

Tackling THE FIELD



Art Gallery of NSW
5 September – 29 November 2009

Tackling *The Field*

Natalie Wilson

The Event

It was billed as *the* gala occasion of 1968, if not the decade. The lavish and much anticipated opening of the magnificently re-sited National Gallery of Victoria was held on the brisk winter evening of Tuesday, 20 August that year. The new building on St Kilda Road – the first phase of the \$20 million Victorian Arts Centre complex – boasted a collection valued over \$25 million, with its most valuable paintings, including works by Rembrandt, Tiepolo and Cézanne, acquired through the magnanimous bequest of industrialist Alfred Felton. In the towering Great Hall, intended for State receptions and banquets, the multi-hued glass ceiling by the Melbourne artist Leonard French – one of the world’s largest pieces of suspended stained glass – shimmered with radiant flashes of brilliant colour. As Evan Williams reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* the following day, ‘with a candle-lit banquet, special exhibitions and seminars, a symphony concert, a trumpet fanfare composed for the occasion, it is some opening’.¹

However, it was the unveiling of the new temporary exhibition gallery a night later, on 21 August, which really set the hearts of the art world racing. In a coup for the city of Melbourne, the director of London’s prestigious Tate Gallery, Norman Reid, was in attendance to officially open the inaugural exhibition of the new gallery before 1000 distinguished guests. The space was a triumph in modern design with its soaring ceilings, geometric space-age lighting and silver-foil walls, providing the ideal space for the seventy-four paintings and sculptures by forty Australian artists which comprised the exhibition *The Field*.

Perhaps it would have been apposite to have titled the exhibition *The Ring*, not in reference to Wagner’s epic operatic cycle but to the combat sport, where the Marquess of Queensberry rules could have equally applied. In that turbulent decade of the Swinging Sixties – especially in the volatile arena of art criticism – the gloves were definitely off. After the champagne glasses were cleared away and the last guests had departed, dissent



The Field, National Gallery of Victoria, 1968

Left to right: on floor, Nigel Lendon *Slab construction 11*; Eric Shirley *Encore*; Tony McGillick *Polaris*; Vernon Treweeke *Ultrascope 5*; Col Jordan *Daedalus series 6* and on floor *Knossus II*; Dick Watkins *October*; Robert Rooney *Kind-hearted kitchen-garden IV*. AGNSW Archives: image from *The Bulletin*, 12 Oct 1968

amongst Australian art critics about the controversial new exhibition began to spill out onto the pages of *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Melbourne’s *Herald*, *The Bulletin* and *The Australian* in a flurry of reviews, exposés and editorials.² So, what was the fracas all about? What had so rattled the cages of the general public, artists and critics alike? The answer is not straightforward and requires a broad understanding of events and the state of play in the Australian and international art world in the decade leading up to *The Field*. This might best be tackled by first examining the exhibition itself: its curatorial concept, predecessors, and, of course, its participating artists.

The line up

The brainchild of the National Gallery of Victoria's exhibition officer, John Stringer – in collaboration with the curator of Australian art, Brian Finemore – *The Field* was intended to be the first of a series of exhibitions for the new gallery devoted to specific and up-to-the-minute developments in Australian art. The new trends were to include artists working in a figurative mode and those who were 'working in a more or less flat, abstract pattern, geometric, colour field direction', with the intention 'to define a whole direction in Australian art that had never been explored before'.³ Stringer held that so-called 'directional' or 'thematic' shows had been a regular part of the exhibitions program of the NGV dating back to the survey shows organised by Leonard French during the late 1950s, when he was employed as exhibition officer.⁴ *The Field*, as the inaugural show for the new gallery, was to satisfy the Victorian Premier's request for an exhibition of contemporary Australian art.⁵

In a memorandum to Eric Westbrook, director of the NGV, in February 1968, John Stringer indicated that he hoped this as yet unnamed display would also travel outside Australia, with possible venues in Japan, New Zealand and the West Coast of America, thereby cementing Australia's cultural relevance on the international stage.⁶ The aim of the exhibition was 'to define a particular international direction which has become apparent in the work of younger Australian artists (at home and abroad)' and which would isolate 'the stylistic tendencies of "Hard Edge", "Colour field", "Conceptual Abstraction", "Minimal", "Pattern", "Geometric" and "Deductive Structure"'. Stringer stressed that the exhibition was conceived 'as only the first in a series of documentary exhibitions which would attempt, in time, to cover all areas of current artistic activity' pointing out that 'directional exhibitions of this type are not rare overseas,

The Field, National Gallery of Victoria, 1968

Left wall: Vernon Treweweke *Ultrascope 6*. On floor: Tony Coleing *Untitled*. Right wall: Rollin Schlicht *Dempsey*. Far end: Normana Wight *Untitled*

Left to right: Peter Booth *Untitled painting*; Col Jordan *Daedalus series 6*; Ian Burn *Mirror piece*; Alan Leach Jones *Noumenon xix Indian Summer*; Normana Wight *Untitled*. On floor: Tony Bishop *Short and curvy*

Left to right: Col Jordan *Daedalus series 5*. On floor: Col Jordan *Knossus II*; Eric Shirley *Encore*; Alan Leach Jones *Noumenon XX first light*; Harald Noritis *Come away*; James Doolin *Artificial landscape 68-1*; James Doolin *Artificial landscape 67-6*. On floor: Tony Coling *Untitled*

Left to right: Paul Partos *Vesta II*; Paul Partos *Orpheus*; Alan Oldfield *Mezzanine*

Photographs courtesy National Gallery of Victoria



but in Australia embarking on such a project may be regarded as pioneering'.⁷

Stringer emphasised the importance of procuring works for the exhibition that embraced not only artists working in the major cities of Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, but also those working abroad in the art capitals of Europe, England and America.⁸ These included, for example, Ron Robertson-Swann, Michael Johnson, Clement Meadmore, Ian Burn, Mel Ramsden and James Doolin. Both Ramsden and Doolin had lived and worked in Australia in the period leading up to *The Field*, but both had left the country by the time the exhibition opened, Doolin returning to America and the English-born Ramsden moving to New York in 1967. Stringer was also in tune with current trends as shown in commercial galleries (and the more altruistic galleries, such as Central Street Gallery) in both Melbourne and Sydney, which had opened during the mid-1960s, and actively sought paintings and sculptural pieces for inclusion in *The Field* by artists exhibiting with these new galleries.⁹

In all, work by forty artists was to be included in *The Field*, with most of them represented by two and often three works. The youngest artist, Robert Hunter, was only 21, the oldest, Michael Nicholson, 52, and of the forty chosen, at least sixteen were under the age of 30. It was this skew to the under-30s which critics and older, established artists resented and ridiculed, believing that serious art could only be achieved through blood, sweat and tears, and that the inexperienced, who hadn't 'suffered' for their art, were achieving success far too easily. The only possible reason for the inclusion of such a young group of artists they held, was to give 'the new gallery a "young look" and [provide] a maximum of entertainment value'.¹⁰

But Stringer's main aim was to break away from previous exhibition models, typified by exhibitions such as *Contemporary Australian painting* (1957), *Recent Australian painting* (1961), *Australian painting today: a survey of the past ten years* (1962), and *Australian painters 1964–1966* (1967), which he felt were 'repetitive and after a few years quite indistinguishable from one another'.¹¹ Perhaps the largest contributing factor that led Stringer to make such a radical departure from prior surveys, was a nine-month reconnaissance visit to Europe and America in 1963 to look 'at gallery design in connection with the new building which was being planned for us, and also just to familiarize myself generally with the operation of galleries and with the collections that the great galleries possess'.¹²



David Aspden *Outer spice* 1969
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 152.4 x 244 x 2.8 cm
Purchased with funds provided by an anonymous purchase fund for contemporary Australian art 1970

During 1963–64 there were a large number of exhibitions in England, Europe and the United States addressing contemporary painting that had its genesis in America, and these may have influenced Stringer's concept for *The Field*. The most likely was *Post Painterly Abstraction*, held in Los Angeles early in 1964.¹³ Certainly, the terminology which Stringer was using early in 1968 to explain the approach of the artists he had selected for inclusion in *The Field*, indicates that he was well versed in the discourse of the early to mid 1960s, which centred largely on the concepts offered by American art theorists Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Greenberg asserted that narrative expression in painting should be replaced entirely by the 'pure' *formal* elements of painting; in particular openness, linear clarity of design, and high-keyed, even-valued colour, as exemplified in the paintings of Morris Louis, Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland, signifying the natural progression of the formal history of art. For Fried, however, the *subjective* experience of a work of art was paramount, and this, in turn, eventually led to the complete dematerialisation of art as 'object'.

