

place, identity and ceramics: shepparton art museum and 80 years of collecting

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Curating a major exhibition celebrating 80 years of the collection is a great way to learn more about a collection rather fast – particularly if it is one of your first jobs as a newly-appointed director. No matter how much you already know about the works, or the artists represented in the collection, it's a little like artistic speed dating. You hope that that initial spark of interest, attraction, and connection will strengthen and deepen the more time you spend together . . . and that there won't be too many questionable traits or foibles that you discover when it's too late to back out gracefully.

Working with an established collection is a gift for any curator or director with a passion for good art history, and the desire to share these stories. A collection tells us things about the past that helps us to understand the present better. It empowers us to tell these stories in different ways, and to notice what was emphasised or glossed over when the story was previously told. A collection reveals the desires and ambitions of those who created it, leaving a legacy for future generations. Inevitably, this prompts us to think about the future we wish to leave for our constantly evolving community.

The SAM, or Shepparton Art Museum Collection provides a fascinating insight into the role of arts and culture in regional Victoria. This history of the collection over 80 years reflects the aspirations and vision of people who have played key roles in the

growth of the gallery – and now museum. They acquired notable works, decided to focus on ceramics as a point of difference from other regional collections, and obtained the ongoing support of successive state governments. Private individuals and supporters with a love of the arts were crucial. The history reflects the way that a regional gallery or museum can strengthen pride and identity in a local community. As we celebrate 80 years of collecting, and get ready to build a new space to house the collection, it is very timely to review this history, and add the next chapter.

80 YEARS: THE COLLECTION AND PUBLICATIONS

Past publications about the collection reveal much about its history and ambitions. The first was the *Catalogue of the Shepparton Art Collection*, 1949. Published by the Greater Shepparton City Council, though unattributed, it could be purchased for the princely sum of one shilling. The introduction outlines the scope and focus of the nascent collection as 'comprising portraits, landscapes, subject pictures, still-life and flower pieces by prominent Australian artists.'¹

The collection had begun with works acquired and hung in council offices. Of the first 37 works acquired for the collection, 35 were by male artists – only two women – which was typical for that time. The two works by women artists were family orientated

subjects: Nora Gurdon's *Her Son* (n.d.), and Betty Patterson's painting, described as 'a charming study of a baby'.²

The first catalogue also featured a work by A. Currie (biographical details and gender unknown at the time), 'an attractive period portrait of local historical significance by this amateur artist'.³ It depicted Sherbourne Sheppard, one of the pastoral pioneers of Victoria who had occupied Tallygaroopna run (1843–52). The site of Shepparton formed part of this run, which is how the village got its name.

A delightful hand-written addition in the back of the town clerk's copy of the small 1949 collection booklet detailed a further 54 acquisitions up to 1961. These included paintings by Rupert Bunny, E. Buckmaster, W. Frater, Arthur Streeton, Norman Lindsay, Max Meldrum, William Ashton, Albert Namatjira (the only Aboriginal artist – later deaccessioned), and Kenneth Jack. These were ambitious works to be acquiring at the time, but none were by women.

In 1965, 16 years after the first catalogue was published, the gallery finally got a permanent home, built with financial assistance from the Victorian government and the Shepparton Preserving Company Limited (SPC). Keith Rogers was appointed as the first full-time director in 1970, a position he held until 1973.

It was Rogers who made ceramics a focus of the growing collection. Fifty-one ceramic works were acquired between 1970 and 1973. In August 1971, the first Caltex Ceramic Award for \$400 was presented to Joan Campbell, part of a wider Australian trend at the time for corporates to support contemporary art awards.⁴

The second significant publication charting the continued history of the gallery was *Shepparton Art Gallery Catalogue of the Permanent Collection*, a small spirex-bound book published in 1975. It was written by Peter Timms, who was director between 1973 and 1980. Assistance for printing from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council marked its significance.

Timms also acquired a number of major works for the collection. Perhaps marking wider social changes of the time (the *Family Law Act* was passed in 1975), these acquisitions included many works by women.

