acts like George Formby with an outlet, and in turn these artists kept the label going until 1963 when the Salvation Army provided it with its first hit record. In 1967, two successful pop producers, Denny Cordell and Tony Visconti, signed with Regal Zonophone, bringing with them acts like The Move and Procol Harum. They were soon joined by Joe Cocker and T-Rex, but when these production deals ended, Regal Zonophone folded.\(^{14}\)
Tom Gibbons, *Regal Zonophone Variations* (1972)
No doubt Gibbons was attracted by the sudden rebirth of the label previously familiar from ancient 78-rpm comedy records, a pre-eminent example of the strange infolding of nostalgia and memory so common in popular culture. Gibbons has added another layer of nostalgia by working the word Zonophone into a brilliant red and blue canvas filled entirely with interwoven letter forms. This type of commercial design was common in fairgrounds and entertainment venues as well as advertising from the 1920s. It had a brief revival in American pop painting of the sixties and in the work of the British painter Joe Tilson.

Miriam Stannage (b. 1939) also has a long lasting commitment to the relationship between high art within the modernist canon and its ironic presence in popular culture. She and Gibbons are the only two artists in Western Australia to have taken the fashion for hard-edge formalism, as practised by Sydney artist Tony McGillick and the Central School group, in their stride. The tenets of so called ‘hard-edge’ and ‘Colour Field painting’, as propounded by the New York School, found many ready followers amongst Australian artists in the 1970s. Stannage herself became a pioneer in hard-edge painting after spending some time in Europe and the United States.

After a period in the Paris Studio of the Australia Council in 1971, however, she became fascinated by the relationship between vision, representation, painting and ideas. She uses “displacement and juxtaposition to explore reality and artifice.” These strategies, ideas and attitudes tend to erode the metaphysical status of abstraction in modernism and the work of the New York School, which collapses in a heap leaving behind only humour and irony.

Stannage began to borrow from art history in her paintings. She chose her principle target carefully. It was Piet Mondrian, the high priest of modernist abstraction, whose work in New York in the 1940s was a primary source for the New York School. Stannage quoted the rectilinear architecture of Mondrian’s compositions as the basis for a witty exploration of the contradictions of abstraction. Sometimes she would add trompe l’oeil elements to her copy of a Mondrian. Objects represented in three dimensions with highlights and shadows lie over her copy of the Mondrian. They totally deny the claims of modernist abstraction to exist outside or beyond the contingent and the quotidian. Stannage was following up the well-known injunction of the Dadaist Tristan Tzara to “use a Rembrandt as an ironing board.”

Her Mondrian on Art (1973), in the University Collection takes her joke about abstraction a stage further. She has reconstructed the typical rhythmic grid of one of Mondrian’s works from the 1920s in a large drawing on paper. The lines of the grid are lines of writing in different coloured inks. Stannage has transcribed a translation of some of Mondrian’s observations about abstraction into the form of his painting. His ideas are physically and humorously inscribed into his art. This is a reversal of the old artist’s joke that paintings are made of paint, not ideas. In 1991, Stannage commented that, “As a visual artist a major interest for me is to explore the many aspects of ‘seeing’ or ‘non-seeing’ in the visible world.” She described her work as, “a light-hearted questioning of art and life by juxtaposing ideas and styles, ironically;
much of my art is about things that cannot be seen physically, emotionally or spiritually."

The University Collection contains one important work of the kind that Stannage regarded with such scepticism. *Flying V* (1973), by Tony McGillick, is a large canvas with a quadrilateral in its upper-half, overlapped by a V-shaped wedge pointing to the left that exactly fills the height of the canvas. McGillick and hard-edge painters like him were the true heirs of Mondrian. Where he used the grid to locate the elements of the composition across the canvas, McGillick appropriated the square proportions of the canvas itself to constrain the size and shape of his large compositional elements. McGillick also used acrylic spraypaint to make the impressively graduated colours which fill the two major shapes that dominate *Flying V*. The pink at the base of the quadrilateral and greenish gold at point of the V suggest a theatrical variation in the light falling on the design. The green triangle beneath the top arm of the V has an even stranger optical effect; it suggests a three dimensional fold between it and the quadrilateral, an Escher-like twist in the flat surface topology that relies for its effect entirely on the chroma and the diagrammatic shift of large flat areas across the canvas.

