

LOOKING CLOSELY AT WA Art in the 1950s

Perth in the 1950s was a small provincial town providing little cultural stimulation for artists, yet in retrospect, it was an environment that nurtured the growth of some of the state's best known artists. Though the effects of the Depression and World War II continued to be felt by individuals and society in general by the 1950s there was a feeling of optimism in Western Australia, fuelled by strong economic growth and a sense that life after the war offered new opportunities.

The Perth Art Scene

In spite of this optimism Perth was still the most remote city in the world, with parochial attitudes to art and art practice. Perth's principal art patron at the time was **Claude Hotchin**, a hardware chainstore owner. From 1946 onwards he gave Western Australian artists considerable support although his taste tended towards conservatism.

Government support for the arts was meagre with few formal sources of art education. Perth Technical College, the only teaching institution for arts and crafts, and the Museum and Art Gallery of Western Australia operated on shoestring budgets.

The flourishing experimental art scene that had grown around the Communist-based Workers' Art Guild in the 1930s had disappeared during the War.

Artists in the Hills

In 1950, ex-servicemen Guy Grey-Smith and Howard Taylor moved to the hills east of Perth as practicing artists. Subsequently, a group of younger artists, including Robert Juniper, George Haynes, Brian McKay and Bernard Tandy, formed around them. Insulated from Eastern States



Brian McKay *Madreporaria*, 1957. Oil on commercial wallboard, detail.

Brian McKay

Brian McKay emerged from the Perth Group to develop a distinctive style influenced by American Abstract Expressionism. Born in the wheatbelt town of Meckering, east of Perth, the colours and textures of his environment held a natural fascination for him. However McKay was to reject landscape as his subject of enquiry preferring to explore abstract shape, form and surface. Far from the centres of the growing *modern art practice* McKay relied on international architecture and design magazines for his intellectual stimulation.

McKay's interest in the use of symbols and colour prompted fellow artist Sidney Nolan to urge him to visit Greece and McKay spent a decade (1964 - 74) in both Greece and London. McKay's art activism stems from this period, when he was involved with the movement for Greek democracy. During the 1980s he joined Perth experimental art group *Media Space* and was a key figure in the establishment of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA) which is adjacent to the Gallery.

debates as to whether Australian art should be figurative or abstract, these artists formed a loose support network that allowed its members to pursue their own individual interests.

The Perth Group, an artists' cooperative, c1957-8, grew out of this informal association.

Winds of Change

The appointment of **Laurie Thomas** as Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1952 was a major turning point for art in Perth. By acquiring major French and Italian modern collections for the state, he gave Western Australians their first experience of original contemporary, international art stimulating public debate about *modern art*.

He also actively purchased the work of local and Australian artists for the State Art Collection as well as took art to the people via country exhibitions, lectures and art prizes.

New Directions

In the last years of the decade, Perth's cultural scene was transformed by two private gallery owners, **David Foulkes Taylor**, a young Perth born, British trained artist-designer who brought examples of European design to Perth, and **Rose Skinner**, owner of Skinner Galleries. As well as marketing experimental work by local artists, they created a new social environment where Western Australian artists could meet and exchange ideas with significant artists and designers from the Eastern States and overseas. By 1960, Western Australian art was poised to expand with new-found self-confidence.

Art changes the way we see the world

Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia with the aim of making art more accessible for visitors

LOOKING CLOSELY AT

Brian McKay's *Madreporaria*

Madreporaria, the name of this work derives from the word *Madrepore*; a species of reef-building coral. Do you need to know this to enjoy the painting?

Brian McKay discovered the underwater world during his time in the Navy during World War II. His first experience of diving was in the Red Sea when he was sent underwater to fix a propeller. Back in Perth, he made his own snorkel from bamboo using it to dive on the reef at Trigg Island.

This was the first work by the artist to be acquired by the Art Gallery of Western Australia. When it was purchased in 1959 McKay was just establishing himself as an artist. Today his work includes large scale, commissioned public art works such as the mural in Central Park Tower and **Impossible Triangle**, a familiar landmark at the entrance to the revitalised East Perth district.



Brian McKay *Madreporaria*, 1957. Oil on commercial wallboard

Colour as Focal Point

Where is your eye drawn to when you first look at the painting?

McKay consistently uses blue in his artworks but, at the time he painted *Madreporaria*, he was experimenting with the stronger vibrant colours that he had seen in examples of French and Italian modernist paintings which had been on show at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Movement

There is a great of visual movement in the painting. How does the artist create this sensation? If you look at the painting for a while you are reminded of a flurry of fish and perhaps a hint at a shadow of a diver. Is The viewer looking down at or through this imaginary shoal?

The work is two-dimensional. Does the sense of movement that the artist creates help us see in three dimensions?

Texture

Can you find where McKay has layered paint thickly with a palette knife or where he has scumbled and rubbed the paint on with the brush? In other areas he has used smooth, light, almost transparent brush strokes? What do you think he is trying to convey by using the differing textures?

Abstract Expressionism

McKay has said that he wants to share his experiences with the viewer. Do you think that he has succeeded with this work?

The idea of sharing experiences underlies the work of the Abstract Expressionists who used paint, sometimes thrown onto the canvas apparently at random, to express feeling and emotion. Jackson Pollock's **Blue Poles**, in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra is a well-known example of this art movement.

McKay was already beginning to experiment with the idea of painting what he felt rather than what he saw when he created the work. Although we can guess at the subject matter elements have been rendered as abstract forms, suggesting but not describing their form precisely. In this sense the work could be described as an example of *figurative abstraction*.

When McKay saw Pollock's work, a year after he painted *Madreporaria*, he was excited by the idea that *'The whole body moves to make a mark on the canvas instead of the small wrist movements of the traditional painter.'*

Somewhat of a turning point from then on McKay was to draw on the ideas of the Abstract Expressionists more fully.