

LOOKING CLOSELY AT WA Women Artists

"I started as a realist but soon began to get behind the scene, behind the people - deep down in all good painting there is abstract work."

Elise Blumann, 1979.

Born in Germany in 1897, Blumann studied at the Berlin Academy of Arts under Max Liebermann and Kathe Kollwitz, and later at the Royal Art School in Berlin. She left Germany in 1934 to escape the Nazi regime. She lived first in Holland then England, moving to Perth in 1938 when her husband faced the possibility of internment in England should war break out.

The ten years following the artist's arrival in Perth were her most productive and recognised as the peak of her artistic career. Her individual modernist style was not however well received and seen to be too radical.

Facing this lack of public recognition Blumann shared her modernist ideas by holding art classes in her home and also helped to found the Perth Art Group, which essentially served as a discussion forum for ideas on modern art.

During the 1950s and 1960s Blumann spent time travelling between Europe and Australia not holding a major exhibition until 1976. She finally received public recognition in 1984 in a retrospective of her work held at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.



Elise Blumann, *Storm on the Swan* 1946. oil on paper on composition board.detail

Women artists and the Perth Cultural Scene

During the early decades of the twentieth century, women's involvement in the Perth cultural scene generally depended on their position in society and their financial situation. It was a difficult time for artists in general since patrons were few, exhibition space was virtually non-existent and interest in the arts in was minimal.

By the 1930s, women artists in Perth found themselves taking on a more prominent role. This was largely due to the formation of close-knit art societies such as the Perth Society of Artists and the West Australian Women's Society of Fine Arts and Crafts. Exhibiting with these societies enabled them to not only put their work into the public sphere, but to exhibit as a group of women for the first time.

However whilst Modernism swept the rest of the world, Perth held strongly to its two dominant influences, the Arts and Crafts Movement and the romantic landscape tradition. As a result few women engaged in Modernism, though there were some who challenged the dominant traditions.

Nature as Inspiration

A major theme running through Blumann's work is that of the interaction of the artist with her environment. She was fascinated by the Australian landscape and the native maleleuca tree was one of many species of native flora often repeated in her work.

Nude studies and portraits also feature in her work as well as her experiences of trips to desert regions.

Blumann and Modernism

At the beginning of the twentieth century the movement known as Modernism transformed the creative world. Essentially, Modernism saw artists create new forms of art and new ways of seeing them.

Blumann's modernism wasn't well received in Perth; firstly because people weren't well informed about modern art and, secondly, because her style didn't fit the text book description. The essence of her 'modernism' was the exploration of new ways of seeing the landscape.

Influenced by the abstract

Blumann's style is drawn from a range of influences that were part of experiences growing up in Europe. The free use of colour and expression by the German Expressionists for example and the strong outlines and blank faces of Matisse's nudes greatly influenced her art practice. She also talked of the influence of the abstract work of Picasso and Cezanne.

