

## **WOMEN IN ABSTRACTION**

September 2 - October 28

Curated by James Makin Advisory

For its latest hang, the ANZ Gallery presents *Women in Abstraction*, work by contemporary female artists working across the various fields of abstraction. Featuring work by Australian and New Zealand artists, the exhibition spotlights the remarkable contributions of contemporary female abstractionists to antipodean art history – and, indeed, art history at large. Historically dominated by men, it is significant that the female history of abstract art is now displayed.

Ensuring the visibility and recognition of female abstractionists is a historically significant project. Since its conception in the early twentieth century, female abstractionists have been categorically excluded from the history of the movement. This exclusion has been well documented by art historians such as Griselda Pollock and Maura Reilly. Both Pollock and Reilly take aim at Alfred H. Barr's catalogue essay for the Museum of Modern Art's 1936 exhibition 'Cubism and Abstract Art.' Authored by Barr, the Museum's founding director, Pollock describes the essay as "one of the first attempts to plot the course of Modern art history." Notably, this history actively excluded women artists of the period. In regards to abstraction in particular, Pollock explains that "when he (Barr) goes to Paris he meets the Delaunays, both Sonia and Robert. When he writes it up, there is only Robert."<sup>1</sup> This exclusion of female abstractionists was reiterated and solidified by art historian Meyer Schapiro, who mapped a history of abstraction in his 1937 text, "The Nature of Abstract Art." When discussing American Abstraction and the New York School, Scapiro relegated artists Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchel, Grace Hartigan and Elaine de Kooning as 'second generation' abstractionists, despite the fact that they were practising at the same time as their male counterparts, such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning.

On the concept of 'mapping' abstract – and, in fact, any – art history, Maura Reilly takes further issue with Alfred H. Barr and those like Schapiro who attempt to provide a blueprint for it. Reflecting on Barr's map of Modernism, Reilly observes an incorrect "synchronic, linear progression of 'isms'" where one artist (male) succeeds another with a particular style or movement. That is, the art historical record promoted a singular, progressivist narrative that excluded any timeline or artist that diverts 'art history' from an ideologically coherent trajectory. In this, it was women who were excluded and women who interrupted the clean line of the historical record. For example, abstract expressionists such as Pollock are categorised as animalistic, primal, and often brutal, whereas female abstract expressionists like Elaine de Kooning and Joan Mitchell brought sensuality and lyricism – and didn't fit the brief.

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<sup>1</sup> Pollock, "Feminism, Art the Library and the Politics of Memory," 7.

It's an almost amusing concept that post-modern histories – especially that of *abstraction* – were mapped along such linear histories. Abstract art was not about history, theory, or philosophy. If anything it rebuffed these things, and was instead entrenched in emotional response; existential, ethical. Abstraction largely seeks to avoid literal associations and is ergo devoid of hierarchies and implicit bias. If an abstract artist seeks to discuss something literal, it is done in a visual language that isn't instantly known to the viewer, interrupting their ability to unconsciously attach meaning and encouraging them to rethink the ways that things are seen.

Angela Brennan's *Why is it, I wonder* (2009), exemplifies the ability of abstract art to detach from reality and step into a more ephemeral terrain. Angela Brennan is a Melbourne-based painter working predominantly with lively colour and abstraction, depicting elements of an inner world. Her evolving practice consists of humming, floating forms and surfaces—a process which allows for dreamt imaginings to spill out and thrive. Imagery and colour are arranged intuitively in her work, and often immersive in scale. Her paintings transport the viewer warmly and invitingly into her universe; a state of introspection, contemplation and feeling.

Similarly, New Zealand-based artist Rebecca Wallis grounds her work in an emotional realm. Wallis deconstructs and reforms the canvas and the 'traditional' painted surface, reconfiguring them into something on the precipice - but just outside - of recognition. Where Brennan's work invites viewers warmly, Wallis provokes, using the abject and allusive experiences of the real. She makes associations between the corporeal and the painterly, to reveal the 'beyond, behind, and beneath' existence itself. Her recent methods characteristically involve simple and unconventional gestures, where she refers to herself as a conduit for the interaction between materials. This is no more apparent than in her work, *Edge of Self* (2022), where in the title and reconfiguration of the canvas, the artist's hand is evident. In her work Wallis often exhibits a purposeful, artist-led slipping away and resisting of containment, referring to an allusive experience of 'understanding' that lies outside that of language.

