

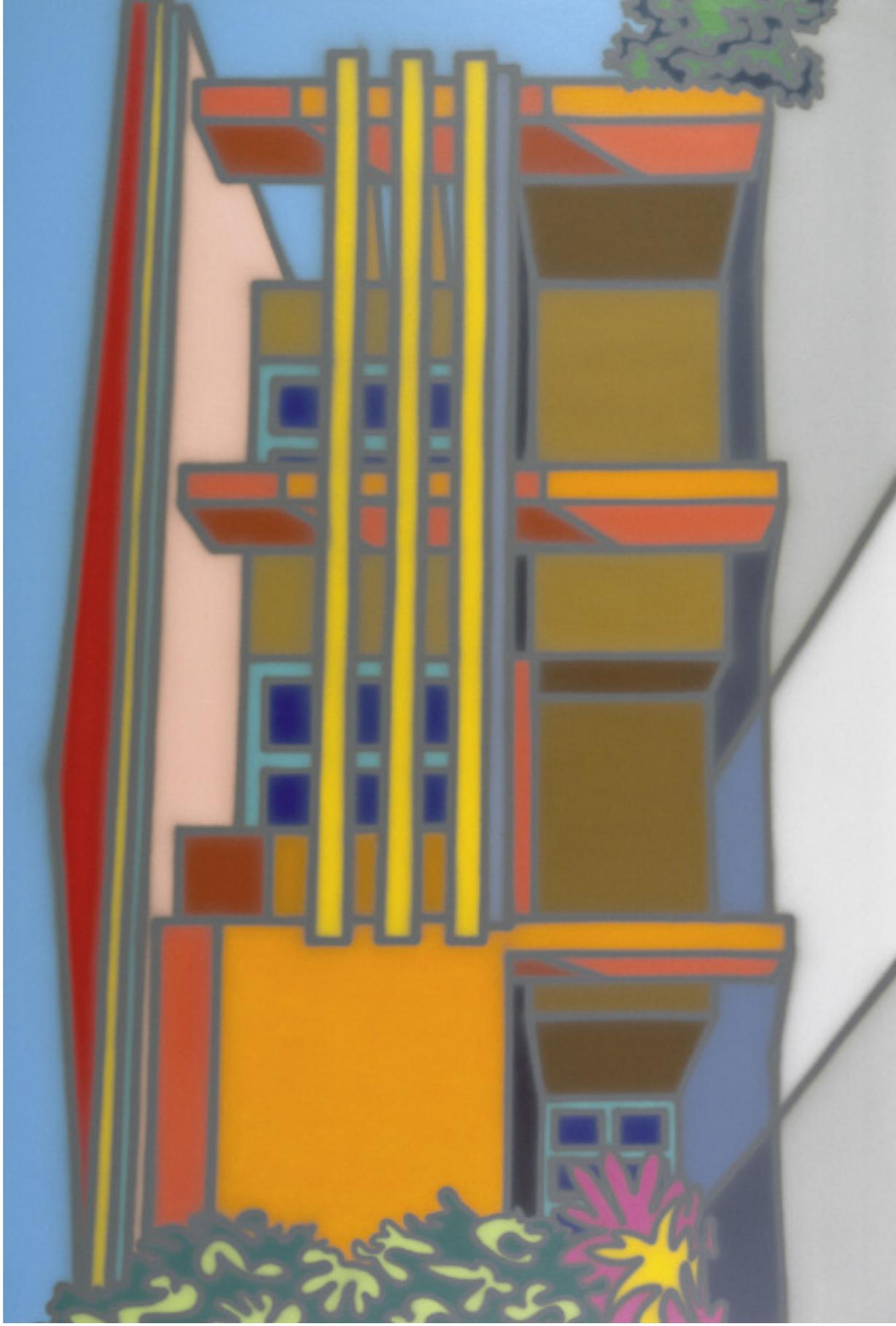
# EDUCATION COLLECTION NOTES

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# HOWARD ARKLEY SUPERB + SOLID





**HOWARD ARKLEY**  
AUSTRALIA 1951-99

**SUPERB + SOLID** 1998  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
200 x 300.6 cm

Contemporary Collection Benefactors' Program 1998  
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Howard Arkley was born in Melbourne. After seeing an exhibition of Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly series when he was a teenager, he realised it was possible to have a professional career as an artist. The next day he began painting. He loved art and doodled constantly, even manically, over every surface that came to hand. That intensity stayed with Arkley all his life.