Works by Australian women artists of the 1940s and 1950s were still relatively affordable in the 1970s, and Timms obtained works by Margaret Preston, Grace Cossington Smith, Thea Proctor, and many other Australian Modernists that are now gems in the SAM Collection. Timms also acquired Tony Tuckson's marvellous abstract oil on board, although the response to such works by many Shepparton locals was, for quite some time, rather derisive.⁵

Many of these early acquisitions were supported by major patrons, notably Sir Andrew and Lady Fairley of Shepparton. As Peter Timms noted in 1975, Sir Andrew, at one time managing director of Shepparton Preserving Company, 'bequeathed to the gallery in 1965 a sum of money, which still forms the major part of the purchasing funds.'⁶ Under the terms of the bequest, these funds continue as an endowment that continues to support acquisitions today, though the funds have been transferred from council to the SAM Foundation to manage.

The next major publication on the collection was also a significant contribution to scholarship on the development of Australian ceramics in the 1970s. *Australian Ceramics* was published by Shepparton Art Gallery in 1987, while Victoria Hammond was the Director (1984–1988). The foreword was written by Sir Zelman Cowen, then Provost of Oriel College at Oxford University, later Chief Justice of the High Court and Governor-General, and a keen collector of ceramics. The publication included an extensive essay by Judith Thompson, Curator of Australian Decorative Arts at the Art Gallery South Australia, which continues to be a valuable reference today.⁷

The ceramics collection was clearly a passion of Joe Pascoe, who was director between 1988 and 1997. He oversaw many publications on the subject, including *Benwell & Potter Ceramics Exhibition*, 1989.⁸ Pascoe also gifted a large collection of Hermannsberg pots to the SAM Collection during his directorship, beginning SAM's substantial collection of work by these artists.

Brown, 1970's Ceramics from the Shepparton Art Gallery Collection, was a small brick-shaped publication with chord binding published in 1991.⁹ *Brown* features Aleks Danko's *Trick Brick* (1970) on the dust cover, and details of Peter Travis' *Coiled*

Pot (1971) are on the cover and inner leaf. It accompanied an exhibition opened at the Meat Market Craft Centre, then a centre for Australian crafts, which subsequently toured regional Victoria and parts of New South Wales.¹⁰ The catalogue and exhibition reflected acquisitions for the collection of works by Australian potters from the 1970s. It aimed to demonstrate an ‘Australianized design excellence, [and] relevance of the inherent philosophy of the object.’¹¹ Joe Pascoe’s catalogue introduction claimed ‘It’s time!’ to support clay and ceramics as an artform (appropriating the famous 1970s slogan used by Labor leader and arts supporter Gough Whitlam). The exhibition showcased a generation of artists who had moved beyond Bernard Leach and Hamada to a broader set of influences, such as California Funk. Their engagement with Japan had broadened into a two-way cultural exchange with Asia. The catalogue also discussed the significance of Australia as a landscape, with a rich Indigenous and migrant history. It documented how the Australian artists working in ceramics, who still called themselves potters at this time, aimed for an Australian-ness to their pots, integrated through their understanding of landscape and material, context and cultural influences. Both artists and catalogue reflected the 1970s preoccupation with exploring Australian identity.

The *1997 Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramics Award* included an extensive essay on the history of the collection by Dr John Lawry, a Shepparton Gallery Friend, resident, and long-time SAM supporter.¹² Rather than looking at specific works from an art historic perspective, Lawry documented the collection’s social history, and the aims and ambitions of councillors and others through its development.

Kirsten Paisley started at the gallery as a curator, before taking on the role first as acting director and then as director between 2007 and 2015. Along with curator Danny Lacy, she developed the focus on contemporary Australian artists, largely publishing on their work through exhibition catalogues. These included catalogues for SAM’s major national art prizes, the Indigenous Ceramic Art Award (ICAA), and the Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award (SMFACA). Both awards are acquisitive, and have played a major role in the development of

ceramics for the collection. Their support of contemporary artists and continued acquisitions echo the early ambitions for the collection, to support and purchase works by living, contemporary artists.