The exhibition – so Stringer envisaged – would also be accompanied by a catalogue which would offer biographies and photographs of all the artists, illustrations of all works, with coloured reproductions where possible. The design, Stringer indicated, would be similar to the catalogue produced for the exhibition *Two decades of American painting*, organised by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the United States Information Service, and which had travelled to Sydney and Melbourne as part of its

1966–67 tour of Japan, India and Australia. And therein lay the thorny issue which piqued many of *The Field's* detractors. Why should painters and sculptors (and curators) from this country join ranks with the growing and seemingly all-consuming internationalist brigade which seemed to threaten the very identity of Australian art?

Was it so important to be seen to be keeping up with the Nolands, Rothkos or the Stellas for that matter? Could Australian art, by so doing, lose its hard-won 'national identity' so lauded in London through the work of Drysdale, Boyd and Nolan? What had happened to the supremacy of the art centres of England and Europe, now that it was recognised that America had become the inheritor of the modernist movement? How could the single element of colour which previously constituted just one of the elements of formal analysis in Western art – line, value, shape, space and texture – be the sole carrier of meaning and expression in a work of art? And, most importantly, what was the future of painting and the artist, in light of the apparent removal, entirely, of subject matter, expression and the status of the work of art as an 'object'?

Historically, Australian art is awash with instances of the art establishment repelling the advances of foreign modes of artistic expression. We only need look at the furore created when Tom Roberts, Charles Conder and Arthur Streeton presented their *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* in Melbourne in 1888, or the era immediately prior to *The Field*, which was directly influenced by the leading abstract-expressionist painters of Europe and America. The middle generation of post-war artists, who had valiantly fought the battle between figurative and abstract expressionism, were collectively being dismissed as old hat and no longer the dominant force.¹⁴ Evidently this was a case of out with the old and in with the 'New Abstraction'.

As Tom Roberts had done in the 1880s, many of the young painters whose work was to be represented in *The Field*, had travelled and experienced, first hand, new developments taking place during the late 1950s and early 1960s, both in England and America. Of the six artists in this Focus Room display of works shown in the *The Field* exhibition – Doolin must be excluded as he came to Australia from New York and stayed for only two years – four had spent several years abroad during a formative period in their respective artistic careers.

Michael Johnson, who was part of a group of London-based artists working in Ladbrooke Grove, returned to

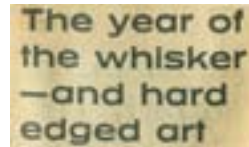
Sydney in 1967 after seven years abroad, where he had been exposed to historical and new developments in abstraction, both in European and American art, through exhibitions such as Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko. Johnson had moved towards a predominantly abstract expressionist mode prior to his London sojourn. However, his direct experience abroad generated a shift to geometric abstraction before his return to Australia. The painting *Chomp*, which was imported from England for *The Field*, was painted in 1966, a year prior to Johnson's repatriation and attests to his having arrived at an individual form of hard-edge abstraction, using a shaped canvas and incorporating broad fields of flat, unmodulated colour. Melbourne *Age* critic Patrick McCaughey noted in 1968, that both Michael Johnson and Ron Robertson-Swann (who had travelled to London in 1960 and studied under Anthony Caro and Phillip King before working as an assistant to Henry Moore), 'were formed as artists by and in London ... [and] discovered themselves as artists at the centre and not at the edges of 20th century art'.¹⁵ McCaughey refuted the derogatory terms of 'copyist' and 'band-wagon-jumper' aimed at many of *The Field* artists by ill-informed critics, by declaring 'they were educated by and into these movements and have belonged to them from the outset of their mature work'.¹⁶

The pundits

Of course, the influence on Australian art at the time, not only in the international art press but also through the resurrection of the seminal and influential *Art and Australia* in 1964, should not be underestimated. *Art International*, *Artforum* and *ARTnews* were all widely disseminated publications amongst artists, critics and students of art. A variety of articles with bold reproductions in colour of the 'new abstraction' and well-informed reports from the central furnace of current painting, sculpture, performance art, earth art, site-specific art and happenings, kept Australian audiences up-to-date; particularly in the arena of art criticism. *Art and Australia* was no exception. In its March 1966 issue, the Australian sculptor Clement Meadmore, now based in New York, contributed the article 'New York Scene II – Colour as an Idiom', with full-colour reproductions of paintings by Gene Davis, Barnett Newman, Jules Olitski, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland. Therefore, when *The Field* finally opened in Melbourne, the work which it presented already had its



INITIAL IMPACT IS
WHAT COUNTS...



The year of the whisker
—and hard
edged art



COOL ART,
HOT
CRITICISM

supporters and its detractors and Australian art critics were chomping at the bit.

Even before the exhibition opened, its most adverse critic in the months to follow, Alan McCulloch writing for Melbourne's *Herald* newspaper, had already censured the curators, the majority of the artists, and the National Gallery of Victoria, for its 'unfortunate choice for such an occasion'.¹⁷ McCulloch's main objections were that: the art did not reflect 'some aspect of the Australian environment'; the artists were 'gambling on the staying power of current international art fashions' (they were 'band-wagon-jumpers'); he believed the artists did not exude enough 'blood, sweat and tears' in their creations to be recognised as producers of serious art. In summary, he accused the National Gallery of Victoria of 'creating artificial standards of value', and condemned the 'selectors' as elevating the status of the artists unduly by allowing their work to be shown in such a hallowed arena as the state's major art institution and thereby fostering 'a new kind of hazard to national creativity'.¹⁸

Laurie Thomas, writing for *The Australian*, was not as judgmentally emotive in his evaluation, but he was nonetheless just as damning. Using Aristotle's example of deductive logic to pare down the essentials of Greenberg and Fried's theoretical rationale behind the 'new abstraction', he came to the conclusion that 'paintings and sculptures made out of theories are like logical deductions. What we want is the wonder, the magic and the joy, the sense of making'. Laurie Thomas also railed against the removal of subject matter in recent art, writing 'the Americans and their faithful followers have left us, and themselves, with something nice and cool like a logical deduction; but only occasionally anything resembling a work of art'.¹⁹

James Gleeson, despite his overall lack of enthusiasm for the art which had captured the attention of the public and critics alike, was perhaps most eloquent in assessing *The Field*. His overall conclusion was that, although upon first inspection the works could 'give great pleasure and delight' and 'have a very superior – and often quite original – sense of design', after repeated viewing, there

was 'nothing left to preserve one's interest'. 'The objects', he declared 'have been used up'.²⁰ Gleeson also took issue with the imposing scale of many of the works, stating 'in the long run, the authority which emanates from size alone is a fleeting and fictitious one'.

