

# Consistent visions

## ART

**GEORGE JOHNSON. *World View*.** Edited by Jenny Zimmer. Macmillan Art Publishing. 256pp. Colour plates. \$99.

**THE WHISPERING GALLERY. *Art into Poetry*.** By Peter Steele. Macmillan Art Publishing. 128pp. Colour plates. \$88.

**UNFINISHED JOURNEY.** Edited by Ken McGregor. Macmillan Art Publishing. 223pp. Colour plates. \$99.

Reviewer: SASHA GRISHIN



George Johnson at his retrospective exhibition in the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, 2002.

**W**HEN A monograph on Leonard French's *Campion* series of paintings was published in Melbourne in 1962, this was seen as a major event in Australian art publishing. Very few books on contemporary Australian artists had been published up to that date and this book was a noisy triumph for the artist and his dealer, Rudy Koman.

Today the situation has changed radically and I would estimate that about 40 monographs and several hundred catalogues on Australian artists are published annually. There is almost an expectation that a mid-career artist, unless she or he wants to stay mid-career forever, will have a book devoted to their art published, at least by the time they are 60. Most artists pay for the publication of their own books, sometimes assisted by Australia Council grants or their dealers. This has led to an avalanche of poorly produced and poorly written vanity publications which, thankfully, generally experience a relatively short shelf-life.

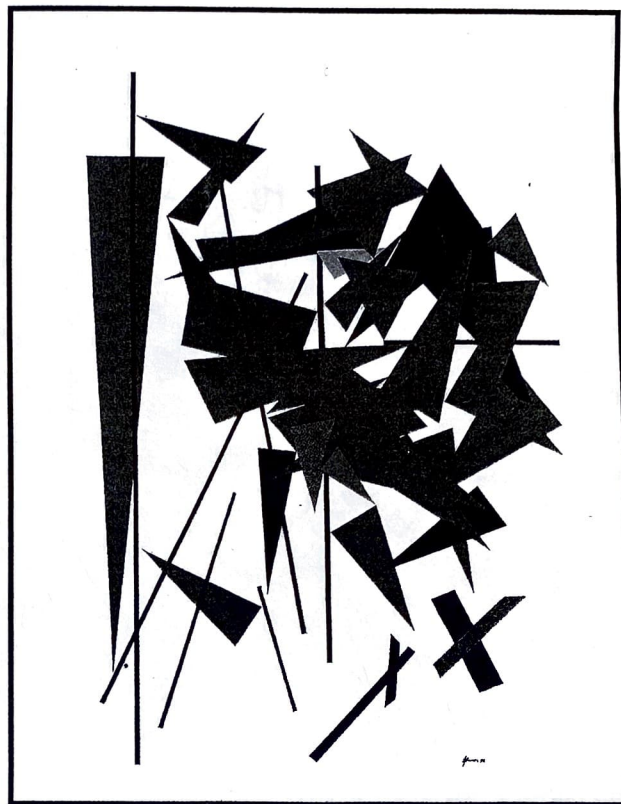
Macmillan Art Publishing in Melbourne is basically a single-woman operation run by the indefatigable Jenny Zimmer, a distinguished critic, writer and academic turned publisher. She has become one of the few art publishers of repute in Australia making a serious attempt at quality control in the selection of artists, authors and production standards. While this may not always be successful, the hit-to-miss ratio is better than in the case of many other publishers.

George Johnson was born in New Zealand in 1926, arrived in Sydney at the age of 25, stayed for a day, and then shifted to Melbourne, where he has remained until the present. He now lives on the Mornington Peninsula. A geometric abstractionist, he has found inspiration in the work of such artists as Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich. There has always been a tendency to try to pigeon-hole him and to place him under some sort of tag, but this has never been totally satisfactory, nor particularly enlightening. In his early work, he was a close fellow-traveller with French, and less convincing parallels may be drawn with Roger Kemp and John Coburn. Later in his art closer parallels could be found with the work of the Russian constructivists, including Vladimir Tatlin and Aleksandr Rod-

chenko, but by then he had established his own authentic language and drew on other sources for inspiration.

Christopher Heathcote provides an insightful discursive account of Johnson's philosophy of artmaking, while Zimmer has written an extensive historical overview. There is also a wonderful body of good-quality illustrations, as well as a detailed apparatus which presents an annotated biography with an account of his exhibitions and their reception. So, finally, by the time Johnson was turned 80, we have an excellent comprehensive overview of his development as an artist.

What strikes me more than anything else is the singularity and consistency of his artistic vision. Having early in the piece established some of the principle tenets of his philosophy of artmaking and having adopted a formal geometric artistic language, he has proceeded for the subsequent half-century to refine and constantly restructure his imagery. I was attracted to Johnson's pronouncement on his role as an artist. He wrote in 1992: "As the artist you are the one who creates 'order' out of 'disorder', who creates order from chaos. One's life and experience could be seen in the analogy of a spider-web, each of us trapping in it that which we find essential for our development and nourishment. As I see it the artist has always had a function. At any given time in history the artist has been the 'outlet' valve for society. Its consciousness and unconsciousness. There is much in society that the artist rejects – and should reject. I am driven in many ways to create my own world, to impose my own sense of order on things around me. My concern is with ideas; ideas which have to do with expression and communication; ideas about the human condition; ideas about 'life', 'society', the way we live and with bringing these ideas forward into the light – giving them a reality so to speak."



Johnson's *Floating Triangles* (acrylic on canvas, 1995).

Johnson's reputation as a major Australian painter has been much enhanced with the publication of this monograph.

The idea of poets interpreting art through poetry goes back at least to classical antiquity with the Pilostrati mastering the technique of *ekphrasis* which seemed to bring paintings to life. Well-known Melbourne poet and academic Peter Steele has selected 55 works of art from the National Gallery of Victoria – from John Brack, George Lambert, Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan to medieval antiquities – to interpret and bring to life in his own unique manner. He uses the analogy of a whispering gallery, like the one in St Paul's Cathedral in London, where the slightest murmur is made audible. Steele draws some remarkable emotional parallels between the emotional tenor of the artwork and its poetic echo. Much of it reads as an affirmation of faith, the celebration of the same God who inspired the art and the verse. This is also a particularly beautifully designed book, simple, elegant and with high-quality reproductions.

Ken McGregor is an art consultant who has now written about half-a-dozen books dealing with the work of artists whom he admires and usually whose work he represents. This book is basically an anthology dealing with 13 artists who "were asked to travel to destinations of their choice, and to create new works as a result of their experiences". The artists involved were Jason Benjamin, Zhong Chen, Fred Cress, Sharon Green, Tanya Hodinott, Dean Home, Emma Langridge, Anthony Lister, John Olsen, Tim Storrier, Yvette Swan, George Ward Tjungurrayi and Mina Young. Each profile of an artist is accompanied by a short essay dealing with the artist's work and a body of illustrations. Predictably, there is no unifying thread and although some of the work is of a very high order, much of it seems unresolved. Again the quality of the production is impressive. Certainly Macmillan in the past few years has made a noticeable impact on Australian art publishing.

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