

New Abstraction RMIT 1965-1985
Leonard Crawford · George Johnson · Grahame King

Introduction

Leonard Crawford · George Johnson

2007 marks the 120th year that RMIT has trained and educated artists in the fine and applied arts. This proud history, 1887 to 2007, of commitment to cultural education is celebrated continuously through RMIT Gallery's extensive exhibition program of fine arts, design, fashion, craft, architecture and new media and specifically, in this exhibition of the work of artists Leonard Crawford, George Johnson and Grahame King. Each artist contributed a significant part of their distinguished careers to the art school at RMIT. We warmly acknowledge their pedagogical legacy and thank them for their generous support to curator Charlotte Skene through their time and access to their work archives. Warm thanks are also extended to Jenny Zimmer, Inge King, Peter Clarke, Marjorie Johnson, Charles Nodrum and Gordon Morrison. We acknowledge the generous gift of artworks from the Leonard Crawford Estate to the RMIT Art Collection, several of which are featured in *New Abstraction RMIT 1965 - 1985*.

Suzanne Davies, April 2007

Len Crawford taught in the painting studios, George Johnson in the 'workshop' over in Building 15 and Grahame King at the lithography press on a staircase landing between levels 3 and 4 of Building 2. Although employed for part of each week, they were dedicated teachers and all brought something extra to their instruction: Crawford, by sharing his passion for music; Johnson, his practical approach to the use of materials and commitment to geometric abstraction; King, his patience in teaching lithography and quiet efforts to assist his students' progress after art school. They were not a group and perhaps seldom met, but their collective presence enabled specific knowledge of abstract art to infiltrate the Fine Art Department.

It may be apocryphal, but it was rumoured that in the 1960s newly enrolling painting students were offered two options — figuration with Andrew Sibley or abstraction with Len Crawford. Most chose figuration, but the division was arbitrary since by this time almost all painting, and certainly any that was informed, had absorbed



aspects of European Modernism and most painting was to a greater or lesser extent abstract — even the works of those who debunked abstract art and considered it a passing phenomenon.

If the popular contention that Melburnians favoured figuration while Sydney-siders were inclined to abstraction has validity, one reason for this schism might lie in art school traditions inherited from European and British academies and, as late as the 1960s, still lingering in institutions like RMIT and the National Gallery Art School then on the other side of La Trobe Street. Accurate rendering, reinforced by life-drawing skills, formed the foundation of art training. In the early 1960s, before the introduction of acrylics, RMIT students still made gesso from traditional recipes and stretched and primed their own canvases before painting set exercises in still-life or figure composition. The architectural layout, turpentine-scented aroma and general ambience of RMIT's art school was similar to that of the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London where many Melbourne artists studied after attending the National Gallery Art School.

Add to this the success in Australia and abroad of Melbourne's own 'figurative abstractionists', Nolan, Boyd and Tucker. In support of the directions pioneered by these modernists, the 'Antipodeans' — Bernard Smith, Arthur Boyd, David Boyd, John Brack, Charles Blackman, Clifton Pugh and Robert Dickerson — issued their 'Antipodean Manifesto' (1959) which condemned non-figurative abstraction as empty decoration leading to 'a death of mind and spirit'. As selective modernists, it seems that their fear was not so much European abstraction but new emanations from New York where action painters and emerging minimalists were producing art that depended solely on perceptual responses and shunned pictorial traditions. Ten years later just such Minimalism appeared in 'The Field' (1969), an exhibition which helped celebrate the opening of the National Gallery of Victoria on St. Kilda Road.

New Zealander George Johnson, already well-versed in literary and art world developments, was so incensed by the Antipodeans' derision of non-objective art that he painted a rejoinder entitled *Antipodean Nightmare* (1968), now in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria. His staunch advocacy of geometric abstraction continues to this day.

