

Australian Surrealism: The Agapitos/Wilson Collection, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 25 July – 12 October 2003, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 16 December – 28 March 2004, S. H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 19 June – 8 August 2004, Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, 27 August – 7 November 2004, New England Regional Art Museum, Armidale, 26 November – 6 February 2005, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, 25 February – 8 May 2005

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In Surrealism, the fire of art and the ice of science have met, and from the synthesis mankind has been endowed with a powerful new weapon for its combat against darkness and evil (James Gleeson).¹

In June 1939, James Gleeson exhibited *The Attitude of Lightning towards a Lady-Mountain* (fig. 1) at the Contemporary Art Society's inaugural show in Melbourne, a Dalí-influenced painting that proved the exhibition's *succès de scandale*. The CAS exhibition, at the prestigious venue of the National Gallery of Victoria, was an ideal showcase for Australia's ambitious young modernists. Shortly before the *Herald* Exhibition of French and British Painting delivered European modernism's full impact to an Australian audience for the first time, Gleeson appeared as surrealism's advance guard.² Without the advantage of seeing surrealist painting firsthand, Gleeson nonetheless became Australian surrealism's most eloquent spokesman and devoted partisan, declaring: 'I was born a Surrealist.'³





Fig.1. James Gleeson, *The Attitude of Lightning towards a Lady-Mountain*, 1939, oil on canvas, 79 x 63.3 cm, Agapitos/Wilson Collection

Surrealism was a highly visible movement in Australia where its agenda – provocative, political, self-consciously modern and determinedly international – found fertile ground. While there was no Australian ‘surrealist circle,’ a wide range of artists including Sidney Nolan, Joy Hester, Albert Tucker, John Perceval, Arthur Boyd, Russell Drysdale and Peter Purves Smith all felt its lure and responded, often briefly, but in ways that were vital and deeply-felt. These artists, and many lesser known ones, are included in a remarkable private collection of over two hundred works whose intention is to survey the largely uncharted phenomenon of Australian surrealism. Sydney collectors James Agapitos and Ray Wilson commissioned critic Bruce James to assist them in their quest to buy exclusively surrealist art, and to document the collection in a book. A selection of the works comprise the current touring exhibition, *Australian Surrealism*. For the first time, the startling breadth and depth of Australian surrealism can be viewed as a movement in its own right.



The Attitude of Lightning towards a Lady-Mountain was the first surrealist work Agapitos and Wilson acquired at a Christie's Australia auction in 1990. Gleeson's painting, a crucial work in Australian surrealism's history, garnered critical and popular attention during the CAS exhibition in 1939. It was reproduced in the *Herald* and the *Sun*, accompanied in the latter by Gleeson's words: 'the artist shuts his eyes to reality and paints creations of his subconscious mind.'⁴ An 'inquiring lady' wrote to the *Herald* advising Gleeson to take 'his picture to a psychiatrist.'⁵ Writing in *Art in Australia*, Gino Nibbi sounded a circumspect note. Nibbi's anti-fascist sentiments had made him quit Italy and settle in Melbourne where his Leonardo bookshop, with its splendid array of books, journals, records and modern art prints, became a focus.⁶ In Rome, Nibbi had been friendly with Giorgio de Chirico. A sophisticated commentator on cultural issues, Nibbi was concerned that Gleeson 'appeared to follow, perhaps too closely, the vision ... of Salvador Dalí.'⁷

Issues of influence and originality have always bedeviled non-indigenous Australian art. Until the late nineteenth century, the images of Australia recorded in landscape painting were dependent on European vision, and the Australian wilderness appeared as manicured as an English park. Post-impressionism's reception in Australia was slow: it was not until 1913 that a group of Sydney art students created works influenced by Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Public collections in Australia were singularly dull and conservative, masterminded by reactionaries and devoid of modern art. Dependent on secondary sources, artists left Australia in order to challenge and educate themselves.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Australia came late to surrealism. Art and debate had emerged by 1932, the year that Sam Atyeo painted *Surrealist Head* (now lost). The following year Alleyne Zander, publicity officer for the Royal Academy in London, commented that 'the younger generation of Australians appears to be interested in such abstract ideas as the principles of surrealism.'⁸ The 1936 International Surrealist exhibition in London resounded in Australia and was reported in major newspapers. It displayed the talents of the French surrealist circle – Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró and André Masson – and to prove its global credentials, a total of fourteen nations were represented. No