Fun and games of this kind were taken very seriously at the Central Street Gallery which was founded in 1966. It was Tony McGillick’s idea, financed by two other artists in the group of hard-edge minimalist painters who exhibited there. McGillick encouraged the return to Sydney of a group of Australian artists with whom he had been living in London’s Ladbroke Grove. They brought back with them the latest formalist ideas about painting from the United States, lightened by the humorous attitude of London formalists such as John Hoyland and Richard Smith. The Central Street artists formed the core of the famous exhibition The Field (1968), at the National Gallery of Victoria. At the time this was believed to herald a new international age for Australian art, although its influence was never really felt in the West, which maintained a relatively separate, provincial outlook until the 1980s. The Collection also owns work by Sydney Ball (b. 1933), *Ahab for a Shiraz Dream* (1968), donated by Bryant McDiven. Ball’s approach to abstraction was less disciplined but his work is often highly amusing.

The work of Cliff Jones (1939–2000) in the University Collection clearly shows the complex relationships that developed within the practice of a single artist who was required to work across the divided consciousness that this outlook produced. Jones was a highly regarded artist and teacher and a friend of Miriam Stannage, who donated his portrait of her to the Collection. *Miriam Stannage* (c. 1962) is a medium-sized portrait in acrylics. Jones built up the portrait from a series of irregular contrasting panels of different sizes in softly applied colours.

The portrait shows a strong relationship with the early work of Matisse and the Fauves and something of the
Sydney Ball, *Ahab for a Shiraz Dream* (1968)
Cliff Jones, Gemstones (1996)

handling of Robert Delaunay. The head is set against a colour wheel, a panel of four areas of colour, two red on a diagonal, one blue in the upper right hand corner and a large green panel in the lower area to the left of the head. The green section functions as the equivalent of shadow, a shadow without loss of chroma as in the early portraits by Matisse. This same green helps model the face in the voids around the nose below the eyebrows and on the upper part of the chin. Jones was able to develop an extraordinarily luminous effect by placing his colour contrasts with great care. The subject’s expression emerges not from careful drawing but from the lines that appear where the edges of separate coloured panels overlap.

Jones was also intrigued by the possible use of formal shapes in bright colours in the manner of McGillick. He experimented with these in Gemstones (1966), a series of eight abstract paintings based on the colours he found in the mineral collection that belonged to a friend and neighbour. Each panel is named after a mineral. For instance Spinel II, one of the eight, consists of a small grid painted with glowing purples, blues and reds with graduated shading, which suggests that each face is in fact part of a cylinder. Jones’ use of hard and soft edges and a geometric form is reminiscent of the work of Tony McGillick made twenty or more years earlier. Even this much later, however, Jones still relied on his discoveries in the natural order to motivate his abstraction.
Cliff Jones, Portrait of Miriam Stannage (c. 1962)
George Duerden, Portrait of Miriam Stannage I (1969); Portrait of Miriam Stannage II (nd)
George Duerden (1926-1986), another member of the group of artists around Miriam Stannage, also made portraits of her which she has since donated to the University Collection. Duerden was of a very different temperament to Jones. He was a brilliant gestural improviser who appears to have had no engagement with the historical development of contemporary art in Western Australia. He was free of any of the concerns which underpinned the work of Stannage, Jones or Gibbons. 19

*Miriam Stannage I* (1969), shows Stannage's face and neck treated as if conceived by Modigliani, painted in dramatic tones of golden brown, delineated with finely observed taut lines constructed around an impression of the character of her face. Duerden uses a technique often referred to as scumbling, in which one layer of opaque brushstrokes is worked over another layer that has already dried or partially dried. This emphasises the graphic qualities of each stroke and allows the artist to build up an intensely active surface.