Cover image:
George Johnson
Mount of the Blue Triangle 1986
Acrylic on canvas
3050 x 1985 mm
Collection of Ballarat Fine Art Gallery
© George Johnson and Ballarat Fine Art Gallery

Inside cover left/right:
Leonard Crawford
Triptych No. 1 1963
Oil on canvas
3 panels each
1010 x 510 mm
Collection of RMIT University

Images from left to right:
Grahame King
Floating Tower 1963
Lithograph
660 x 480 mm
Collection of the artist

Leonard Crawford
Pierrot Lunaire 1975
Oil on canvas
1220 x 610 mm
Collection of RMIT University

Leonard Crawford
Moon Drunk 1961-63
Enamel on Swedish hardboard
1350 x 1220 mm
Collection of RMIT University

George Johnson
World View 1984
Acrylic on canvas
1220 x 2440 mm
Charles Nodrum Gallery

George Johnson
Red Triangle Construction No. 8 1988
Acrylic on canvas
1830 x 1520 mm
Charles Nodrum Gallery

Grahame King
Predatory Bird 1963
Lithograph
430 x 315 mm
Collection of the artist

Grahame King
Celebration 1993
Lithograph
555 x 745 mm
Collection of the artist



George Johnson · Grahame King

Circumstances commonly endured in the 1930's Depression helped shape Leonard Crawford's abstraction. Born in 1920, into a God-fearing, West Brunswick, working class family, he left school at thirteen to work as a labourer in a succession of trades—locksmithing, metal-casting, upholstering and glass-blowing to identify just a few. Fortunately, he served as a delivery boy for a printer who published the communist newspaper, *The Workers' Voice*. This led to membership of the Workers' Theatre group where he learned about music and the stage. Short-term employment at yet another institution ceased when he turned eighteen and qualified for a higher wage, but in the meantime he had saved enough to buy a rosewood piano.

By 1940, aged 20, the self-trained artist was exhibiting with Melbourne's new Contemporary Art Society and his painting *Improvisation* (1940) was reproduced in the *Sun* newspaper — along with others by Sidney Nolan and Adrian Lawlor. Crawford had gleaned information about the latest overseas developments from Gino Nibbi's Little Collins Street bookshop and from the recently arrived Yosl Bergner. He developed a style based on strong, form-enclosing lines, rhythmic shapes and non-objective compositional devices which was shared by many

contemporaries who were similarly attracted to European movements such as Synthetic Cubism, Tachism and Expressionism — the latter personified by the influential figures of Klee and Kandinsky. Crawford soon began the game (after Kandinsky) of equating sounds, colours and shapes, and frequently alluded to music and theatre in the titles of his paintings.

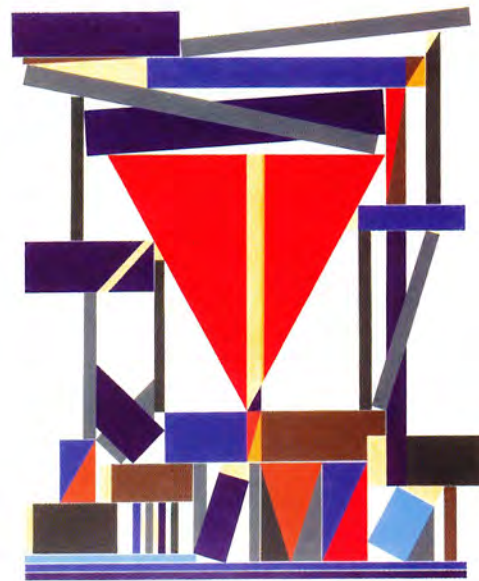
By the 1960s Crawford achieved his aim of completely abolishing the image. The beautiful three-panel *Triptych No 1* (1963) was painted in London where he travelled on the proceeds of sales of art works to the collector, Mrs Margaret Carnegie. In 1965 it was shown at the old National Gallery of Victoria in a major Survey Exhibition which included works by Leonard French, George Johnson, Jan Senbergs and Roger Kemp. About this time he left his employment at Brunswick Technical School to teach at RMIT. Thenceforth, he continued to explore the inexhaustible nuances of colour, line and shape while pursuing a perfect fusion of form and content.

George Johnson (b. 1926) also left school early due to the Depression. He worked on New Zealand rural properties until the mid-1940s when he and his brother, the poet Louis Johnson, found themselves at the centre of the so-called 'Wellington Group' of artists and poets. James K. Baxter, Theo Schoon, Gordon Walters and others congregated at the Johnsons' lodgings to discuss art and literature.

By raiding New Zealand bookshops they developed a good knowledge of European trends, favouring works by Picasso, Klee, Miro and Ernst.

Eventually George Johnson's heroes would be the more radical non-objective painters — Mondrian, Malevich and Kandinsky. But his emotional roots were firmly planted in the Pacific region; the organic crenellated shapes of his 1960s abstractions perhaps an instinctive response to Theo Schoon's late 1940s photographs of New Zealand's mud-pools and eddies. When, in 1970, Johnson and his family travelled, it was not to Europe but to Latin America where he was excited by the abstract structures of ancient Peruvian stonework and where the South Pacific's own peculiar 'Spirit of Place' felt omnipresent.