Australians were among the artists included, however. Peter Purves Smith visited the International Surrealist exhibition and its impact shaped his oeuvre. *Woman Eating Duck* (1948, fig. 2), with its biomorphic distortions and vertiginous space, explores the formal exaggerations, wit and wonderful strangeness of the surrealist vocabulary. But Purves Smith was in the minority: most artists in the Agapitos/Wilson collection had to make do with haunting the Leonardo bookshop, or other local venues, for their surrealist awakenings.



Fig. 2. Peter Purves Smith, *Woman eating Duck*, 1948, gouache on paper, 45.7 x 61 cm, Agapitos/Wilson Collection

Sidney Nolan, the only Australian artist who has had a significant career in England, fashioned a deliciously original response to surrealism. Though surrealism was a brief affair for Nolan, as it was for other major Australian artists like Hester, Boyd and Perceval, its humour and powerful visual dissonances shaped the imagery of his early work. *Girl with a Curly Line* (c. 1945, fig. 3) may take as a reference Picasso's beach goddesses of the late 1920s, but it is Nolan's own childhood at St Kilda beach that gives the painting its idiosyncratic charm. Nolan, an expert in creating lyrical, *faux-naïf* figures, uses Surrealism's doodling automatic calligraphy to make the figure dance with a mad, playful energy. St Kilda beach, especially during the war years, was Melbourne's favourite playground, a place for sun worshipping and socialising. Nolan combines the authenticity of autobiography with the



language of European modernism to produce an image that is both surreal and Australian. Making a canny connection, the Agapitos/Wilson collection also includes several of Nolan's highly regarded drought paintings from the early 1950s, linking the dessicated forms of dead cattle to Nolan's earlier surrealist essays.



Fig.3. Sidney Nolan, *Girl with a Curly Line*, c. 1945, oil and enamel paint on board, 61 x 91.5 cm, Agapitos/Wilson Collection

Bruce James, in his thorough account, believes 'it was Melbourne that Surrealism chose as its Australian nerve centre.'⁹ A preponderance of surrealists was grouped there, though Adelaide, with Ivor Francis, Dora Chapman and Jeffrey Smart, was also well represented. Max Harris, publisher and surrealist poet, should also be mentioned as an important member of the Adelaide *milieu*. But Melbourne, with its complex and often virulent art politics, combined with the intense, sexual imagery and tenor of tortured Expressionism chosen by several of its key painters, made it surrealism's most fecund arena. To locate surrealism's energy even more specifically, it was at the home of art patrons Sunday and John Reed, where the group – Nolan, Tucker, Hester, Boyd and Perceval – met as regular guests. Nolan created his first *Ned Kelly* series (1946–47) on the Reeds' dining room table. Today the Reeds' home and collection has become a public gallery, the Heide Museum of Modern Art, where *Australian Surrealism* was recently shown. In 1934, the Reeds bought a property in the lush Yarra Valley, some distance from Melbourne, and opened their doors to young



modernists. Named Heide after the suburb of Heidelberg, it became Australia's Bloomsbury. Not only did the Reeds encourage, collect and financially support the artists mentioned above, they began a publishing house with Max Harris and jointly edited, again with Harris, a stylish art journal with the appropriately surrealist title of *Angry Penguins*. Published in its pages were Herbert Read, his follower the anarchist writer and poet George Woodcock, as well as Dylan Thomas, Henry Treece and Robert Penn Warren. James Gleeson's poetry was also included. The Reeds' library provided Nolan with Arthur Rimbaud and Hester with Jean Cocteau's *Opium*, the latter inspiring a series of drawings, *An Incredible Night Dream* (c. 1946–7). The Reeds, both from wealthy, patrician backgrounds, were avowedly leftwing; Herbert Read's *Art Now* was their Bible.

