

ROY JACKSON RETROSPECTIVE



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WHEN ROY JACKSON died in July 2013, aged 68, we lost a unique voice in Australian art. His remarkable achievements are celebrated in *Roy Jackson – Retrospective 1965–2013*, an exhibition curated by Sioux Garside and Terence Maloon which opened at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra in late 2013, and is now being reconfigured in Sydney at the S.H. Ervin Gallery from 27 February – 12 April, 2015. The exhibition will then tour Tamworth, Wollongong, Orange and Maitland throughout 2015–16.

A monograph of Jackson's work, published by ANU Drill Hall Gallery Publishing, will be launched in March 2015. In planning the retrospective and book, Terence Maloon interviewed the artist at his home over several weekends. I am grateful to Maloon and Maggie Bassendine, Jackson's partner and trustee of the Roy Jackson Art Estate, for providing me an advance copy of this interview and other text from the monograph, which has enabled me to quote the artist's own views about his life and work.

Roy Jackson was born in England in 1944, migrating to Australia with his parents at the age of 15, though returning a year later to continue his art school studies at the Sutton School of Art and the Wimbledon College of Art. The influence of this time was not immediately apparent, but something the

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artist realised later in life. "I woke up to the fact that my youth was spent going up to London, looking at the galleries when I was an art student and that period, the late '50s and the '60s, I recently started to look at quite seriously [for example painters Alan Davie, Peter Lanyon and Ivon Hitchens]. I was re-finding a heritage that I hadn't consciously realised I had."

Australia and her artists, however, were to have an instant impact. On the ship sailing from England, Jackson heard there was an artist on board and "sought him out" as he had never met a "real artist". This was Ron Lambert, returning home after two years of painting in Europe. Lambert became a mentor to Jackson for the next decade. To Jackson, "He was a natural teacher. He never propounded theories, dogma or methods, no rules passed his lips but he was passionate about personal enlightenment received through experience and self-education."

Ian Fairweather was another early and enduring influence on Jackson's work. When he was 16 Jackson saw a Fairweather exhibition at the Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, and was struck by their uniqueness. "I remember being alone in the gallery with the paintings, feeling their earthiness and dusty dry light. The linearity, the patches of colour felt completely natural and right. I'd



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108



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never seen painting like this before. Most painting I'd seen was made with sensual and meaty oil paint and felt European. These paintings resonated with heat and the dryness of distance. There was no yearning for 'green fields'. They were made in Australia."

This was a lesson Jackson took to heart, and sought to recreate in his own work. Rejecting the "slick, shiny, lavish" nature of oil paint as inappropriate for the dryness and "austerity" of the Australian bush, Jackson experimented with his materials. "I wanted to make paint that was as close as possible to the earth, to paint with the earth and that's why I started making my own paints. The first pigments I got were all the earth ochres and I painted with them for years and I still have a predilection for those. The dryness is still really important to me; I could never just paint in oil paint; to me that belongs to Europe."

Indeed it was Australia's landscape that was to have the greatest influence on Jackson's work. He found it "filled with extraordinary energy, beauty and spirit" and started painting immediately, from a glasshouse he converted into a studio at his family's Neutral Bay flat. A studio had always been very important to Jackson, and he would claim space wherever he was living for this purpose.

Jackson's ultimate studio was to be found at Wedderburn, an area 57 kilometres south-west of Sydney. In the early 1970s, Barb and Nick Romalis gifted four hectares (10 acres) of bush to a group of artists (Elisabeth Cummings, Joan Brassil, Fred Braat and Jackson; John Peart (1945–2013) was to join later when they acquired six more hectares) so they could live and work without financial pressures. 'Widdin Weddin' was Jackson's base for 38 years and had a great impact. As he stated, "My painting has been

109



05

most affected by living in this environment. The studio opens onto it and I look at it every day. If someone asks me what has influenced me most in my work I simply point to the landscape of this place. It is absurd how a moment of fate turns into destiny, human connections and ideas turn into a life lived."

As well as a permanent base at Wedderburn, travel was very important to Jackson's process throughout his career, with the Australian wilderness and Greece holding particular fascination. From 1995 Jackson spent time each year at Bassendine's home in the North of England, re-engaging with his early influences and finding new ones in the stone walls of Northumberland and the visual dialogue that occurred when he worked on paintings in both his Australian and English studios. Jackson's art is not easy to characterise, something that the artist himself realised.

"If I am asked what I paint, what 'kind' of art I make, terms such as 'Landscape', 'Abstract', 'Contemporary' fit loosely. I work with nature close up; I sense how it works and use paint similarly. A painted line moves across the canvas like a branch of a tree grows out toward light. Space and form are like water moving across rocks. Every direction is active simultaneously. Small and large energies move side by side. I am not a city person, nature informs all my work, and

I have always tried to use paint and colour to get as close as I possibly can to the earth." An important aspect of Jackson's practice was his passion and dedication. To Sioux Garside, "His intelligent creativity was fuelled by an unswerving commitment to painting and drawing every day. In this regard he continues the pattern of an artist completely dedicated to painting while remaining as much as possible at a distance from the commercial imperatives of the art market – free to experiment and innovate."