Over this surface Duerden uses small articulated figures repeated in a semi-regular pattern so as to hold the image together. The two fretwork motifs in Stannage's blouse are echoed by the strange square light-green motifs in the background. Although one cannot be certain, Duerden appears to have used domestic enamel paint in some parts of this work and occasionally in his other paintings so as to achieve the necessary flow and density to enable such graphic effects.

*Miriam Stannage II* (nd), the second portrait, is a far more confident version of the same painterly manner. Duerden has worked animated scribbles of dense red-orange and a little black paint, barely softened with medium, over an underpainting made up of various blues. He may indeed have originally thought of a blue background and changed his mind. This approach to painting allows for many such shifts of invention without the deterioration of the surface which would occur if this were to be attempted in other styles.

The energetic curves of Stannage's black sixties-style hairdo pick up their rhythms from the background. This locks her features into the surface as a whole. Together with the unmodulated painterly gestures which make up the volume of her face, this gives it an extraordinary presence. The diagonal network of white lines on her waistcoat contributes a predictable visually stabilising element to this intensely active image. Duerden was a painter's painter able to invent some of the most remarkable surface effects without ever diminishing the coherence of his images.

His *Portrait of Cliff Jones* (1977) is a remarkable account of his close friend, a fellow artist with whom he had travelled and studied overseas. Duerden has treated his subject's denim shirt and cap in a typically bold manner that rhymes with his hands-on-hips pose. Jones is caught between two other images, a female nude and half a carved mask in bright green and blue. Duerden has treated both with a degree of energy which suggests that they are intended to be emblematic of his friend's personality.

The surprisingly broad sensibility that Duerden brought to all his work is displayed in two more works in the University Collection. The first, *The Garden at Leighton* (nd), was donated by Cliff Jones. It shows a young woman with bright golden-red hair and dressed in a simple shift, seated in this garden with three well-observed and very lively cats. Beyond her is a fruit tree close to the red brick wall at the end of Duerden's backyard. It appears to have been espaliered because its branches radiate widely in a flat fan-like shape that fills the upper third of the canvas. The traces of their rhythmic lines across the canvas are marked by small green and golden semi-transparent marks. They form a flickering screen beyond which can be glimpsed the intense blue of the sea and the swirling purple sky. Duerden lived and worked for some years in a
George Duerden, Portrait of Cliff Jones (1977)
George Duerden, *Garden* (nd)

studio that formed part of a higgledy-piggledy group of ancient grey concrete and stone buildings on the coast near the Stirling Highway at Leighton. *The Garden at Leighton*, however, is equally redolent of Pre-Raphaelite London. Its arch-like frame takes a form that was popular with the Pre-Raphaelites. The woman in the garden could almost be Millais' *Ophelia*. Duerden's technique, however, remains loose and energetic. The warm glow of sunlight on the red wall to the right is rendered in scumbled strokes of scarlet over pink. The paint was pushed over the surface until it became as dry as dust.

*Garden* (nd) is a view from the bottom of a different kind of garden, a memory perhaps, from the UK: a view of a hillside covered with grubby, two and three storey houses, semi-camouflaged with ochre-stained whitewash. The houses have been put together from curved brushstrokes. The roads and lanes that connect them have the organic logic of tree roots, not the disciplined relationship ordained by the surveyor.

In *Garden*, Duerden's surprisingly extensive, but disciplined palette produces a brilliant range of cool and warm grey, from brown mud to blue-tinted, rain-bearing cloud. Surely this is an early memory, a walk through the streets of one's remembered childhood. Each house is locked into an imagined relationship. The entire canvas, houses, gardens and sky, sway as though the image of the hillside is reflected in a wind-blown silver puddle.