Speaking with Colour – Longing for Country: The Collection of Carrillo and Ziyin Gantner was published by SAM in 2013, and included extensive texts by writer and art consultant Jennifer Isaacs on major Indigenous artists and art communities in the collection. It supported the exhibition drawn from the collection selected by Kirsten Paisley. Both played an important role in the Gantners’ subsequent decision to make a substantial cultural gift of much of the collection to the new Shepparton Art Museum. This enabled the collection to reflect a broader view of Australian history, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, and Indigenous artists from both remote communities and urban centres.

Thus, a number of notable publications on the collection have led up to SAM’s 80-year anniversary. Some have been small, while others have contained significant texts. All demonstrate a desire to locate the collection within a wider artistic and cultural context.

This new publication brings together highlights from across the whole collection in a single book for the first time. It extends our knowledge of the history of the collection, and contextualises it within a wider Australian art history. While the development of the SAM Collection naturally has parallels with the development of other regional collections, this publication shows that it is, ultimately, specific to the particular location and people that make Shepparton unique.

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The collection took a significant turn when the name changed from Shepparton Art Gallery to Shepparton Art Museum in 2012, at the same time that the gallery spaces were renovated.

Many have asked what motivated the change. Museums in Australia are more readily associated with natural history than art. While we have notable examples of art museums in Australia, such as Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, it is often seen as an American naming trend. The

change was a chance to develop a new brand, designed to be young, contemporary, engaging, and attractive to a wide variety of visitors.

The new name was more than a shift from the unfortunate acronym SAG (Shepparton Art Gallery), to the more affectionately regarded SAM (Shepparton Art Museum). More importantly, the change in title from gallery to museum sent a clear message to those working in the arts and cultural sector. Internationally, any institution recognised as a museum works within an International Code of Ethics, developed by the Geneva-based International Council of Museums (ICOM).¹³ This code covers many of the issues that arise in caring for collections, managing them, and running a museum. It sets standards for things such as temperature, humidity and lighting. An institution recognised as operating according to the code can request and borrow important works from other leading art museums and galleries around the world. In recognition of its achievements and conformity with these standards, in 2012 SAM was awarded Museums Australia (Victoria) best Victorian small art museum award.

Of course, many art collections in Australia are not called museums. Large institutions like the AGNSW, AGSA, and regional gems, such as the Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong Art Galleries are most unlikely to change their names.¹⁴ Their colonial architecture often reflects the British art gallery tradition as an Enlightenment temple of learning. Like many British art galleries, libraries, and other important public institutions, these colonial galleries feature grand porticos, steps, and columns, all harking back to a Classical tradition.

SAM's history, however, is not one of gold-rush Victoria. Shepparton's history is both newer and older: it has a strong Indigenous culture and community that predate first European settlement and continues today, and a multicultural history of migrant settlers from several continents including more recent refugee communities. The shift to the term museum reflects a desire for an institution that is not so steeped in older, Anglo-European traditions. Instead, SAM leans on more international and contemporary models, reflecting the unique regional, multicultural and Indigenous history of Greater Shepparton.

80 YEARS: THE MAKING OF THE EXHIBITION

SAM celebrates 80 years of the collection with an exhibition and this major publication, *Eighty Years of SAM. The Collection*. They have been a long time in the making. In 2011, Kirsten Paisley and her curatorial team began to develop ideas around what to include in the exhibition. They decided to showcase 80 works that would reflect the 80 years of the collection's history. I inherited responsibility for the exhibition and publication when I began as acting director in August 2015, and then took on the position permanently in January 2016. I wanted an exhibition that would engage directly with the people of Shepparton, as well as providing insights for visitors from further afield into this particular regional centre and its artistic and cultural history.

There has not been a substantial book on the collection since *Australian Ceramics*, published by Shepparton Art Gallery in 1987. The 80 Years of SAM exhibition provided an important opportunity to update the history, and to write about the many highlights in SAM's wonderfully eclectic and exciting collection. And so we have aimed for a publication that engages both a general reader and a specialist. The Gordon Darling Foundation generously committed to supporting the publication.

In selecting 80 notable artworks for the exhibition and publication, three central themes emerged: place, identity, and ceramics. Place and identity respond to Shepparton's particular place in the world. Ceramics draws on a strength that makes the collection unique, and for which SAM is widely recognised. Many of the works selected could have been included in more than one of these categories. These themes are inherently open to the viewer's interpretation, encouraging visitor engagement with the collection. And of course, the decision to limit to 80 works proved nigh impossible.