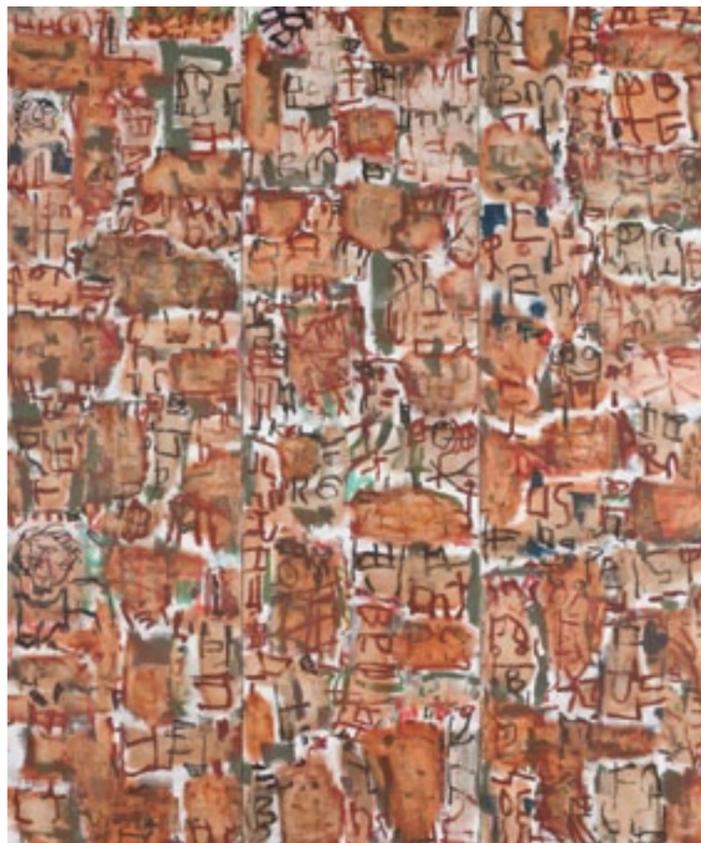
Bassendine personally encountered this: "I soon discovered that drawing for Roy is a way of inhabiting the spaces he passes through – his note/sketch books accompany him on train journeys, in hotels, on remote beaches. They fill with his direct mark-making derived from observing the immediate environment combined with vestiges of his wide reading and other half forgotten and revitalised memories. This constant engagement with the present underlines the inseparability of his daily life with hands-on work."

These sketches were important to Jackson's practice, but as works in themselves rather than plans for larger paintings. His process was much more spontaneous. In his words, "I can start from very different places as long as there is a feeling of celebration of the natural world. The paintings grow organically from

the first brushmarks. Although my work is considered abstract it's not uncommon for me to start a work from plants, stones, things around me in the studio or in the landscape. I like to use my hands so the work is hands-on, painterly and maybe even raw."

These qualities are immediately apparent when one views the paintings selected for the retrospective exhibition, which John McDonald described in 2013 as "one of the most impressive things I've seen this year". Each work seems infused with energy and the process of the artist becomes tangible as you trace the movement of his materials over the canvas.

This is equally true of expressive, free-flowing works such as 'Kythra', 'Running Acrobat Moon' or 'Jowalbinna Bushcamp' and more structured, patterned works like 'Tidal', 'Rain' or 'Text for a Dry Land'. The former show an intuitive, spontaneous, impassioned hand darting across the canvas, while the latter seem more measured, with colours and shapes carefully placed to form harmonious fields of pattern. In some works subjects are recognisable, such as his portraits or paintings of dingos, in others tangible objects or words are incorporated with heavily worked abstracted backgrounds, and others are given over entirely to form and colour. In each work, elements come together to create a unique rhythm and feeling that



06



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- 01 Such a Place, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 180cm
- 02 Wang Wauk, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 150cm
- 03 Roy Jackson at his 2004 exhibition at Martin Browne Fine Art Gallery, photographer Stephen Oxenbury
- 04 Morning Light, 2012 acrylic, water soluble pencil and graphite on paper, 29 x 37.5cm
- 05 Mereenie Loop, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 160 x 240cm
- 06 Text for a Dry Land, 2010, polymer/oil emulsion and oil stick on canvas, 180 x 150cm
- 07 Dingo, 1997, polymer tempera on paper mounted on canvas, 57 x 75.5cm

Courtesy the estate of Roy Jackson, Defiance Gallery, the Nock Art Foundation and the collections of Richard Caldwell, Margaret Bassendine and Allan and Lisa Campbell



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is extraordinarily effective in capturing the essence of a subject, place or idea. Over the course of planning the retrospective, Terence Maloon suggested that Jackson paint a series of large paintings for the final room of the exhibition. The resulting *Clinamen* series, of which six were planned and three accomplished, were important works that were to shape the plan of the show, as discussed by Garside.

"Roy responded [to Maloon's suggestion] with a brilliant fierceness, circling back to his beginnings, to the form and structure of the paintings of the mid 1970s, to the qualities of light and philosophies of his beloved Greece, and the descriptive drawing lines of his earliest works, then across decades the paintings in his retrospective across time and space and from place to person, to reveal the consistent interconnections in his oeuvre."

While Maloon and Garside were free to choose works from all aspects of Jackson's career, the artist was also involved in the process and there were certain works that he was particularly passionate about and thus became significant in the exhibition. States Garside: "It might have been that a particular painting conveyed a special time, place, person or memory of such intensity that the painting was forever freighted with meaning for the artist. 'Jowalbinna' is just such an example."

Defiance Gallery Directors Campbell Robertson-Swann and Lauren Harvey see the survey as a well-earned commemoration of an important artist's work. "It is immensely rewarding to see his work receiving the recognition it deserves." They are happy that more people can experience the work of "an artist of unquestionable integrity with a rare and distinctive voice. He is the quintessential artists' artist who has relentlessly followed his own path. He is greatly influential among friends and former students and held in such high regard." ■

EXHIBITION
Roy Jackson Retrospective 1963–2015
2 February – 12 April 2015
S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney
www.shervgallery.com.au