

## A History of Gold Coast City Gallery's Collection

"*Rates squandered on Art Trash*" so said 'Patron of the arts, Coolangatta', in a letter to the Gold Coast Bulletin on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1968. The impetus for the letter was the inaugural Gold Coast Art Prize, the first such event on the coast, and the beginnings of the development for what is now the Gold Coast City Art Gallery collection. The prize also signalled what was to become an important avenue to develop the city's collection. Since 1968 acquisition prizes have accounted for over 430 acquisitions up to the end of 2006. Whilst the issues surrounding the validity of art prizes is many and varied, with limited funds available for straight out purchases, art prizes are a pragmatic way for regional collections to develop. By casting a wide net throughout the country (and in terms of the Ceramic Art Award – the world) a collection in turn illustrates the major themes and issues being addressed by artists at the time.

With the advent of the internet and the plethora of art magazines today, it seems impossible to imagine a landscape in which regional arts workers having limited access to current artistic practices compared to their city counterparts; yet in the 1960s and 70s, when the Gold Coast collection was developing, this would have been the case. The Art Prize committee would have relied on the expertise of invited judges to elucidate on the reputations and work of the entrants, whose work would otherwise have remained largely unseen by regional audiences without the pretext of an art prize. The judge of the 1968 Gold Coast Art Prize was the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, Eric Westbrook. In August of that year, the NGV held the enormously influential exhibition *The Field*, an overview of the work of 40 Australian artists whose work echoed current interest in colour field painting. Westbrook chose Michael Taylor, the London educated and Lismore based artist as the winner of the inaugural prize, and whilst his work is essentially figurative, there is elements of early colour field painting in the upper portion of the work. Subsequent acquisitions from the Art Prize throughout the 1970s displayed a greater influence from this school, indeed a number of artists who exhibited in *The Field* were acquired for the city collection in the following years. These artists include David Aspden, Sydney Ball, Janet Dawson, Michael Johnson, Col Jordan, Alun Leach-Jones, Alan Oldfield, Ron Robertson-Swann and Normana Wight. It could be argued that without the focal point of an art prize, artists of this calibre would never have been collected for a collection on the Gold Coast, particularly a city with no public gallery in which to store them, and no full time staff in which to care for the works.

More recent acquisitions of work by artists who had exhibited in *The Field* include Paul Partos, Robert Jacks, Dick Watkins, John Peart and Tony Coleing. The collection also houses works by contemporary artists whose work draws its influence from this style of abstraction including Melinda Harper and Marie Hagerty. The flat, hard edge style of the American inspired colour field artists in some ways approximates the newness of the Gold Coast, itself an American inspired leisure city

Still, for the seeming importance to the collection of these artists discussed above, when Michael Taylor's *Overnight Sleeper* was announced as the winner of the 1968 prize, a very public furore erupted. Popular opinion has it that the Gold Coast Mayor, Bruce Small, disliked the work so much he refused to have it hung in his office, however Small's more public attitude of the work suggested he felt "not entirely worthy of the compliment" (in relation to the work hanging in his office); and that "although I am honoured with an unceasing flow of visitors in my office, I could not hope to compete with the traffic where tourists gather in their increasing thousands. On this basis, I think it might well move up and down the Coast...to give the millions of tourists that we hope to see, as well as our own residents, the comfortable opportunity of advancing their own artistic education."<sup>i</sup> It could be argued that advancing the artistic education was the furthest thing from Small's mind – rather it was seen as a way of not displaying the work in his office and capitalising on the publicity generated by the unpopular choice. The artist, rightly, felt humiliated by this public discourse on his work, and Westbrook even proposed to purchase the work back from the Gold Coast for the National Gallery of Victoria's collection.

Yet for all (or more likely, because of) the negative publicity surrounding the prize, 10,550 people went to view the prize in just 10 days, which represented 20% of the Gold Coast's population at the time.<sup>ii</sup> The Gold Coast Bulletin even observed a boom in attendance at art classes by February of that year.<sup>iii</sup> Westbrook also noted at the time that, "the Gold Coast could become a very important festival centre with a series of first-rate artistic activities." He also observed that, "When you consider Mildura, with a population of 18,000 has a first-rate gallery, a museum of local history and a beautiful little theatre, the Gold Coast with its permanent population of 50,000, swollen by thousands of tourists, should be moving along these lines by now."<sup>iv</sup> It took 18 years for the Gold Coast to finally have a public gallery and theatre, with the opening of the Gold Coast Arts Centre in 1986. Westbrook's observations of the Gallery still have some currency today, when you consider the present facilities weighed against the current Gold Coast population of 500,000.