Where Brennan and Wallis' practice is about a constructive reimagining, be it an emotional realm, or a reconfiguration of familiar visual signifiers, Judy Millar's work centres upon the process of erasure. The gestural and abstracted surfaces of Judy Millar's art are both intensely physical and highly mediated structures, reflecting the paradox we face of inhabiting both corporeal and cognitive realms. Millar, a distinguished and internationally acclaimed artist, employs the processes of erasure – wiping and scraping paint off the surface of the work – to create visceral canvases that invoke a sense of the body. As the artist explains, "Without our body we don't exist, this to me is our experience of the world and this is what paintings can directly address." Millar's painterly practice also incorporates various printing techniques and digital reproduction, which allow her to push the possibilities of scale by enlarging and exaggerating the painted surface. Through exaggerations of scale, her expressive paintings saturate the viewer and become commanding expressions of embodiment.

The history of abstraction, too, must situate the viewer in an embodied female history of the movement. In a time where recuperative strategies of curation – that is, making visible artists who were once relegated to the back of the history books – is having a resurgence, this exhibition reminds us that we have to also celebrate and situate those artists practising now. This ensures that those recuperative strategies will not be needed in the future. In the works of Angela Brennan, Eleanor Louise Butt, Leslie Dumbrell, Emma Coulter, Lara Merett, Judy Millar, Nuha Saad, Antonia Sellbach, Noël Skrzypczak, Wilma Tabacco, Kate Tucker and Rebecca Wallis, *Women in Abstraction* makes sure that the leaders of contemporary abstraction are celebrated in their own time.

*Catalogue essay by Laura Kirkham*

## ARTWORKS CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

- 1. Noël Skrzypczak**  
*Sunrise at 35,000 feet*  
2019  
acrylic on canvas  
152.0 x 224.5 cm  
*Neon Parc Gallery*
- 2. Antonia Sellbach**  
*Unstable Object #46*  
2020  
acrylic and gesso on linen  
150.0 x 150.0 cm  
*Nicholas Thompson Gallery*
- 3. Lara Merett**  
*Harvesting*  
2019  
acrylic and ink on linen  
153.0 x 122.0 cm  
*Sullivan+Strumpf Gallery*
- 4. Rebecca Wallis**  
*Edge of Self*  
2022  
silk and acrylic on silk over pine bars  
130.0 x 125.0 x 15.0 cm  
*Scott Lawrie Gallery*
- 5. Emma Coulter**  
*SPECTRUM WARP #2*  
2021  
synthetic polymer paint on linen  
153.0 x 121.0 x 3.2 cm  
*Courtesy of the artist*
- 6. Emma Coulter**  
*Construction #10 (parallel rainbow)*  
2018  
pigmented and mirror acrylic  
68.0 x 43.0 x 16.0 cm  
*Courtesy of the artist*
- 7. Angela Brennan**  
*Why is it, I wonder*  
2009  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
171.0 x 180.0 cm  
*ANZ Fine Art Collection*
- 8. Wilma Tabacco**  
*Viceversa*  
2003-4  
oil on linen  
183.0 x 152.0 cm  
*Galleriesmlth*
- 9. Kate Tucker**  
*Absorbing Place*  
2021  
linen, canvas, calico, acrylic, acrylic  
mediums on canvas; bronze supports  
127.0 x 141.0 x 4.0 cm  
*Daine Singer Gallery*
- 10. Lesley Dumbrell**  
*Midnight Mauve*  
2001  
acrylic on canvas  
106.0 x 198.0 cm  
*Charles Nodrum Gallery*
- 11. Judy Millar**  
*Untitled*  
2007  
oil on canvas  
195.0 x 138.0 cm  
*ANZ Fine Art Collection*
- 12. Nuha Saad**  
*Razzle Dazzle Chroma*  
2022  
oil on wood panel  
20 x 66cm  
*James Makin Gallery*