Johnson arrived in Australia in 1951 and by 1956, the year of the Melbourne Olympics, was sharing a Parkville studio with Leonard French and preparing his first solo show of totally non-objective paintings. With art materials expensive and difficult to obtain, both artists experimented by painting in commercial enamels on carpenters' composition board.



Similar techniques were employed by King and Crawford who during the 1960s, like Johnson, exhibited at the avant-garde Argus Gallery in La Trobe Street. By 1962 Johnson was on a roll, with works like *Earth Growth* (1962) receiving accolades from the critics James Gleeson and Alan McCulloch.

After teaching elsewhere, Johnson joined RMIT on a part-time basis in the early 1970s. Throughout that decade he developed the distinctive, uncompromising geometric abstraction that was so well received in 1983 when mature examples such as *Study for Structure No 6* (1982) were shown at Realities Gallery in Melbourne and Rudy Komon Galleries in Sydney.

The enormous *Mount of the Blue Triangle* (1986) was originally painted for an exhibition in the RMIT Gallery which did not eventuate. It has now arrived in a space where, in the latter years of his employment at RMIT, Johnson was responsible for the hanging of numerous exhibitions for enjoyment by the RMIT community and the public at large.

Grahame King (b.1915) received more conventional art training. His early career in commercial art demanded skills of photolithography, ticket-writing and sign-painting, some learned at the Working Men's College (later RMIT). Then, in the late 1930s, before World War II army service, he attended evening classes at the National Gallery Art School. After the war he received instruction from George Bell, adopting the Cézannesque style so popular in Melbourne, and at RMIT, until the 1960s.

In 1945 he joined the Victorian Artists' Society, becoming its secretary and thus beginning a lifetime of selfless service to the arts which included his later roles in helping to establish the Print Council of Australia and the Australian Print Workshop. At RMIT, in addition to teaching, he voluntarily designed many of the art school's posters, exhibition invitations and brochures and applied his photographic skills to making helpful identification portraits of all enrolled students.

Late in 1947 King left for Europe to see modern art first-hand and to study at the Central School of Arts

and Crafts in London. He stayed three years, residing and painting at The Abbey, an artists' colony which also hosted the Australians James Gleeson, Robert Klippel, Leonard French, Noel Counihan and Bernard Smith — and his wife-to-be, Inge Neufeld.

Back in Australia, the Kings held several joint exhibitions, but his major break came in 1961 when Victor Greenhalgh, Head of RMIT's art school, invited him and a group of significant Melbourne artists to use the printmaking facilities. The school had recently purchased a litho press and King, with his earlier experience in the trade, was one of very few artists ready and able to use it. Magnificent lithographs like *Floating Tower* (1963) produced over the next couple of years were highly acclaimed when shown at the Argus Gallery. They clearly demonstrated his indebtedness to European Modernism.

While teaching at RMIT, and travelling extensively, he absorbed influences from Japanese art and Aboriginal rock paintings — seen in works like the highly gestural *Aise* (1980) and *At Noulangi* (1984). He was also well aware of post-war developments in New York and, in works like *Sorcerer* (1965) and

Totem (1970), shared the search for atavistic origins that so gripped New York's first generation of abstract expressionists — Rothko, Gottlieb and Newman.

King's prints were included in RMIT's travelling exhibition, 'Twelve Melbourne Printmakers', which went to Oxford University in 1982. His paintings — like those of Crawford and Johnson — appeared in 'A Study Exhibition: Abstract Painting in Melbourne' held in the RMIT Gallery in 1983. This exhibition was intended as a reminder that abstraction would persist despite the flurry of 'New Figuration' and its 'appropriations' that characterised much painting in the early 1980s and formed but one of the many strands of subsequent post-modern art practice.

That non-figurative, or non-objective abstraction, has also flourished within Post-modernism is evidenced by exciting new works we see around us every day.