Gleeson, however, did acknowledge that new attitudes in art have always been met with a healthy blend of scepticism and enthusiastic acceptance, and that 'the swinging pendulum has become as constant and predictable as a metronome'. He observed that in the past decade alone, from the late Fifties until the appearance of *The Field*, 'the pendulum swung away from the subjective, emotional, violent, accidental and esoteric forms of abstract expressionism to pop art' and that 'in the mid-Sixties the pendulum has swung again – this time to the cool, cerebral, refined, controlled and esoteric forms which we try to define with such terms as post-painterly, hard-edged, op or minimal'.

The fact that this constant realignment still caused such indignation and heated discussion was what most astounded Gleeson for, he believed, 'what has happened to art is quite logical, necessary, inevitable and good ... As a form it is just one among dozens that have been thrown up by the ferment of the most rapidly changing times in history. It has a positive and salutary contribution to make'.²¹

Donald Brook, Patrick McCaughey, Elwyn Lynn and Daniel Thomas were all largely in favour of *The Field*, not only because their sympathies lay with new art being produced per se, but, like Gleeson, they also saw that there was a need for 'a new starting point in Australian art', and that rocking the boat when it came to establishment ideals would ensure a continuing vitality. McCaughey's response to the critical reaction to *The Field* is best summarised in his article 'The significance of *The Field*', published in *Art and Australia* in December 1968, through which he asserted that the overarching consequence of the exhibition was that it heralded a 'fresh enterprise' in Australian art, that in the future it might 'make its own contribution to the upbuilding and progress of the modernist tradition'.

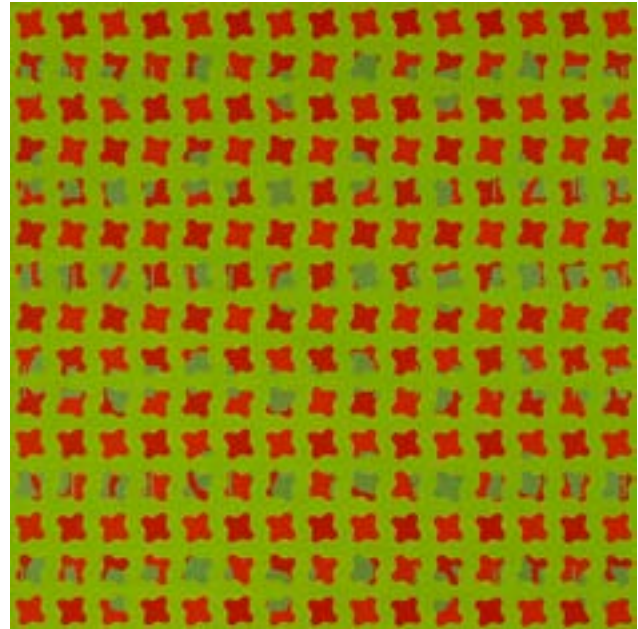
The contenders

This Focus Room comprises six paintings by six artists, all of which were originally included in *The Field*. These works represent a number of divergent tendencies embraced by Greenberg's 'post painterly abstraction' and are proof that the claims of the exhibition's detractors – most notably that there was a lack of variance within the 'movement' – were tenuous. From the tranquil expanse of pale blue in *Cool corner II* by John Peart, which through its natural associations of sky and sea acts to calm the viewer, to the vibrant explosion of colour which erupts from the surface of Dick Watkins' *October* and stimulates the senses, these six works explore aspects of Greenberg's formal criteria, without strictly complying with all of his tenets.

The paintings by Watkins, Doolin, Robertson-Swann and Johnson, each employ the stylistic variant referred to as 'hard edge', whereby abrupt transitions take place between colour areas, often along straight lines but also commonly – as in the case of Doolin and Watkins – through curvilinear edges of colour. The colour areas are largely unvarying and demonstrate a precise handling of materials and a meticulous surface with little or no evidence of the hand of the artist, contrary to the more painterly or gestural forms of abstract expressionism. In the case of Johnson, the colour transitions occur on each individual panel which abutts directly against another, creating concrete edges between the hues.

Works by Johnson, Partos, Peart and Robertson-Swann could all be grouped under the stylistic variant known as 'colour field', as the works all favour large, flat areas of colour, either stained, sprayed or brushed onto the canvas with little or no tactile quality, in direct contrast to the gestural mark making of the abstract expressionist and 'action' painters of the previous generation. Greenberg asserted that by dispelling a tactile surface 'colour is given more autonomy by being relieved of its localizing and denotative function'. 'Colour ...' Greenberg affirmed, 'no longer fills in or specifies an area or even a plane, but speaks for itself by dissolving all definiteness of shape and distance'. The requirements of colour were only 'to be warm colour, or cool colour infused with warmth ... to be uniform in hue, with only the subtlest variations of value if any at all, and spread over an absolutely, not merely relatively, large area'.²²

Colour was the prime element in Greenberg's conception of 'post painterly abstraction', with historical



Robert Rooney *Canine capers III* 1969
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4 cm
Purchased 1975

roots extending back through Matisse to Manet. Joseph Albers' series of paintings, *Homage to the square*, dating back to 1949, were also seen as precursors to the 'new abstraction'; the Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased a 1966 Albers from the exhibition *Two decades of American painting* in 1967.²³ In Australia, the colour-music experiments of Roland Wakelin and Roy de Maistre in 1919, and the pioneering abstract work of Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson of the 1930s–50s, were re-evaluated by the next generation of abstract painters. Balson's death in 1964, and ensuing 'memorial' exhibitions held at Gallery A (the agent for the artist's estate) in Sydney and Melbourne in July and August 1968, further raised awareness of the importance of his early exploration into abstractionist principles and his series of systematised abstract constructive paintings. The display of Balson's so-called 'Constructive' paintings from 1941–56 in the months leading up to the *The Field* affirmed an Australian historical precedent for the new wave of abstraction, with James Gleeson asserting that Balson's art was a 'springboard for much of the hard-edged abstraction and Op-art of today', and that 'Balson has now replaced Olsen as the young painters' father-figure'.²⁴ Whether Balson's art was directly instrumental to the development of the 'new abstraction' represented in *The Field*, must however be



Sydney Ball *Canto No. XXX* 1966
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 201.2 x 181 cm
On loan from the estate of Elwyn Lynn

counterbalanced with the fact that Patrick McCaughey's catalogue essay for the exhibition, which only cursorily cites the names of Balson, Robert Klippel and Roger Kemp as principal figures in the development of an abstract tradition in Australia.²⁵

The effect of flat, uniform colour was made possible largely with the advent of acrylic paints in the 1950s, initially as mineral-spirit based paints. Water-soluble, artist-quality acrylic paints became commercially available in the early 1960s and proved to be not only ideally suited for stain painting but also for spray painting, and can be best observed in Paul Partos' subtle gradations from deep blue to oxidized red in the painting *Vesta II*, and in the flat, even expanse of velvety brown in Michael Johnson's *Frontal 2*. Canvases in *The Field* were often left un-primed, as in Robertson-Swann's *Golden breach*, coated with three bold bands of colour which the canvas has absorbed into its structure, with two blank rectangular bands of raw canvas left at the top right and lower left corner anchoring the pulsating yellow and orange rectangles. Alternatively, the primed, crisp white surface used by Doolin in *Artificial landscape 68-1*, keeps the

carefully applied colours clean and vibrant and the edges of the semi-circular and rectangular shapes exact.