Some artists who grew up in Western Australia and were trained here occasionally rivalled Duerden's freedom of outlook. One such was Ian Wroth (1927–2003). Wroth was a much-loved teacher at Perth Tech and a highly skilled and
George Duerden, The Garden at Leighton (1977)
Ian Wroth, *Rondo* (1975)

talented watercolorist in the traditional representative manner. He also pursued a long sequence of experimental modernist paintings. His *Rondo* (1975), was originally purchased for the Graylands collection. It is a threnody of reds and ochres. Wroth’s watercolour practice has helped provide the sources to shape the colours without reducing them to a flat pattern of planes. They hang in the moment like flames.²⁰

Wroth rarely showed his abstract work until his retirement. He felt that he might risk losing his job or otherwise be made to regret it. It seems that until recently, change in style and attitude in Western Australian art has come either from artists who lived overseas for long periods or from migrants. One important role of collections of art is to support those who wish to take up the full challenge of contemporary art with a storehouse of good examples.
Ceramics Collection

A small group of important ceramics can be found in the collection, including Paul Greenaway’s *She wears her heart on her sleeve* (1981), a good example of the influence of American West Coast Funk on Australian ceramics. Joan Campbell’s *Form Horizons* (1980) is typical of her use of organic forms redolent of the beach landscape near Fremantle and its flora. Milton Moon’s *Vase* (1979) testifies to the potter’s commitment to the aesthetics of Japanese ceramics and his own exquisite control of rustic form, surface and glaze.
Several works by artists of national significance from the Eastern States, including Arthur Boyd, Sydney Nolan, Brett Whiteley and Fred Williams, were acquired in the 1970s.
In Western Australia, art has nearly always followed its own path, virtually unaffected by events in the Eastern States. Indeed European and American examples have been far more influential here than say the work of artists from Melbourne. Nonetheless there is, and has been, a constant drain of many of this state’s best artists to the Eastern States, very few of whom return. It is difficult to assign a particular cause to this situation. The high-minded Ruskinian attitudes to art in vogue in Perth at the time of the origins of the Art Gallery of Western Australia and other public institutions here, were perceived to be very different to the pleasure seeking motives behind the foundation of the National Gallery of Victoria three decades earlier.

The tyranny of distance also played its role. In the 1930s, Charles Lemon, then the art critic of *The West Australian*, was moved to protest that the National Academy then being formed by Mr Menzies and his friend J.S. McDonald had not seen fit to invite a single artist member from Western Australia. More generally the ‘Eastern States’ have chosen to believe and still believe that artists from Western Australia have made little or no contribution to the history of art in Australia.\(^1\)

Despite this the Collection contains a small group of works by the great masters of the Eastern States’ post-war generations: Nolan, Boyd, Blackman, Lloyd Rees, Olsen, Whiteley and Williams. These were mainly acquired as result of good fortune and energetic buying. Various collections seized the moment when the proverbial window of opportunity was briefly open. It goes without saying that the Collection will never be able to afford such important works again. Magnificent as they are, they sit uneasily in the Collection like jewels in an ill-fitting crown. Their presence, nonetheless, holds out the possibility that the long-postponed artistic dialogue between east and west might be initiated from this Collection.

The most significant work in the Collection, *St John in the Desert* (1951), is by Sidney Nolan (1917-1992), made shortly after his success with several series of paintings in a naive style that dealt with iconic Australian legends, notably Ned Kelly. It was purchased from the Blue Boy Galleries, Melbourne, in 1979.\(^2\)

In 1950, Nolan travelled and studied throughout Europe, including Italy, Greece, and North Africa. He then settled in London, where he began painting in a more mature, slightly figurative, abstract style. *St John in the Desert* is one of the first works in which Nolan responded to his experience of Europe. His encounter with the desert fathers also allowed him to engage the cultural diversity of Europe whilst still making use of the motifs he developed to portray the epic and legendary qualities of Australian outback experience.\(^3\)

For instance the extraordinary rocky hills in the landscape, defined by sharp edges of dark shadow and scrubbed translucent textures can be found in *The MacDonnell Ranges* (1949), and the last paintings of inland Australia that Nolan made in 1950 before his departure. The angel in flight above St John resembles the parrot in *Pretty Polly Mine* (1948), both in its emphatic mass and in its place in the composition. There is also something of the Siennese trecento, Ambrogio Lorenzetti, and the international gothic about the form and placement of the small chapel to the left. *St John in the Desert* is therefore a highly significant work as it marks the beginning of Nolan’s engagement with the European heritage.