Jenny Zimmer, April 2007



Leonard Crawford

b.29.9.1920, Melbourne; d. 26.7.1996

Leonard Crawford was encouraged by Gino Nibbi and Edith Holmes in the 1930s and studied with Mary Cockburn-Mercer in 1948-1952. After a period of exploration of representational techniques he eschewed figuration for the principles of pure formal abstraction, abandoning the image in favour of strong lines and poetic shapes. Embracing this approach he 'translated' his love of music into a visual language resulting in lyrical abstract paintings. Crawford exhibited in early Contemporary Art Society shows (c.1938), Melbourne; the Rowden White Library, University of Melbourne, 1948; the *Herald Outdoor Art Show*, Melbourne, 1953; and the Museum of Modern Art and Design, Melbourne, 1956. He had five solo exhibitions during 1948-70 and participated in several group exhibitions including the Mertz collection, Art Gallery of South Australia, 1966; the Carnegie collection, National Gallery of Victoria, 1966; the Komon collection, Georges Gallery, 1971; and *Modern Australian Painting*, Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne, 1985 and 1988. Crawford was a lecturer in painting at RMIT University for over twenty years (1964-1985) and as a result of his family's generous endowment his paintings form a significant part of the RMIT University Collection.

George Johnson

b.18.8.1926, Nelson, New Zealand; arr. Australia 1953

George Johnson studied at Technical College, Wellington, New Zealand (with Theo Schoon and Gordon Walters) in 1943-1947. He gained a Certificate of Art in 1956 and a Diploma of Art in 1968 from RMIT University. A non-figurative painter, Johnson's non-objective treatment of form gives him the necessary freedom to create spontaneous compositions full of rhythm, energy and movement. His abstract approach to organic forms and materials positioned him as a central figure in the advancement of new abstraction in Melbourne during the 1960s. Johnson first exhibited in the *Herald Outdoor Art Show* in 1953, and he was included in the *Georges Invitation Art Prize* in 1965, 1970 and 1975 and in *20 Years of Abstraction*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, in 1986. Since 1956 he has had around 23 solo exhibitions including shows at Pinacotheca, Melbourne; Realities Gallery, Melbourne; Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne; Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney; Coventry Gallery, Sydney; and at numerous regional galleries including Ararat, 1969; Hamilton, 1970; and Shepparton, 1970. A retrospective was held at the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery in 2002. Johnson was a painting lecturer at RMIT University in 1970-1975 and 1978-1984.

Grahame King

b.23.2.1915, Melbourne

Grahame King trained at the National Gallery of Victoria School, 1934-1939; George Bell School; Central School of Art, London, 1947-1949; studied in Paris and Rome, 1949-1950; and participated in a British Council study tour in Europe and the United States, 1969-1970. He was a foundation member, first honorary secretary (1966) and subsequent President (c.1979-1984) of the Print Council of Australia. Specialising in lithography, Grahame King is a leading printmaker in Australia. He played a major role in the development of printmaking in Melbourne, helping to form The Victorian (later Australian) Print Workshop. During 1975-2006 King has had solo exhibitions at Tynte Gallery, Adelaide; Realities Gallery, Melbourne; and Eastgate Gallery, Melbourne; and a survey exhibition at Drill Hall, Australian National University, 2002. Numerous group exhibitions include Second South Pacific Print Biennale that toured 12 countries in 1978; Twelve Melbourne Printmakers, Oxford, United Kingdom, 1982; Classical Modernism: The George Bell Circle, National Gallery of Victoria, 1992. King was an art lecturer at RMIT University during 1966-1988.

Jenny Zimmer

Jenny Zimmer studied in the art school at RMIT between 1961 and 1967 and taught art history there for 15 years in the 1970s and 80s. She is now art publisher for Macmillan Publishers Australia.

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GEORGE JOHNSON

World View 1984

Acrylic on canvas

1220 x 2440 mm

Charles Nodrum Gallery

Study for Brown Construction 1977

Acrylic on board

335 x 315 mm

Collection of the artist

Study for Structure No. 6 1982

Acrylic on canvas

300 x 450 mm

Private collection

World View 2003

Acrylic on canvas

785 x 935 mm

Collection of the artist

Red Triangle Construction No. 8 1988

Acrylic on canvas

1830 x 1520 mm

Charles Nodrum Gallery

Structure Blue and Grey 1984

Acrylic on canvas

1550 x 1260 mm

Private Collection

Red Triangle Construction Trio 1998

Acrylic on canvas

Each panel 950 x 480 mm

Collection of the artist

Structures 9 1983

Acrylic on canvas

1220 x 1070 mm

Collection of RMIT University

Point of View 1992

Acrylic on canvas

1400 x 1250 mm

Private Collection

Mount of the Blue Triangle 1986

Acrylic on canvas

3050 x 1985 mm

Collection of

Ballarat Fine Art Gallery