The paintings of Johnson and Partos both use the shaped canvas, which came into widespread practice during the early 1960s, with Barnett Newman credited as the 'father' of the shaped canvas.²⁶ However, the work of Frank Stella is acknowledged as the basis for Michael Fried's controversial theory of deductive structure, which held that 'not only were the stripes coincident with the shape of the canvas, they were deduced from it – "generated by the framing edge"²⁷. Writing for *ARTnews* in 1966, Elizabeth Baker maintained that, 'work of this kind has a sort of intrinsic physical excitement – stretching, straining, an often implausible material tension – and an implication of formal daring, in the wake of the entire modern tradition with its fanatical aversion to illusionist space and its insistence on painting as the affirmation of a flat surface...'

The shape of Partos' painting *Vesta II* stemmed largely from a practical need: in his desire to create large works he was required to make compact modules which could be pieced together once outside the confines of his small studio. Johnson's methodology of spray painting multiple, stretched lengths of canvas, with each individual panel having its own flat expanse of colour, was captured by David Moore's camera for Craig Macgregor's book *In the making*, published in 1969. Johnson's monumental *Frontal 2* relates to a series of works from this period with a similar structure. Consisting of a large central panel of colour with smaller, individual vertical and horizontal bands – black at the top and dark blue at the sides – the inner void is contained, but at the same time the sombre brown expanse spills outward and down, unrestrained by a lower controlling edge of colour until it hits the boundary between the object's tangible limit, and the wall. Peart's *Cool corner II*, with its subtly protruding diagonal structures at each of the four corners, creates clearly defined edges for the eye to rest on, after extended concentration on the unmodulated central surface. In the court adjacent to the Focus Room, the modular shaped canvas of Tony McGillick's *Jasper's gesture* presents another example of this hybrid of 'post painterly abstraction'.

One characteristic which all six works have in common is their scale. The significant size of the paintings lent a quality to the art object, which as one critic noted, meant that the 'field of the painting surface purposely engulfs the viewer in its world' representing a 'changed attitude towards scale as an element of composition', rather than

the simple imperative to fill a vast architectural space, as in the Baroque ceiling paintings of Mantegna and Tiepolo.²⁸ For Doolin the scale of his work represented his connection to the urban environment: 'paintings [became], in their own right, complete objects in which all space, all forms, all surfaces were real in their own right in addition to whatever reference they made to the landscape, so they became totally firsthand experiences, at least in my own mind'.²⁹ Partos declared: 'I was always concerned with scale, in my work, even in 1965. I was more involved in terms of getting a large area involving myself as well as the viewer, within a large area'.³⁰

One of the more intriguing aspects of these works is that a number of the artists unequivocally stated that their works were *about* something, and not the entirely self-referential 'objects' which Greenberg and, more importantly Fried, maintained. In 1968, John Peart declared that his paintings at the time were about himself, telling one journalist: 'I love music. I get a lot of ideas from music and nature. Ideas themselves stimulate me. These are all reflected in my work ... at least I hope they are ... Everything one does in art is an expression of oneself. Anything that influences one's life, influences one's work'.³¹

Writing in *Aspect*, Paul McGillick noted that Doolin's paintings of this period:

suggested both formal and conceptual possibilities. The two sets of Artificial Landscapes ... made explicit a crucial premise of modernist art: in a fundamental sense, the perceived object is itself a projection on the part of the viewer; traditional representational landscape painting, therefore, was no less an act of imagination than the 'artificial' and totally invented landscapes that Doolin was painting.³²

The group of Artificial Landscapes, McGillick added, 'suggested new subjects for painting ... [and] demonstrated that abstraction could retain its aesthetic integrity (to remain self-referring) and yet still be 'about' something – it could have a subject, a topic, a conceptual content ...'.³³ In 1969 Ron Robertson-Swann maintained that: 'Art is just expressing your own feelings and making your own kicks: it's an expression, a vehicle for feeling. I put red next to green when I am painting because it makes me feel good. All art is about the same sorts of things'.³⁴

Michael Johnson had already stressed his own absolute commitment to the new creed stating that, '... painting is a phenomenon that exists quite separate from existence; it's a phenomenon in itself; That's what painting *is*. Sometimes painting comes more out of



Tony McGillick *Jasper's gesture* 1966
synthetic polymer paint and wax on canvas, in four modular sections, 170.1 x 162.5 cm
D G Wilson Bequest Fund 2003

painting, the thing itself, than out of life'.³⁵ Paul Partos, who had spent a year in London in 1965–66, also pledged his allegiance to this new direction, declaring:

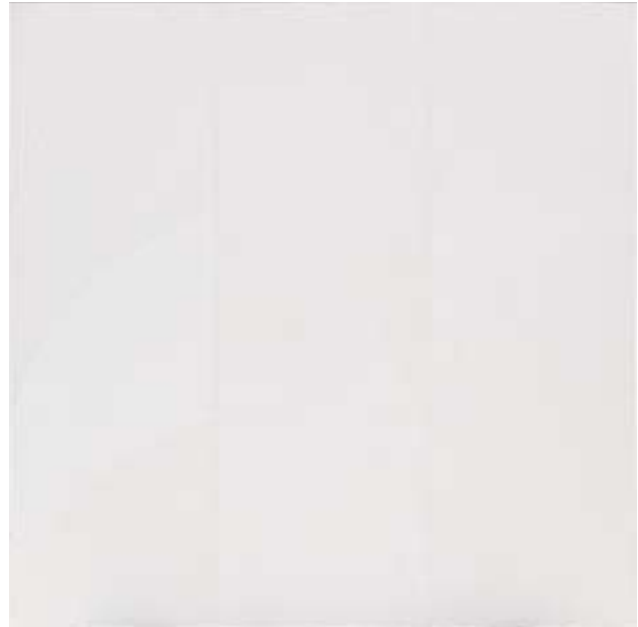
I wasn't involved with expressionism as such, I was more involved with coming to terms with certain problems, problems that related to the area of the canvas, rather than the problems of putting down an emotional experience or dabbling with sensuous paint ... If there was an image at all, in any sense, and this comes back to the idea that if you paint on an area as such, you're involved with painting an image of some form, of some kind ... If you must have an image, I should think that the image became that area of the canvas which it occupied in space. The image was the canvas, it was nothing else.³⁶

Dick Watkins was more eclectic with his image making, and within a period of twelve months between 1967 and 1968, he produced works which could easily fall into both camps. In particular, his diptych *October* straddled the divide between the 'pure' formalism of the more rigidly composed and highly ordered works of Johnson, Robertson-Swann and Partos, and the referential Artificial Landscapes of Doolin, which consistently acknowledged

the imagery from his urban environment as his source. Painted the year before *The Field*, with its discordant colour scheme, *October* combines elements of hard-edge, Pop and cubist spatial relations to create a vigorous composition whose competing geometric shapes jostle for attention across an expanse of lightly modulated pale blue, cut through by a notched bolt of mustard yellow. There is none of the panoramic monochromatic spread of Peart's *Cool corner II* or Johnson's *Frontal 2*. Watkins constructs a highly disciplined and tightly composed painting, with each of the elements – circles, squares cut through with 'windows', rectangles, grided rhomboids, and a five-pointed star – drawn inwards from the periphery towards the centre, like some cosmic, variegated black hole. Watkins employs the device of diagonals and contrasting cool and warm colours within his pictorial structure to create dynamic forms which seem to simultaneously hover above and slide below one another, creating ambiguity in the relationship between figure and field.

October's history after *The Field* is fascinating in its peregrinations across the globe, highlighting issues of long-term conservation which have been, until recently, rarely considered.³⁷ Like so many large-scale works from this period, in Australia as well as in Europe and America, keeping the integrity of the artist's intention becomes problematic when the works have not been held in the pristine environment afforded by an art museum, with complete control over climate conditions, skilled handling and secure long-term storage.