There are several other works by Nolan in the University Collection but none with the power and subtlety of *St John in the Desert*. In 1962-1963 Nolan travelled to North Africa in the footsteps of Rimbaud. His *African Landscape* (1963) was originally in the collection of his long-term friend Lord Alastair McAlpine. It is a record of the edge of a lake or riverbank made with broad strokes of intense acid colours. Sickly golden-yellow and viral-scarlet lines pick out the far bank against dark brown shadows that bloom softly in brilliant stormy light. Nolan has charged this empty space with oppressive heat and possible danger for the creatures who may choose to drink there at this very hour.

The two versions of *Rooster and Oedipus* (1975) in the Collection are equally unusual. They were also previously in the collection of Alastair McAlpine. Both show the eyeless head of Oedipus and a distant pyramid, allusions to the Oedipus legend, and also a rooster under the blazing white heat of a desert sky. The connection between them is that
both Oedipus and the rooster have been interpreted as symbols of resurrection, one in a pagan, the other in a Christian context. This relationship was very important for Nolan throughout the 1950s.

It has also been suggested that the rooster is a symbol of betrayal and Oedipus was betrayed by the fates. In both works Nolan juxtaposes the images of man and bird so as to force an ironic connection between the acutely observed behaviour of the animal and the stone-like inanimate quality of the face, for surely human life should always be the more animate. In Rooster and Oedipus I, the sky is visible through the empty eye sockets of the horizontal head which intensifies its monumental immobility. Nolan had used a similar means of de-centering the human image in the first Ned Kelly series where blue sky can occasionally be seen through the slit in Kelly’s helmet. The horizontal head was probably suggested by the sight of ruined monumental sculpture in North Africa.

Nolan’s engagement with Europe was very different to that of Guy Grey-Smith or Robert Juniper, discussed in the last chapter. Nolan brought a set of problems, a creative system formed in Australia from Australian experience, to Europe and allowed his art as a whole to grow through this encounter. Juniper’s encounter with European modernity was more about retooling his resources to deal with the same issues that Western Australian experience had posed from the 1930s. Grey-Smith’s art was dominated by his commitment to an inner vision that was linked to the living landscape by paint. For him also the examples of modernity, in his case of Matisse and De Stael, were no more than helpful hints to this end.

The work of Charles Blackman (b.1928) points to a very different understanding of modernism. In the post-war years, Blackman received the support and patronage of Melbourne lawyer John Reed who promoted his work in Melbourne. Like Nolan, he was one of the group of Australian artists whose work was promoted in the Whitechapel and Tate Gallery exhibitions in London (1961–1962). From early in his career, however, he was committed to contemporary suburban imagery, not iconic legends. His most important subject matter arose from the notorious murder of a schoolgirl in Melbourne in 1921. From 1951 to 1953 he painted a series showing uniformed schoolgirls, often outside corner shops or walking home after school. From this time the schoolgirl, later the figure of Alice, became Blackman’s central theme. There are two paintings of schoolgirls from the 1960s in the University Collection.
Sidney Nolan, *Rooster and Oedipus* (1975)
School Girls (1962), originally from the Claremont Teacher's College collection, shows a whirling scrum of schoolgirl figures in dark blue shadow against a sinister bright blue background. Only one face is visible, presented in the profile that is typical of Blackman's work, halfway between Picasso's portraits and the cartoon faces that Blackman encountered in his early newspaper work. The other faces are masked by shadow in a manner that suggests that they are slipping into darkness and death, as do the arms to the right which hang down limp and useless. An acute psychological calculus underpins the apparent simplicity of Blackman's means. There are always intimations of mortality in children's games.