The development of a city collection was not one of the original aims of the Art Prize committee, yet by 1969 this was a stated aim in Bruce Small's foreword in the catalogue, with him claiming that from the award, "Paintings will be

purchased for the city's future civic centre and art gallery...This will help the council build a strong collection of contemporary Australian paintings." It did take 18 years for this to happen, when Gold Coast City Art Gallery did finally open in 1986, as part of the larger Gold Coast Arts Centre. Nevertheless, this 18 years of purchasing works (mainly through the art prize, but also through the Gold Coast International Ceramic Art Award, established in 1982) meant that when the Gallery finally opened, over 270 works of art had already been acquired and were able to be displayed in a proper gallery setting for the very first time.

A major exception to the acquisition of works through prizes in the interim years between 1968 and 1986 was the 1969 Theodore Collection gift. This gift was made up of 30 works by artists including Vida Lahey, Arthur Murch, Bessie Gibson, William Bustard, Howard Barron, John Rigby, Jack Kilgour and Roland Wakelin. It seems unlikely that such a significant gift would have been made without the council having already made the commitment to develop a collection through the art prize.

The first acquisition policy was ratified in 1987, and included six areas: Contemporary Australian Art (specifically including indigenous art), Contemporary Australian Non-functional ceramics, Historical and Regional Works of Art, Contemporary Australian Sculpture, Gifts outside the range of the policy, and Traditional Works of Art.

The most prominent acquisition by the Gallery, in terms of public debate, price, and sheer scale, was the purchase of *The rainforest* by William Robinson in 1990. When this painting won the Wynne Prize for Landscape in 1990, the then Gallery Director, Fran Cummings, was inspired to purchase this work for the collection. The ensuing public battle over the acquisition of this work, parallels, on a regional scale, the public controversy of the Whitlam government's decision to purchase Jackson Pollack's *Blue Poles* in 1972. The considerable funds raised to buy the painting are now justified by its current monetary value, but, more importantly, this purchase firmly placed Gold Coast City Art Gallery's collection as a major collection of contemporary Australian art and one of the finest in regional Queensland.

Other prominent aspects to the collection include the ceramic collection and works by indigenous artists. As noted earlier, the Gold Coast International Ceramic Art Award was established in 1982 by a committed group of local ceramic enthusiasts, led by Ruth Lyons. Motivated by the ongoing success of the Gold Coast Art Prize, but perhaps also done to give the medium some representation not seen in the Art Prize, this award has gone on to develop a collection of over 150 ceramic works for the Gallery, widely seen as among the best in regional Australia. The inaugural winner was Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, in the initial days of her still life groupings. Subsequent winners include

Stephen Benwell, Jeff Mincham, Patsy Hely, Alan Peascod and Michael Keighery.

To address the lack of representation of indigenous artists in the art prize over its 25-year history, in 1993 the prize focused solely on the art of indigenous Australia. Eleven works were selected for the collection by judge Hetti Perkins, including works by Richard Bell, Willie Gudabi and Denis Nona. The collection of works by indigenous artists now numbers over 100 objects, though not a huge amount of work, this collection does include some fine pieces by some of the greatest practitioners of the last quarter century. Outstanding bark paintings by John Mawurndjul, George Milpurruru and Charlie Djurritjini are included, alongside paintings by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Kathleen Petyarre and Paddy Bedford. There are many sculptural works included such as an impressive Ken Thaiday headdress purchased in 1995 and a group of spirit figures purchased in 1992. One of the standout pieces from the indigenous collection is Gordon Bennett's *Terra Nullius*. It is no surprise that this powerful work of the claiming of Aboriginal land in the name of King George III is one of the most requested works by outside lenders from the Gallery's collection, including an exhibition of Bennett's work organised by Ikon Gallery in the United Kingdom, and his 2007 survey at the National Gallery of Victoria. Purchased in 1989 with funds raised from the Gallery's dedicated volunteers, it is evidence of the vitality of regional collections.