Moreover, one of the major conservation issues was the advent of acrylic paint, which first became widely available to artists in the early 1960s. Recently, extensive research has been undertaken into the archival properties of these new paints.³⁸ The stability of oil-based pigments is universally acknowledged, its widespread use since the fifteenth century clear evidence of its relative durability. Acrylic paints, however, present new and often unexpected problems for the conservation of works created during the medium's infancy. Unforgiving surfaces can leave the once immaculate painted fields of vivid colour scuffed, scratched and edges riddled with finger marks, due to inadequate storage or inappropriate handling, usually outside the museum environment. It is a concern which has brought about discussion between conservation and curatorial staff at this Gallery, indicating the need for dialogue with artists, who can best provide invaluable information about their materials and technique, and whose work is now under our custodianship.



Robert Hunter *Untitled (white series no 6)* 1968
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 158.5 x 158.5 cm
Gift of Georgina Carnegie 1984

The post-mortem

Four decades on, it is hard to imagine an exhibition which could engender as much discussion in art circles today as *The Field* did in 1968. Its influence was widespread and opened many doors for the artists who took part in it. The awarding of art prizes and competitive scholarships to the young generation of artists who took part in the exhibition, in the period leading up to and directly following *The Field*, acted as a signpost of the 'new sensibility of the Sixties', and incensed established artists who had dominated these awards in the previous decade. There were also more awards to be pursued, as the number swelled to over ninety art prizes providing various financial incentives for the winners.

Elwyn Lynn, in a 1969 article in *Art and Australia*, isolated thirteen 'really important prizes' bestowing frontrunners not only with monetary reward but additional kudos in the competitive art world.³⁹ The Transfield, the Alcorso-Sekers and *The Australian Pacesetters Award* were all prizes which, if secured, guaranteed the artist a promising future. In 1968, John Peart, one of the youngest artists to take part in *The Field*, received four of the more important awards of the period, including The Transfield

(with his painting *Bivouac*), the Newcastle NBN Channel 3 Award, the Mirror-Waratah Prize, and a Pacesetters travel grant, marking the 'proliferation of a new mode' and causing further disturbance in the already troubled waters of art criticism.⁴⁰

Once the dust had settled, attention moved on to succeeding modes of expression, namely the 'anything goes' period of the 1970s, which saw the rebirth of abstract expressionism and a continuation of the minimalist tradition which evolved out of *The Field*.⁴¹ The Eighties saw a re-appraisal of the importance of *The Field* in the history of twentieth-century Australian art with a succession of exhibitions focusing on this most fertile period. Through *The Field now* (1984), *Field to figuration* (1987), *I had a dream: Australian art in the 1960s* (1997) *Central Street live* (2003), and most recently *Gallery A* (2009), the artists, curators and critics who took part in the seminal exhibition of 1968 continue to prompt lively discussion on one of the most intriguing periods of art history in this country.

This Australian Collection Focus Room display celebrates that ground-breaking exhibition, which proclaimed the emergence of a new and absorbing period of Australian art, and pays tribute to the works of these six artists which still resonate with the clarity of purpose with which they were conceived four decades ago.

1 Evan Williams, 'The centre of things', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 Aug 1968, p 2

2 Vincent Basile, 'Brush-off for first gallery art show', *The Age*, Melbourne, 22 Aug 1968

3 John Stringer, interviewed by Hazel de Berg, New York, 11 May 1970, Hazel de Berg Collection, NLA DeB 507

4 John Stringer, 'Why – The Field', *The Field now*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Bulleen 1984, p 15

5 'Memorandum to Mr E Westbrook', 13 July 1968, *The Field* exhibition files, NGV Archives

6 Robert Hughes acknowledged this desire for recognition by Australian artists from the art centres of Europe as the effect of the cultural cringe, which subsequently resulted in a form of 'cultural imperialism', writing: 'They resigned themselves to an imperial situation. Imperialism creates provincialism: it standardizes things, straightens out the edges. The periphery yearns for the reassurance of the centre – to submerge its fragile and only partly definable identity in something manifestly strong'. See Robert Hughes, *Nothing if not critical: selected essays on art and artists*, Collins Harvill, London 1990, pp 4–6

7 'Memorandum to The Director from the Exhibition Officer: Opening Exhibition', 27 Feb 1968, *The Field* exhibition files, NGV Archives

8 Letter from John Stringer to Mr R Voumard of Qantas Airways, 4 Apr 1968, *The Field* exhibition files, NGV Archives

9 These included Gallery A Melbourne (1959–1970) and Gallery A Sydney (1964–1980); Central Street Gallery, Sydney (1966–1970); Pinacotheca, Melbourne (1967–1973); Strines Gallery, Melbourne (1966–1970); Watters Gallery, Sydney (opened 1964); Barry Stern Galleries, Sydney (opened 1960); and Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney (1958–1984), although Komon wasn't converted to the 'new abstraction' until late in 1968 when he brought Ron Robertson-Swann into his stable. Recently, a number of exhibitions have focused on these pioneering galleries, providing an historical overview of the gallery owners and their stable of artists, including *Gallery A Sydney*, at Campbelltown City Art Gallery and Newcastle Region Art Galley (2009), and *Central Street Live*, at Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest and Macquarie University Art Gallery (2003)

10 Alan McCulloch, 'Entertainment, yes ... but is this really art?', *The Herald*, Melbourne, 24 Aug 1968

11 John Stringer, 'Report on conclusion of 'The Field'', not dated, *The Field* exhibition files, NGV Archives

12 John Stringer, interviewed by Hazel de Berg, p 5881

13 The following are only a few of the many exhibitions which featured work by international artists working in the manner now referred to as post-painterly abstraction: *Morris Louis: Memorial Exhibition: Paintings from 1954–1960*, New York, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, Sep–Oct 1963, curated by Lawrence Alloway; *Toward a new abstraction*, The Jewish Museum, New York, 19 May – 15 Sep 1963, featured works by Al Held, Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella and others; *The Formalists*, Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 6 Jun – 7 Jul 1963, with artists including Gene Davis, Larry Poons, Jules Olitski, Ad Reinhardt, Frank Stella and Victor Vasarely; *Painting and Sculpture of a Decade. 54–64*, Tate Gallery, London, 22 Apr – 28 Jun 1964, included work by 170 artists working in Europe and the USA including Helen Frankenthaler, David Smith, Jasper Johns, Barnett Newman and Patrick Heron; and perhaps most importantly, *Post Painterly Abstraction*, organised by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 23 Apr – 7 Jun 1964, and which travelled to Minneapolis and Toronto. The artists included in *Post Painterly Abstraction* were selected by Clement Greenberg, who contributed the essay 'Post Painterly Abstraction' for the catalogue. For a comprehensive chronology of group exhibitions held in the USA between 1959 and 2004, which featured work by American artists working within the phenomenon of Minimalism, see Ann Goldstein, *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958–1968*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2004, pp 382–400

14 Patrick McCaughey, 'Revolution and crisis', *The Age*, 2 Nov 1968

15 Patrick McCaughey, 'Revolution and crisis', *The Age*, 2 Nov 1968

16 Patrick McCaughey, 'Revolution and crisis', *The Age*, 2 Nov 1968

17 Alan McCulloch, 'What a choice!', *The Herald*, Melbourne, 19 Aug 1968

18 Alan McCulloch, 'Entertainment, yes ... but is this really art?', *The Herald*, Melbourne, 24 Aug 1968

19 Laurie Thomas, 'Art with a bit less logic', *The Australian*, 27 Aug 1968

20 James Gleeson, 'Initial impact is what counts...', *Sun Herald*, Sydney, 30 Oct 1968

21 James Gleeson, 'A big show of what's modern', *Sun Herald*, Sydney, 1 Sept 1968

22 Clement Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', in Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (eds), *Art in theory: 1900 – 1990*, Blackwell, Oxford 1995 (Reprint), pp 767–768