Place

The City of Shepparton's first *Catalogue of the Shepparton Art Collection* identified two of the three focus areas for the collection as 'landscapes and subject pictures', alongside portraits.¹⁵ Under the first two of these categories, the collection acquired images of place, notably Frederick McCubbin's early

Australian pioneer scenes, as a strapping young man saws wood and settles the land. Hans Heysen's *The Quarry* (1956–57) presents another view in oil on canvas of rugged Australian beauty, and images of pastoral landscapes captured by Arthur Streeton and many others from the early Australian Colonial period were prominent in the early collection. There aren't many women in these scenes, and there are even less of Indigenous Australians. The landscapes embody a pride in agricultural industry and in an Australian nation travelling on the sheep's back.

Some of these images are specific to Shepparton town and its surrounds. The 1949 catalogue introduction notes that Sir John Longstaff, a 'celebrated Australian painter', advised the council to acquire a landscape for its first work of art, John Rowell's *A Wet Day at Tallarook* (n.d.). Much is made of Longstaff's connection to Shepparton in the publication: born at Clunes, he 'came to Shepparton when a small child, and spent many years of his boyhood in the town.'¹⁶ The collection also includes Eugene von Guerard's depiction of a punt crossing where Shepparton now stands.

Objects, as well as pictures, can tell us about place. Early ceramic works are mementos of a growing nation, such as the *Triangular Lidded Cheese Dish* (c. 1895), and the Lithgow Pottery *Breadplate* (1890). Many of the moulds for these early works were transported on the first fleets to Australia, as ballast alongside bricks. One of the first jobs for European settlers and convicts was to find clay deposits to start making utilitarian ware for everyday living.

The paintings and ceramics by artists from the Murrumbidgee Circle could be presented in any of the three sections of the exhibition. The small koala figure and organically formed jug by Merric Boyd, or charger and cup and saucer by Arthur Merric Boyd and Neil Douglas, all explore aspects of Australian culture in the first half of the 20th century, using a visual language drawn directly from Australian flora, fauna, and colouration.

Alongside these stand other major works by leading Modernist Australian artists. There are feminine perspectives of place: Margaret Preston's *Blue Mountains Theme* (c. 1941); Grace Cossington Smith's *Landscape With Flowering Peach* (1932);

works on paper by other women artists of this period; and the atmospheric depiction of Melbourne's beachside suburb, Beaumauris, by Clarice Beckett. More abstracted depictions of Place include Perceval's *Black and Gold* (1961) and Fred Williams' *On the Nattai River* (1959).

Contemporary works treat ideas of place in more complex ways. Christian Thompson's photograph, *Dead as a Door Nail* (2009), depicts a seated man smoking a pipe, with an axe at his side, sunk deep in reflection in an isolated bush setting. Though dressed in Scottish tartan, he is an Indigenous Australian acknowledging both Aboriginal and Scottish descent and blood. In Stephen Bush's painting *Bright Flight* (2010), a psychotropic lava-lamp effect of enamel paint is behind an alpine landscape, in front of which appears a solitary figure dressed in uniform facing away from the viewer. Bush's work in the 1980s and 1990s was post-Colonialist, using a language of reference and pastiche. Swapping Australian bush for alpine crags and European garb, he deliberately upsets the conventions of Colonialist place.

Shepparton's rich and diverse multicultural community has also influenced our understanding of place. eX de Medici's *The Law (Ops)* (2013–14) is a large highly decorated painting, which draws on the Persian traditions of oriental tapestries and ornamentation, with traditional motifs swapped for contemporary objects. Surveillance cameras take the place of stylised arabesques, iconic consumer goods and fast-foods take the place of flowers. Richard Lewer's *I wish I was as lucky as you* (2013) reuses the kind of map of Australia that once adorned every local classroom. But emblazoned across the Australian land mass are the hand-painted words 'I wish I was as lucky as you'. Lewer reminds us of immigration policies and stories, good and bad, of our country's more recent policy around refugees, or 'boat people', and of Australia's place as an isolated and relatively wealthy island nation.