The second painting, Bus Stop (1964), was bought by the Churchlands collection directly from the Rudy Komon Gallery in Melbourne. It shows a schoolgirl in a white dress, arms raised over her head in balletic gesture as she leans to the left against the bench of a bus stop. This pose might be no more than an innocent rehearsal of life to come but is also capable of being seen as provocative. Certainly the young girl is at risk, seated as she is between the grey headless male figure to the right and the large dark silhouette which looms to the left. Blackman has made certain that this shape is much more than simple emptiness by allowing the ribbed corrugations of the bus shelter to invade it on the right. It is a shape-shifting presence from which danger may strike at any moment.

Some authorities have also identified Blackman's work with the poetry of John Shaw Neilson (1872-1942), who became widely known in the late 1930s. His poem 'Schoolgirls Hastening' (1922) serves as a reminder that Blackman's work is more complex in motivation than is often realised.
Fear it has faded and the night:
The bells all peal the hour of nine:
The schoolgirls hastening through the light
Touch the unknowable Divine.
What leavening in my heart would bide!
Full dreams a thousand deep are there:
All luminants succumb beside
The unbound melody of hair.
Joy the long timorous takes the flute:
Valiant with colour songs are born:
Love the impatient absolute
Lives as a Saviour in the morn
Get thou behind me Shadow-Death!
Oh ye Eternities delay!
Morning is with me and the breath
Of schoolgirls hastening down the way.
This symbolic dimension of his work links Blackman more closely to Nolan and especially to Arthur Boyd (1920-1999), the other great beneficiary of John Reed and his salon at Heide near Melbourne. Boyd was the most diverse, prolific and generous of the great post-war generation of artists. The Collection includes three of his works, all from 1975. Boyd lived in Australia for a considerable period of time in the 1970s, first at Bundanon, then from 1975 on a property called Riversdale in New South Wales. He became fascinated by a magnificent view of the Shoalhaven River which became the leitmotif that allowed him to consolidate the themes and imagery of his previous forty years' work.

The first of the three, Potter's Wife (1975), was acquired from an exhibition at the Skinner Galleries in that year. The title is a reference to Boyd’s mother Doris, who helped his potter father Merric with the production and sale of his work and who was an accomplished artist in her own right, as David Boyd recalled:

From the first year of marriage, Doris worked closely with Merric, sharing the decoration of his pots. She helped Merric sell them at city stores like Mair and Lyne, Georges, the Mutual Stores, The Primrose Pottery Shop and Lily Ronald’s florist shop, and gave him a great deal of support when he was firing his kiln.... They kept an open house which became a regular venue for many artists of the period.

There were parties and gatherings and so on; it was all very nice and friendly. Max Nicholson, the Langleys, the Coutts, Sid Nolan, Charlie and Barbara Blackman, and Tim and Betty Burstall would come over. I think Josl Bergner was still in Melbourne at that time. There’d be 50 people or more in the brown room. Maybe I’d be playing piano and people would be dancing around, maybe smaller groups would be discussing something to do with the arts or literature or politics, anything.

Doris died in 1960. In the mid-sixties Boyd used the title Potter’s Wife in relation to a sunny, memory painting of her in the garden with a dog. There is a similarly abbreviated, highly energetic dog in the lower right hand corner of this very different painting. It shows a woman driving a horse along the river shore at twilight. The orange rose glint of the sun is shifting into purple shade. One star has appeared in the sky. Its reflection gleams from the water’s edge just in front of the horse, as it raises its head to the universe. One suspects a reminiscence of Turner’s Morning Star. Woman, cart and horse are modelled in a muted silhouette, whose enfolded greys vary enough to suggest energetic movement against a brilliantly modulated strip of water, as it catches the very last of the light. On the opposite bank the familiar tree-covered hills of Shoalhaven merge into a single warm shade.