After going to art school he won a scholarship to Europe and the United States. His interest in Art Nouveau and Art Deco doorways began when photographing in Paris. Shortly after his return, while waiting for his mother to answer her doorbell, Arkley found himself focussing on the ornate patterning on her fly-wire door. The aluminium grill and mesh were to inspire many of his later abstract paintings. He then began to photograph streets of these flywire screens, and the kinds of mass-produced fake-Modernist patternings to be found on garage doors, couch fabrics, and wallpaper in the suburban homes many of us have grown up in.

Excepting John Brack and Barry Humphries, suburbia has by and large stayed invisible to most artists who gravitated to, and thrived in, the city's mean streets. To be modern was to be urban, metropolitan. Or else artists took off for the bush, like Fred Williams, to paint those wonderful rural landscapes. Or to the desert, like Drysdale and Nolan. The spread of suburbia into the countryside after the housing shortage of the wars was an unmistakable fact of life in Australia. The suburbs were popular and people wanted to move there because of the space. But the effects of 1950s suburban conformity fermented in the psyche of everyone who inhabited those endless stretches of fibro, Laminex and cement boxes. On television when they replay the period, it appears to be a remote, languid time, pre-psychological even, and looks as if shot on some overchlorinated film. A time when women spoke into heavy Bakelite telephones and played records at 75 r.p.m.

But there was an isolation there that would have driven Robinson Crusoe mad. So how does an artist learn to stop worrying and love the 'burbs? As Gertrude Stein said of suburban Oakland in California: "there's no there there". Except that in Australia it was the cities that tended to empty out when the commuters left after 5pm. What was the reality behind the triple-fronted brick veneer walls and the curtains as still as stone columns? What truths lay underneath the fantasy of *Better Homes & Gardens*? Was it childhood boredom, marital tension, parental anxiety, Mum providing 450,000 meals as regular as clockwork that left failed nerves like joists eaten by termites?

Capping a trend that had been percolating for most of the 1970s those artists who saw the suburbs as 'landscape' saw the strangeness – even the Otherness – of this Australian heartland. Some were condescending and some were accepting; some were driven by genuine love and some were spooked by alienation. But slowly the norms of Australian life seemed interestingly exotic. While pop art took over consumer products and media icons, the suburbs were to become the unlikely landscape of moral forces that our artists celebrated with either an exaggerated, shadowless clarity (as in Arkley or Scott Redford), or with the most sinister of twilight

(as in Tracey Moffatt, Bill Henson and Juan Davila).

Beginning as an abstract painter in the 1970s, then a figurative painter in the 1980s, Howard Arkley reconciled these two tendencies in his distinctive take on the suburban motif. Arkley embraced it, when 'serious' designers ignored suburbia. He continued to collect out-of-register colour pages from outdated magazines, or lovingly ponder different ways of rendering woodgrain surfaces or rug designs with his reverberating optical and zinging air-brush.

With his spray-gun technique Arkley developed different styles or motifs: iridescent grids of dots that seemed to look like a cross between old computer print-outs and disco lights. Arkley even painted these buzzing dots on a suburban Melbourne tram in 1980.

During Arkley's punk phase the artist developed a decorative graffiti style with a black graphic line that had a cover-the-earth intensity, and resembled a cartoon version of tattooing. (See *Primitive*, a monumental 1.5 x 5.6 metre work made in 1982).

In his 1983 '*Urban paintings*' exhibition, at Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne, he began his first domestic interior paintings (*Suburban interior*). The black sprayed line is replaced by luminescent colours, and Arkley evolves more sophisticated effects of shading and stencilling techniques. Sometimes real wallpaper was used.

By 1987 and 1988 he focused on the external appearance of brick veneer (*Suburban exterior*). Starting off with preliminary rapidograph drawings – sourced from outmoded photos from glossy magazines or real-estate brochures – Arkley would outline the composition of exterior or interior, and then project the crisply defined drawing directly onto the canvas, and paint the broader areas in flat colour. Later smaller cut-outs or stencils were taped onto the canvas, suggestive of textures and patterns, and these were integrated into the overall picture.