**13. Eleanor Louise Butt**

*Autumn Painting 2*

2022

oil on cotton

160.0 x 200.0 cm

*Nicholas Thompson Gallery*



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*Sunrise at 35,000 feet*

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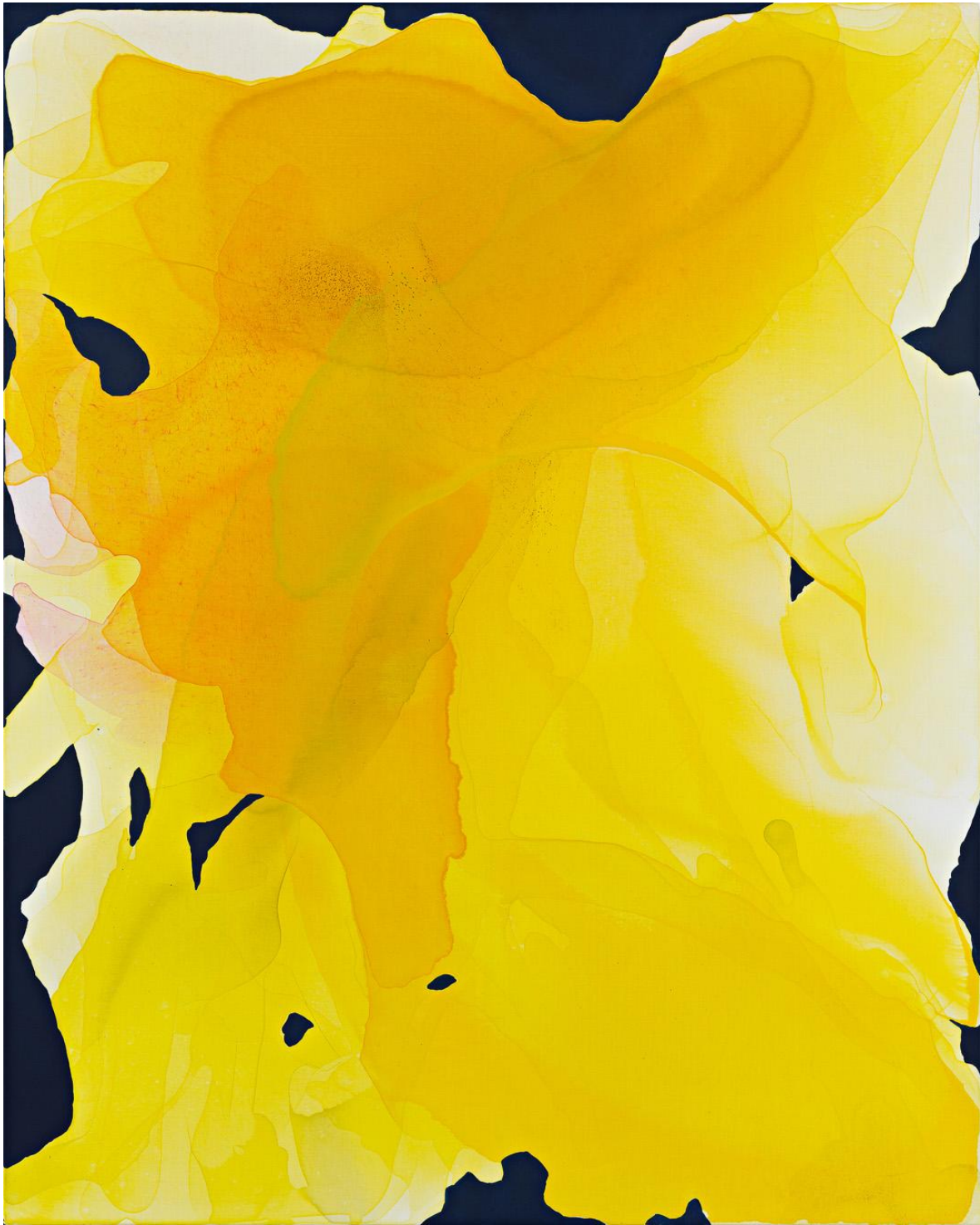
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