The Gallery's current policy, as seen through the structure of the Gallery's upcoming publication on the collection, was adopted in 1999. Generally broad in scope, and incorporating media specific categories, it also addresses two areas that give our collection its distinctiveness – Gold Coast historical works and Beach Culture. Whilst some people act with surprise that the Gold Coast has a history, this collection of works illustrates to audiences the city's original agricultural origins, and shows the phenomenal change that the city has undergone since first settlement. As an aside, whilst curating an exhibition in 2001 on historical portrayals of the Gold Coast, I was surprised to find that the state gallery had one work in its entire collection of a historical Gold Coast scene – a small watercolour. This is evidence that without regional collections, then our local stories remain untold.

What isn't surprising though, is that the beach is a fundamental part of the Gold Coast's identity. This is the city that saw the development of the bikini in Australia, it was where surf wear labels such as Brothers Neilson developed, and has seen the rise of contemporary surf culture through the likes of Michael Peterson, Wayne 'Rabbit' Bartholomew, Peter Townend and Peter Drouyn in the 1970s and Mick Fanning, Dean Morrison and Joel Parkinson today. The Gallery's beach collection responds to this, through historical interpretations of our coastal environment, through to wider readings of beach culture.

The depictions of the coastal environment from the early years until now, reflects a nation changing its identity – from a rural/bush self-image – to one that sees the beach as being the most geographically pertinent landscape to the majority of Australian's. A work such as Anne Zahalka's 2002 *Cole Classic II (the next wave)* in which thousands are lined up to take part in an ocean swim event, illustrates our contemporary obsession with the beach. The large surf community on the Gold Coast always responds to images of itself, thus surfing is another integral part of the beach collection. A 2002 travelling exhibition, *6ft + clean: surf + art*, saw numerous works acquired that dealt specifically with how artists have been influenced by surfing, including Anne Zahalka, Kieran Kinney, Mark Kimber, Tim Hixson, James Geurts and Scott Redford.

The Gallery also has a large collection of outdoor sculpture as part of the Evandale Sculpture Walk. Instigated by Fran Cummings in 1990 around a small promontory in the Nerang River, adjacent to the Gold Coast Arts Centre, this walk represents a wonderful selection of Australian and international sculptors. Cummings initiated a number of sculptural commissions, including works by Robert J Morris, Chris Booth and Stephen Newton. More recently the Gallery's chairman, Pat Corrigan, has facilitated the lending or gift of more works for the Sculpture Walk including Michael Snape, Melinda Brown and William Tucker. Corrigan part funded the commission of the large Chris Booth work, and has since gone on to become one of the Gallery's major benefactors, gifting over 400 works in the past 15 years.

Marking the dominance of the photographic medium in contemporary art, in 2002 the Gallery hosted the first *Josephine Ulrick & Win Schubert Photography Award*. The inaugural award was won by Tasmanian artist David Stephenson, with his study of a Hungarian synagogue. With a first prize of \$10,000, it was at the time the richest photographic prize in the country, attracting a distinguished group of photo-media artists including Rosemary Laing, Marian Drew, Fiona McDonald and Julie Rrap. The award has contributed greatly to the development of the collection of contemporary photography, a collection that includes major pieces by Anne Ferran, Anne Zahalka, Julie Rrap and Tracey Moffatt. These works complement earlier works by mid Twentieth Century photographers including Max Dupain, Jeff Carter and David Moore – pioneers who helped establish photography as a vital medium in Australia

Lastly, to recognize the significant impact screen-based work is having on contemporary art, the Gallery has developed a specific gallery space, DarkRoom, in which to show new media on an ongoing basis. In 2004, for the first time, the Conrad Jupiters Art Award sought entries from video artists. Gold Coast based artist, Christopher Bennie's work *Mothership*, was the first video work acquired, and signals the beginnings of another chapter in the



development of Gold Coast City Art Gallery's collection. The Conrad Jupiters Art Award, which began its life in 1968 with the inaugural Gold Coast Art Prize, entered a new era in 2007 with the support of the Stan and Maureen Duke Foundation. The annual award is now known as the Stan and Maureen Duke Gold Coast Art Prize.

*Brett Adlington, 2006*

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