The trick from here on was to balance lightness with the oppressive density of the visual data. Here is Arkley himself: "Ordinary houses are full of pattern. You go into a house, there's no art ...but it's filled with a kind of second degree imagery – the patterning around the fireplace, on the curtains, in the carpet; and the different bricks on the different houses, and the pattern between the gutter and the nature-strip, the footpath, then you have the fence, then you have the lawn, the house, the tiles, then you have the beautiful sky ... and I missed the bushes in between ... it's rich."

Then the air-brushed line with its fuzzy, dreamlike quality, and its tonal after-effects, would stylise the final look of the painting. The results were always exuberant: "I like the fact that the imagery looks like it's printed; it looks like a *reproduction* of painting, rather than a painting."

Howard Arkley's signature style was this combination of the sharp after-spray black outline and the zinging hazy effect of the air-brush. You can see it in *Superb + solid* the work in the Gallery's collection. The title itself comes from the real-estate huckster's wishful lexicon evoking middle-class status-anxieties as well as its worries about

insecurity and unpredictability. As you try and take in the whole glowing radioactive picture your eye keeps shifting focus: there is suburban neatness – the sharp yellow horizontals and orange day-glo verticals of this modernist family dwelling – mixed with a draining heatwave blur; the literal 'solid' norm is subverted by the floating sense of the psychedelic; so even as you try and keep them apart, the deadpan ordinary becomes one with the incandescent exotic.

There was a hip generosity to Howard Arkley's celebration of suburbia. He delivered a democratic vision in these paintings: a creative way of turning boring real-estate into something like magical unreal-estate.

Two days after the 1999 Venice Biennale, where he exhibited *The Home Show* to world-wide acclaim, Arkley was found dead in his Melbourne studio from a drug overdose.

**George Alexander**

Coordinator of Contemporary Programs

## SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

### Books

- Crawford, A. Edgar, R. *Spray: The work of Howard Arkley* Craftsman House, Sydney 1997
- Gregory, J. *Carnival in suburbia: The art of Howard Arkley*, Cambridge University Press 2006
- McAuliffe, C. *Art and suburbia*, Craftsman House, Sydney 1996
- Preston, E. *Not just a suburban boy*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney 2002
- AGNSW Education Kits  
*Aspects of Australian Art* Sydney, reprinted 2004

### Exhibition Catalogues

- Szeeman, H. Liveriero Lavelli, L. *La Biennale di Venezia: 48a Esposizione internazionale d'arte: Dapertutto = Aperto over all* La Biennale di Venezia Marsilio 1999
- O'Connell, S (essay). *Fabricated rooms* AGNSW contemporary projects Art Gallery of New South Wales 1997
- Sayers, A. (essay) *Howard Arkley Black + White 20 years, work on paper and canvas* Tolarno Galleries 1995

For further resources, information and programs related to Howard Arkley and his work see also:

Art Gallery of New South Wales collection search  
[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection)

• National Gallery of Victoria  
<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/>

• Case Study: Howard Arkley  
<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/secondary/creativearts/assets/visualarts/pdf/vas6casestudies.pdf>

## ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

- The title of this work *Superb + solid* is based on the language used in real-estate advertising. Outline how this title may contribute to an audience's physical and conceptual encounter with the work? Collect real estate advertising blurbs. Discuss the language that is used and decode what the words actually mean. Select 5 key words and develop a collage of new suburban home based on them.
- Write a real-estate advertisement for *Superb + solid*. Compare this to the description used in the exhibition catalogue. Analyse these two texts and discuss how specialist languages can target different audiences. Debate whether both texts might actually be saying the same things in different ways.
- Analyse the use of colour and scale in *Superb + solid*. Examine Arkley's practice and discuss the way he has developed particular motifs and styles in his work. Assess and describe the effects Arkley has achieved by using the air brush as a key technique in his painting.
- In *Superb + solid* Arkley has depicted what might be regarded as a typical Australian suburban house. Can the familiarity of the subject matter enhance or detract from an audiences understanding of the artists intentions. Research the work of contemporary artists who have addressed the suburb as a source of inspiration and compare their approach with that of Arkley.
- Examine Arkley's visual language and its relationship to popular culture and the mass media. Compare Arkley's images of Australian suburbia to those produced in magazines and television. Discuss the influence these other media forms may have on the way Arkley produces his paintings and conceives of his subject. Debate whether Arkley's vision of the Australian suburbia is a celebration or a criticism.

### Acknowledgments

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