23 Joseph Albers, *Homage to the square: early fusion*, 1966, oil, synthetic polymer paint on hardboard, 121.5 x 121.5 cm, WH Nolan and JB Pye Bequest Funds 1967, Purchased by the AGNSW from Sidney Janis Gallery 1967, through the Museum of Modern Art, New York

24 See James Gleeson, 'Artist ahead of his time', *Sun Herald*, Sydney, 17 July 1968;

James Gleeson, 'A new father figure of art', *Sun Herald*, Sydney, 21 July 1968;

'Sydney's "in" artist died a pauper', *Sunday Mail*, Adelaide, 27 July 1968; Alan

McCulloch, 'Ralph Balson: an odyssey in abstraction', *The Herald*, Melbourne, 14 Aug

1968; Elwyn Lynn, 'Looking for mates', *The Bulletin*, Sydney, 3 Aug 1968; Patrick

McCaughey, 'Balson: the classic story', *The Age*, Melbourne, 13 Aug 1968, and GR

Lansell, 'Ralph Balson', *Nation*, Sydney, 31 Aug 1968, for the collective critical praise for Balson's work following the series of Gallery A memorial exhibitions held in 1967

and 1968, following the artist's death

25 See Dr Carolyn Barnes, 'Some observations on the uses of the traditional and the modern in Australian visual culture, 1937 to 1968', *Symposium papers: Colour in Art – revisiting 1919 & R-Balson -/41 Anthony Horderns' Fine Art Galleries*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney 2008, pp 50–51

26 Frances Colpitt, 'The shape of painting in the 1960s', *Art Journal*, vol 50 no 1, Spring 1991, p 54

27 Frances Colpitt, 'The shape of painting in the 1960s', p 54

28 Kurt von Meier, 'Los Angeles: the new "pure" painting', *Art International*, vol XI no 2, 20 Feb 1967, p 52

29 James Doolin, interviewed by Hazel de Berg, Los Angeles, 22 May 1970, Hazel de Berg Collection, NLA DeB 518, transcript p 6012

30 Paul Partos, interviewed by Hazel de Berg, Melbourne 22 Nov 1969, Hazel de Berg Collection, NLA DeB 431–432, transcript p 4

31 John Peart cited in 'Background ... looks at John Peart: Portrait of the artist ...', *Sunday Telegraph*, Sydney, 10 Nov 1968

32 Paul McGillick, 'Five migrant artists in Australia', *Aspect*, vol 5 no 1–2, 1980, pp 23–25

33 Paul McGillick, 'Five migrant artists in Australia', pp 23–25

34 Ron Robertson-Swann cited in Craig McGregor, *In the Making*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1969

35 Michael Johnson cited in Craig McGregor, *In the Making*, pp 1–10

36 Paul Partos, interviewed by Hazel de Berg, transcript p 4

37 The painting was purchased from the artist by Garry Pursell in 1969. It was then lent to Monash University, Melbourne (1971–72); to The World Bank, Washington, USA (1973–2001); to the Australian Embassy, Washington, USA (2001–2005); and gifted to the Art Gallery of New South Wales by Garry Pursell in 2008

38 See Thomas JS Learner, Patricia Smithen, Jay W Krueger, and Michael R Schilling (eds.), *Modern paints uncovered*, The Getty Conservation Institution, Los Angeles 2007, for the proceedings of a symposium held at the Tate Modern in London in 2006, which brought together professionals around the globe to discuss the conservation issues of modern and contemporary painted surfaces

39 Elwyn Lynn, 'Art prizes in Australia', *Art and Australia*, vol 6 no 4, March 1969, p 314

40 Elwyn Lynn, 'Art prizes in Australia', p 316–318

41 For an evaluation of the multitude of the varieties of expression found in art directly following *The Field*, see Paul Taylor, *Anything goes: art in Australia 1970–1980*, Art & Text, Melbourne 1984

List of works



1
James Doolin
Artificial landscape 68-1 1968

1

James Doolin***Artificial landscape 68–1 1968***

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

166.7 x 132.4 x 6.8 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Gift of Chandler Coventry 1972

© Estate of James Doolin

8.1972

inscribed upper left verso, black fibre-tipped pen "JAMES DOOLIN/ 1968/ Los Angeles"; inscribed upper left verso on stretcher, black fibre-tipped pen "JAMES DOOLIN 1968 Los Angeles 68 5/8" x 52 1/8""; inscribed upper left verso, ink on label "NOTE:/ Hang with bottom of painting/ approximately 18" from floor/ so that top grey semi-circle/ is centred at normal eye level/ (x)/ Finger prints can be removed/ from front and sides of painting/ with a damp sponge./ Liquitex Acrylic paint on/ Cotton Duck"

Provenance:

Chandler Coventry (c1969–1972); gifted by Chandler Coventry to the Art Gallery of NSW in 1972

Exhibitions:

The Field, NGV, Melbourne, 21 Aug – 28 Sept 1968, AGNSW, Sydney, 30 Oct – 24 Nov 1968, cat no 20; *Central Street Live*, Macquarie University Art Gallery, 7 Mar – 5 May 2003, Penrith Regional Art Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, 16 Nov – 23 Feb 2003

Literature:

Royston Harpur, 'An important academy', Elwyn Lynn's untitled essay and Patrick McCaughey, 'Experience and the new abstraction' in *The Field*, NGV, Melbourne 1968, general references to Doolin's works in the exhibition, pp 21 col ill, 85, 89, 93; Patrick McCaughey, 'The significance of The Field', *Art and Australia*, vol 6 no 3, December 1968, pp 240 col ill, 242; Mervyn Thomas, *Present day art in Australia*, Ure Smith, Sydney 1969, p 60 col ill; James Doolin, 'Letter extracts from James Doolin concerning the present exhibition about the Artificial Landscape paintings of 1969', *James Doolin 'Artificial Landscape' paintings*, Central Street Gallery, Sydney 1970, general reference to series of 'Artificial landscape' paintings; Tony McGillick, 'James Doolin since 1965', *James Doolin: shopping mall 1973–77: a conceptual perspective*, The Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne 1978, general reference to series of 'Artificial landscape' paintings; Paul McGillick, 'Five migrant artists in Australia', *Aspect*, vol 5 no 1–2, 1980, general reference to series of 'Artificial landscape'

paintings, pp 23–25; Gary Catalano, *The years of hope: Australian art and criticism 1959–1968*, OUP, Melbourne 1981, general reference to series of 'Artificial landscape' paintings, p 179; Rhonda Davis & Elin Howe, *Central Street Live*, Penrith Regional Art Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, Sydney 2003, general reference to series of 'Artificial landscape' paintings, p 36; Eric Riddler, 'Central Street Live: a "swinging sixties" phenomenon', *Art and Australia*, vol 41 no 1, Sep–Nov 2003, p 48 col ill; Natalie Wilson, *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, Sydney 2009



2
Michael Johnson
Frontal 2 1968

2

Michael Johnson*Frontal 2* 1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

198.5 x 214 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Gift of Michael and Margot Johnson 2000

© Michael Johnson. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

88.2000

inscribed centre verso on stretcher "7' x 6.6' P.V.A. FRONTAL 2
MICHAEL JOHNSON 1968"

Provenance:

Pinacotheca, Melbourne (1968–mid 1970s); The James Baker Collection, MOCA, Brisbane (mid 1970s–1986); Private Collection, Sydney (1986–c1992); re-purchased by the artist (c1992); gifted by the artist to the Art Gallery of NSW in 2000