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

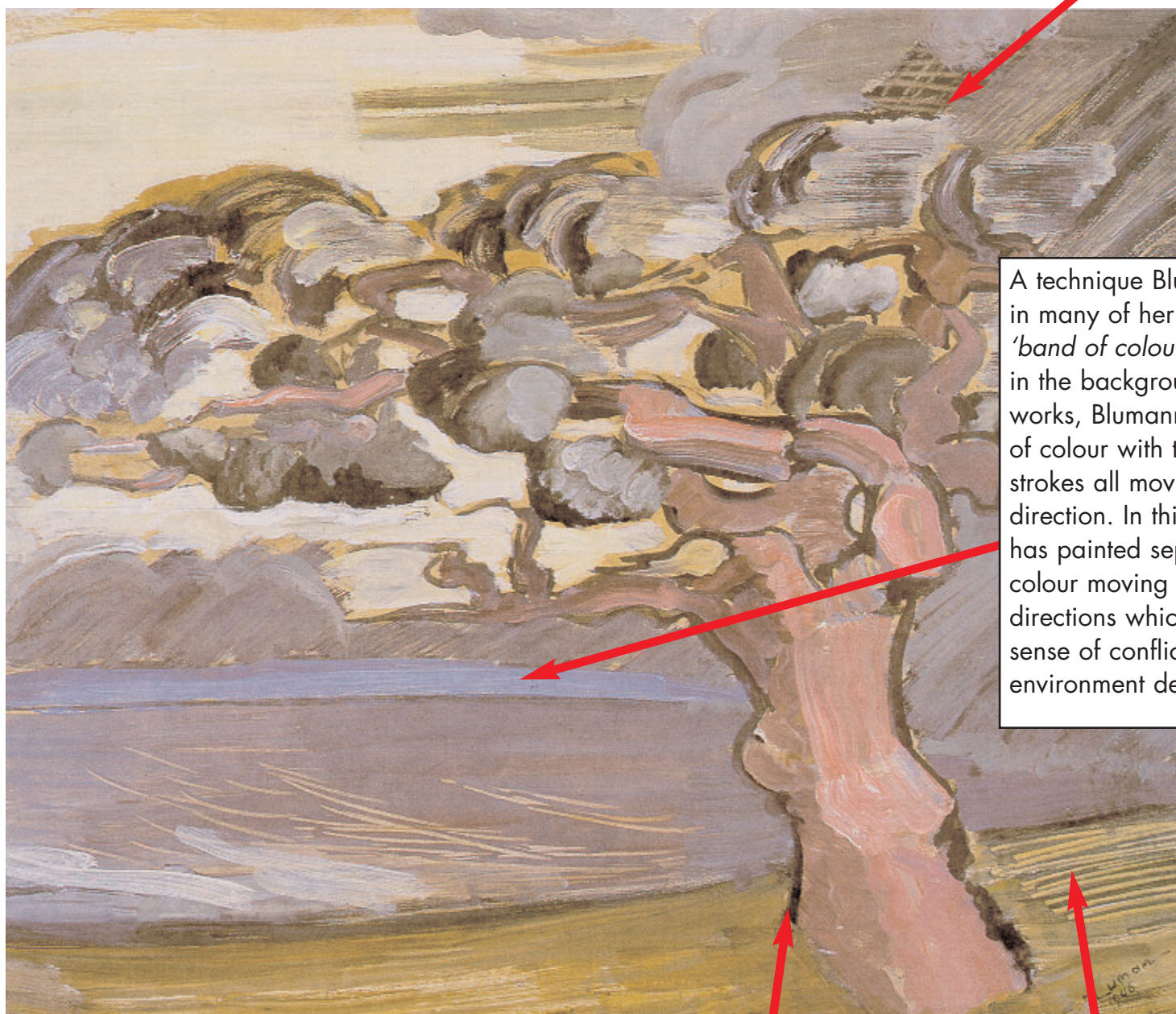
LOOKING CLOSELY AT

Elise Blumann

Living by the Swan River in Nedlands, Blumann painted many scenes depicting the local maleleuca trees. This painting is moving towards abstraction. Although we can still recognise the old, gnarled maleleuca the subject is simplified depicting its character by using thick, expressive brushstrokes. Have you seen trees like this by the river?

Note the Brushwork

In *Storm on the Swan*, Blumann has used painterly technique to help depict the effects of the storm. By using thick, expressive brush strokes, moving in different directions, she captures the turbulence and drama of the storm.



Elise Blumann, *Storm on the Swan*. 1946 oil on paper on composition board

A technique Blumann employs in many of her works is the 'band of colour'. Often used in the background of her works, Blumann paints blocks of colour with the brush strokes all moving in the same direction. In this painting she has painted separate bands of colour moving in different directions which heightens the sense of conflict within the environment depicted.

Like the German Expressionists, Blumann believed colour to be very important in the expression of feelings. By using colours that aren't realistic, do you believe they suggest certain emotions? Do you feel agitated or unsettled looking at this painting?

Blumann uses much softer colours in the top left hand section of the painting. Does this give the indication of the storm passing?

The black outline of the tree is characteristic of some of the works of the German Expressionists. In painting the maleleuca, the use of black outlines has created the presence of shadows in the foliage and the trunk. Does this suggest the three-dimensional form of the tree?

Here it appears as if Blumann has used the end of her paintbrush to work into the paint and emphasise the direction of the brushstrokes. This feature also appears in the water and the sky. By doing this, has Blumann meant to reinforce the sense of agitated conflict caused by the storm?