Joy Hester is one of Australian surrealism's few female contributors. Indeed, she is the only woman member of *Angry Penguins*, the group of artists which took its name from the Reed-Harris journal, and which galvanised Australian art during the war years. *Fun Fair* (c. 1946, fig. 4) shows an eerie evening land- and seascape, where a girl's body lies like an abandoned doll beneath the terrifying gaze and yawning maw of a monster decked with a crown reading 'Fun Fair.' In 1946, Hester was living near St Kilda beach and close to Luna Park. But her interpretation of the area is very different to Nolan's. Luna Park's two distinctive features – the enormous, painted mouth providing its entrance and the Scenic Railway's wooden armature – are transformed by Hester into the voracious Fun Fair monster, that she contrasts with the abject vulnerability of the girl-doll. The monster's square head directly quotes the abstracted helmet Nolan invented for Ned Kelly. A geometric version of the Scenic Railway forms the crown. Hester was a keen admirer of Nolan's work but, on a deeper level, she registers the anxieties that feminine creativity can experience under the male gaze, where the 'body' of female enterprise literally wilts and is infantilised. Interestingly, in Sunday Reed, Hester sought a mentor, prized audience and chief support until the latter's death in 1960, underscoring the need by a woman artist for a receptive female gaze.¹⁰ Other works by women artists in the Agapitos/Wilson collection include Freda Robertshaw's delicate abstract *Composition* (c. 1947), Inge King's marble sculpture *Animal Shapes in Space* (1948) and Vera Rudner's scarifying *Sacrilege* (1942).





Fig 4. Joy Hester, *Fun Fair*, c. 1946, watercolour and gouache on paper, 24.5 x 31 cm, Agapitos/Wilson Collection

Gleeson's quotation that opens this review indicates Australian surrealism's political and historical context: it was viewed as a language of freedom and a weapon against fascism. It was largely a wartime movement that enjoyed its most lively impact and discourse among a generation of younger artists between 1939 and 1945, though Gleeson remains Australian surrealism's lone standard bearer. But the Agapitos/Wilson collection draws attention to just how profound that experience was for Australian art.

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¹ James Gleeson, 'What is Surrealism?', *Art in Australia*, November 1930, 30.

² The *Herald* Exhibition of French and British Painting was commissioned and funded by Sir Keith Murdoch, the newspaper's director, and selected in Europe by *Herald* art critic Basil Burdett. It opened in Melbourne in October 1939. 217 works were exhibited, mainly French paintings. Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso made the central contribution, while Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Amedeo Modigliani and Marc Chagall were also included. De Chirico, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí's *L'Homme fleur* (the talking point of the exhibition) represented surrealism.

³ Quoted in Lou Klepac, *James Gleeson, Landscape out of Nature*, Sydney, 1987, 12.

⁴ Gleeson, *The Sun*, 7 June 1939.

⁵ Anon, *The Herald*, 8 June 1939.

⁶ Nibbi brought several modernist paintings to Australia including de Chirico's *Horses on the Beach* (now lost). From de Chirico's later period, this work was not considered to be one of the artist's strongest pieces, but it had been a personal gift from the artist. See Gino Nibbi, 'Some Modern Masters', *Stream*, 1:2, 1931, 8.

⁷ Gino Nibbi, 'Ideas Behind Contemporary Art,' *Art in Australia*, August 1939, p. 17.

⁸ Alleyne Zander, 'Modern Art, an Historical Explanation,' *Manuscripts*, 4, February 1933, 28.

⁹ Bruce James, *Australian Surrealism: The Agapitos/Wilson Collection*, Roseville, New South Wales, 2003, 33.

¹⁰ See Janine Burke, *Joy Hester, Milson's Point*, 2001 and Janine Burke (ed.), *Dear Sun: The Letters of Joy Hester and Sunday Reed*, Milson's Point, 1995.