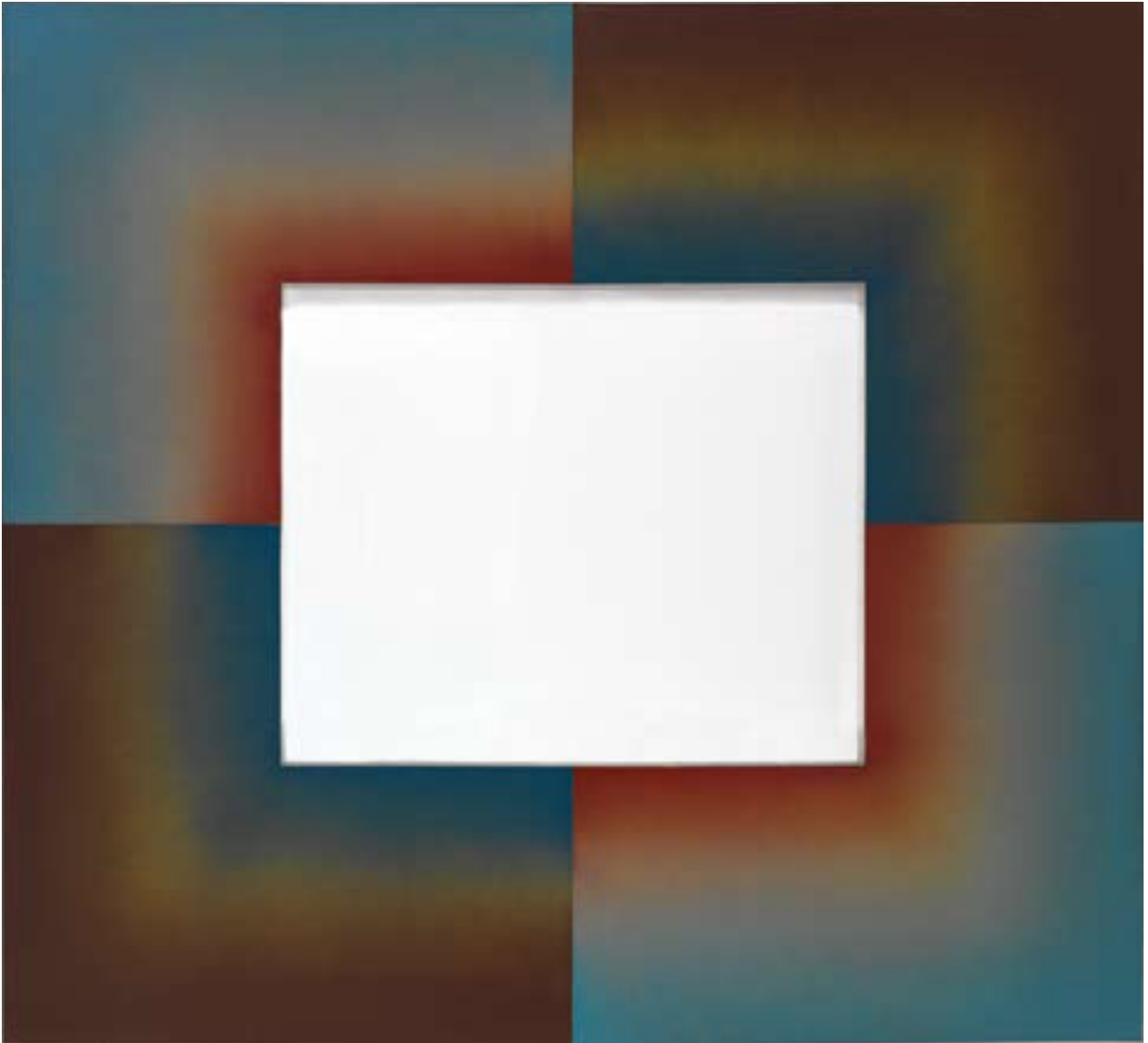
Exhibitions:

Young Contemporaries Exhibition 1968, Farmer's Gallery, Sydney, 13–23 March 1968, cat no 27, 'Frontal 2', \$600; *The Field*, NGV, Melbourne, 21 Aug – 28 Sept 1968, AGNSW, Sydney, 30 Oct – 24 Nov 1968, cat no 30; *Michael Johnson: paintings 1968–1986*, University Gallery, The University of Melbourne, 6 Aug – 3 Oct 1986, cat no 1; *Australian Biennale 1988: from the Southern Cross: a view of world art c1940–1988*, AGNSW, Sydney, 18 May – 3 July 1988, NGV, Melbourne, 4 Aug – 18 Sept 1988; *Michael Johnson paintings 1968–1988*, AGNSW, Sydney, 8 Feb – 2 Apr 1989; *Australian abstraction 1965 – 1985: from the collection*, AGNSW, 9 Dec 2006 – 25 Jan 2007; *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, 5 Sept – 29 Nov 2009, cat no 2, col ill

Literature:

Patrick McCaughey, 'Experience and the new abstraction', *The Field*, NGV, Melbourne 1968, pp 33 ill, 88–90; Patrick McCaughey, 'The significance of The Field', *Art and Australia*, vol 6 no 3, December 1968, pp 241 col ill, 242; 'Judgement day', *Nation*, 23 Nov 1968; Robert Rooney, 'A hard won leap to freedom', *The Weekend Australian*, 16–17 Aug 1986, p 14; Terence Maloon, *Michael Johnson: paintings 1968–1986*, University Gallery, University of Melbourne, Parkville 1986, pp 9 col ill, 33; John McDonald, 'Michael Johnson', *Art and Australia*, vol 24 no 3, Autumn 1987, 348; Elwyn Lynn, 'Farewell to all that jolly fun', *The Weekend Australian*, 28–29 May 1988; Frances Lindsay, 'Antipodean antecedents: an accent on the present' and Terence Maloon, 'Michael Johnson' in Nick Waterlow (ed), *The 1988 Australian Biennale: from the Southern Cross: a view of world art c1940–1988*, ABC Enterprises for the Australian

Broadcasting, Crows Nest, and Biennale of Sydney, Sydney 1988, pp 160, 279; Victoria Lynn, 'Michael Johnson' in Terence Maloon, *Michael Johnson 1968–1988*, AGNSW, Sydney 1988, col ill; Christopher Allen, 'An exuberant Johnson turns new artist at 50', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 Feb 1989, p 84; Barry Pearce, *Michael Johnson*, The Beagle Press, Sydney 2004, pp 28, 29 col ill, 138, 199; Anthony Bond & Wayne Tunnicliffe, *Contemporary: Art Gallery of New South Wales Contemporary Collection*, AGNSW, Sydney 2006, pp 18, 40, 41 col ill; Natalie Wilson, *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, Sydney 2009



3
Paul Partos
Vesta II 1968

3

Paul Partos*Vesta II* 1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

230 x 251 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Visual Arts Board Australia Council Contemporary Art

Purchase Grant 1975

© Estate of Paul Partos

10.1975

not inscribed

Provenance:

Gallery A, Sydney (in 1968); purchased by the Art Gallery of NSW with funds provided by the Visual Arts Board Australia Council Contemporary Art Purchase Grant in 1975

Exhibitions:

Group I – 1968, Gallery A, Sydney, 20 Feb 1968, probably cat no 17, titled 'Vesta'; *The Field*, NGV, Melbourne, 21 Aug – 28 Sept 1968, AGNSW, Sydney, 30 Oct – 24 Nov 1968, cat no 50, titled 'Vesta II'; *Project 16: Paul Partos*, AGNSW, 12 Feb – 20 Mar 1977, cat no 3, titled 'Vesta II'; *Australian abstraction 1965–1985: from the collection*, AGNSW, 9 Dec 2006 – 25 Jan 2007; *Gallery A Sydney 1964–1983*, Campbelltown Arts Centre, 21 Mar – 3 May 2009, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 9 May – 19 July 2009; *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, 5 Sept – 29 Nov 2009, cat no 3