Boyd made a number of images on this theme. No doubt Potter’s Wife is an allegory of the death of his mother. It is filled with symbols of the dying of the light, a resonant and unique mythology which closely coexists with Boyd’s long-term preoccupation with the themes of human struggle and destiny in the Australian landscape. There is, however, no rage in this dying, only a sense of wonder at the vast mysterious world which surrounds all humanity from birth to death.

Until his death, Boyd continued to draw on the banks of the Shoalhaven to support every aspect of his painting in its relation to experience, more particularly Australian experience and Australian painting. His Shoalhaven River Banks, Rocks & Falls (1975), acquired by the Churchlands collection from the Blue Boy Galleries, is a superbly sketched summary of a fundamental Australian
image, the waterfall plunging, unhindered, down a cleft in a rugged wall of rocks beneath a blue sky, life and death under a brilliant sun. The river towards which it flows, however, is deeply shaded, coloured from a dark verdigris to a central sinister greenish-yellow high spot, a fever creek, no place for bathers, which negates every last romantic association of the subject.

Boyd was fascinated by the rocky banks of the Shoalhaven of which he proved to be a masterly interpreter. The interplay of light, shade and the manifest geological structure of the rock face has attracted many painters. Boyd’s later paintings of this subject suggest a strong influence from Cézanne, especially the French master’s use of dark brushstrokes synonymous with the shadows and the structure of their subject. In Shoalhaven River Banks, Rocks & Falls, however, Boyd was referring far more directly to an Australian painter, Arthur Streeton, with whom he had, somewhat involuntarily, shared the Australian exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1958. His friend Alan McCulloch, then critic of The Melbourne Herald commented:

How is Australia to be represented? By landscapes of the late Arthur Streeton, presumably representing the past, and the landscapes of Arthur Boyd, representing the present. We are to appear, it seems, like a geographical magazine, as propagandists of our native scenery.

Boyd is still battling out this dilemma in Shoalhaven River Banks, Rocks & Falls. He is plainly concerned with the tragic, romantic view of the Australian landscape which animates Streeton’s Fire’s On! (1891), which was shown in Venice alongside Boyd’s work in 1958. By 1975, however, Boyd wanted to move beyond this to a broader, more mythological vision, not to escape the Australian qualities of his work but to secure them ever more firmly in his own style and technique, free of all colonial duties. This desire is expressed in his manifest struggle with the ways in which the rock face in Shoalhaven River Banks, Rocks & Falls is to be represented.

Floods (1975), the remaining painting by Boyd in the Collection was also purchased from the Skinner Galleries in 1975, but on this occasion by Claremont Teachers’ College. It shows the bloated brown body of a cow, drifting, legs in the air, in the turbulent muddied waters of the Shoalhaven. Beyond them, the wooded hillside is dissolving into a purple and ochre mist with a few dark commas of dry paint to mark the crowns of taller trees as they break beyond the mist line. The peak of Pulpit Rock lurches above them, curiously animated as if Boyd were once again remembering Turner, in this case his Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus, with its blinded giant looming over a headland.

A strange biplane-like creature, delineated in translucent, smeared white paint appears to swoop down towards the prostrate floating corpse. It has a propellor, the head of a pilot with goggles and perhaps wheels, though they have the presence and poise of dragonfly legs. Indeed, the posture of this ‘creature’, and a number of details such as the transformation of the rotary engine into a form of jointed thorax suggests a predatory insect, like those that would hover over the waters of Shoalhaven.

This sinister form first appeared, with a number of other inventions, in the work which emerged from his creative fellowship at the Australian National University in 1972. It can be seen, crashed, in Rocky Landscape with Two Figures (1973) in the National Gallery of Australia, where it interrupts two lovers hiding behind a rock in a manner reminiscent of Boyd’s version of Adam and Eve. Some commentators have suggested that its form is based on the windmills that occasionally appear in Boyd’s works. They point to the struts of

Opposite: Arthur Boyd, Shoalhaven River Banks, Rocks & Falls (1975)