Literature:

Donald Brook, 'Roll up roll up!', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 Feb 1968, p 14; Elwyn Lynn's untitled essay in *The Field*, NGV, Melbourne 1968, p 54 col ill, 85 (in error referred to as *Orphea*); Robert Lindsay, *Project 16: Paul Partos*, AGNSW, Sydney 1977; Frances Lindsay (ed), *Fieldwork: Contemporary Australian Art in the NGV 1968–2002*, NGV, Melbourne 2002, pp 14 ill, 25 col ill; Michael Desmond, 'Abstraction' in Anthony Bond & Wayne Tunnicliffe (eds), *Contemporary: Art Gallery of New South Wales Contemporary collection*, AGNSW, Sydney 2006, pp 52, 53 col ill; Natalie Wilson, *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, Sydney 2009



4

John Peart
Cool corner II 1968

4

John Peart*Cool corner II* 1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

236.2 x 236.2 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Gift of the artist 1968

© John Peart

OA27.1968

not inscribed

Provenance:

gifted by the artist to the Art Gallery of NSW in 1968

Exhibitions:

The Field, NGV, Melbourne, 21 Aug – 28 Sept 1968, AGNSW, Sydney, 30 Oct – 24 Nov 1968, cat no 53, note: captions reversed; *Recent paintings: John Peart*, Watters Gallery, Sydney, 19 Nov – 6 Dec 1969, cat no 3; *John Peart: paintings 1964–2004*, Campbelltown Arts Centre, 17 Mar – 7 May 2006; *Australian abstraction 1965 – 1985: from the collection*, AGNSW, 9 Dec 2006 – 25 Jan 2007; *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, 5 Sept – 29 Nov 2009, cat no 4

Literature:

The Field, NGV, Melbourne 1968, pp 57 col ill; Gary Catalano, *Recent paintings: John Peart*, Watters Gallery, Sydney 1969; John Stringer, *Material perfection: minimal art & its aftermath, selected from the Kerry Stokes Collection*, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, Perth 1998, p 26; John Stringer, 'Radiant haze' and Renée Porter, 'Introduction', in Renée Porter *John Peart: paintings 1964–2004*, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Campbelltown 2004, pp 9, 29, 30 col ill, 74; Natalie Wilson, *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, Sydney 2009



5

Ron Robertson-Swann
Golden breach 1965

5

Ron Robertson-Swann*Golden breach* 1965

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

259.2 x 111.1 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Purchased 1983

© Ron Robertson-Swann

234.1983

not inscribed

Provenance:

purchased from the artist in 1983

Exhibitions:

Exhibition of work by 3 new sculptors (Robertson-Swann, Wendy Taylor & Yardeni), Kasmin Gallery, London, 4 Feb – March 1966; *The Field*, NGV, Melbourne, 21 Aug – 28 Sept 1968, AGNSW, Sydney, 30 Oct – 24 Nov 1968, cat no 57; *Ron Robertson-Swann survey*, Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 3–27 Apr 1975, cat no 2; *Dead sun: an installation by Mike Parr from the Gallery's Australian collection*, AGNSW, Sydney, 2 Oct – 9 Nov 1997; *Hard edge*, AGNSW, Sydney, 7 Aug – 24 Oct 1999; *Australian abstraction 1965 – 1985: from the collection*, AGNSW, 9 Dec 2006 – 25 Jan 2007; *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, 5 Sept – 29 Nov 2009, cat no 5

Literature:

The Field, NGV, Melbourne 1968, pp 62 ill; *Dead sun: an installation by Mike Parr from the Gallery's Australian collection*, AGNSW, Sydney 1997; Natalie Wilson, *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, Sydney 2009



6
Dick Watkins
October 1967

6

Dick Watkins*October 1967*

diptych: synthetic polymer paint on canvas

244 x 305 x 4 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Gift of Garry Pursell 2008

© Dick Watkins. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

53.2008

Inscribed bottom centre verso left panel "Dick Watkins"; lower right corner verso right panel on stretcher "Dick WATKINS"; lower left corner verso right panel on stretcher "67"; lower right corner verso left panel on stretcher "1/2 'OCTOBER'"; upper right corner verso left panel on stretcher "'OCTOBER'(1/2)"

Provenance:

purchased from the artist by Garry Pursell in 1969; lent to Monash University, Melbourne (1971–72); lent to The World Bank, Washington, USA (1973–2001); lent to the Australian Embassy, Washington, USA (2001–2005); Deutscher and Hackett, Melbourne, 29 Nov 2007, lot no 8; gifted to the Art Gallery of NSW by Garry Pursell in 2008

Exhibitions:

The Field, NGV, Melbourne, 21 Aug – 28 Sept 1968, AGNSW, Sydney, 30 Oct – 24 Nov 1968, cat no 71; *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, 5 Sept – 29 Nov 2009, cat no 6

Literature:

Royston Harpur, 'An important academy', Elwyn Lynn's untitled essay and Patrick McCaughey, 'Experience and the new abstraction' in *The Field*, NGV, Melbourne 1968, pp 78 ill, 85, 89, 93; Terry Smith, 'Color-form painting: Sydney 1965–70', *Other voices: critical journal*, vol 1 no 1, June–July 1970, p 12; Sylvia Harrison, 'Sydney pop and social internationalism in the 1960s', *Art and Australia*, vol 25 no 4, Winter 1988, p 502; Barbara Dowse, *Dick Watkins in context: an exhibition from the collection of the National Gallery. 1993: 15 January – 15 July*, NGA, Canberra 1993, p 13; Terry Smith, *Transformations in Australian art: the twentieth century – Modernism and aboriginality*, vol 2, Craftsman House, Sydney 2002; *Deutscher and Hackett fine art auction*, 29 Nov 2007, lot no 8, p 26, 27 col ill; Natalie Wilson, *Tackling The Field*, AGNSW, Sydney 2009

Other exhibition works

David Aspden

Outer spice 1969

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

152.4 x 244 x 2.8 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Purchased with funds provided by an anonymous purchase fund for contemporary Australian art 1970

© David Aspden

Sydney Ball

Canto no XXX 1966

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

201.2 x 181 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

On loan from the estate of Elwyn Lynn

© Sydney Ball. Courtesy Sullivan and Strumpf Gallery

Robert Hunter

Untitled (white series no 6) 1968

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

158.5 x 158.5 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Gift of Georgina Carnegie 1984

© Robert Hunter. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

Tony McGillick

Jasper's gesture 1966

synthetic polymer paint and wax on canvas,
in four modular sections

170.1 x 162.5 cm overall (irreg)

Art Gallery of NSW

D G Wilson Bequest Fund 2003

© Reproduced with permission of the artist's estate

Clement Meadmore

Double up 1970

steel

102 x 79 x 64 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Gift of Rosemary Foot 1985

© Estate of Clement Meadmore. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney

Robert Rooney

Canine capers III 1969

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

152.4 x 152.4 cm

Art Gallery of NSW

Purchased 1975

© Robert Rooney

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- Walford, Leslie. 'Things really are looking up in art', *Sunday News*, 6 Aug 1967, p 8
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 Dick Watkins, *October* 1967
 diptych: synthetic polymer paint on canvas
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Michael Johnson and John Peart discussing Dick Watkins' painting *The Mooche* on display during *The Field*, Art Gallery of NSW, 30 August 1968

AGNSW Archives: image from *Daily Telegraph*, 31 Aug 1968