Indigenous understandings of place are also essential. They often map terrain and remember history differently. Acrylics on canvas and bark works from remote Indigenous communities depict the wider reaches of Australia. These works are drawn from the considerable Gantner Cultural Bequest, and the donations of others, including Michael Moon.

More locally, *Sacred Battle Site* (1990) by Yorta Yorta artist Don Briggs includes local Kaiela (or Goulburn River) sand. The collection also holds major Indigenous works that have been acquired through the Indigenous Ceramic Art Award (ICAA), which commenced in 2007. Its fifth iteration in 2016 acquired *Midden* by local Yorta Yorta artists Jack Anselmi and Cynthia Hardie. It speaks directly to place by representing the middens left by Indigenous people as the leftovers from meals eaten on the banks of the Kaiela.

Another set of works take place at the intersection of Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. Ricketts' small sculpture depicts delicately carved images of Aboriginal children emerging from uncarved stone. Respected by the Aboriginal community with whom he worked closely, Ricketts' work, created in the first half of the 20th century, reflected the artist's desire to celebrate, acknowledge and engage with Indigenous people, culture and stories. Tony Tuckson's majestic painting on board, one of the collection's highlights, is also informed by the artist's sustained interest and engagement with Indigenous Australian culture and art while using an abstract expressionistic painterly language.

Ceramics

Since the choice to focus on ceramics in the 1970s, SAM has developed an enviable collection of Australian ceramics, from first European settlement to the present day. Successive directors, curators, and other staff all worked to acquire pieces that, taken together, demonstrate the resurgence of Australian studio pottery. The SAM Collection and exhibitions are now a magnet for artists, art enthusiasts, potters and collectors from around Australia and internationally. This exhibition selected key examples of Australian ceramics, including commercial ware, examples from notable potteries such as Lithgow and Bendigo Potteries, and works by significant artists. Visually, they have been interwoven throughout the exhibition, inviting visitors to walk in and around the works. Some reveal Australia's colonial past, from utilitarian function to industry and economy. Some show the development of a specifically Australian artistic language in this medium.

There are a significant numbers of pieces by potters working within the Bernard Leach and Japanese influenced traditions. Others, from the 1970s and 1980s, are by potters such as Marea Gazzard, Joan Campbell and Col Levy, who began to develop a new language that extended these traditions and created a two-way cultural and artistic exchange.

The 1970s were halcyon days for Australian potters, as the objects shifted from vessels to sculptural forms and the Visual Arts Craft Board was created in 1973. The 1980s and 1990s, on the other hand, were not so kind, as the division between high and low arts – art and craft – became pronounced. Some of the essays written during this period about artists such as Stephen Benwell stress Benwell's status as an artist working in the ceramics medium, rather than using the title 'potter' (used by artists in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Gazzard). Many others divided 'craft' from 'art' and discussed the practice, materiality, processes and history of ceramics quite separately from wider discussions about contemporary art.

Fortunately, we have moved on. It is now widely accepted that some of Australia's leading 'contemporary artists' work in ceramics, and this is often only one of the materials they employ to explore ideas as part of a wider contemporary art discourse. To cite a recent example, after winning the 2015 Sidney Myer Australian Ceramics Art Award, Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran's colourful, irreverent, and politically charged ceramic works were included in the Adelaide Biennial, the Busan Biennial, Korea, and a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia in 2016.

These histories have been extensively documented in previous publications by the museum. Previous publications have not, however, documented the more recent 'renaissance' of contemporary artists engaging with ceramics as a means of exploring ideas, and as part of wider global art trends and developments. This issue came to the fore in a recent issue of the *Journal of Australian Ceramics* in 2016, where guest editor Glenn Barkley (himself an artist working in ceramics, and as a writer and curator) and Ramesh talked about ceramics as the latest 'hot' new thing, and the resistance from more traditional ceramicists towards a newer generation

of contemporary artists working in the medium.¹⁷ The edition also featured articles about two other contemporary artists, Nell and Juz Kitson, both of whom have extended our understanding of ceramics as a means of exploring contemporary themes. Nell's first major survey show was presented at SAM in 2016, while a work by Juz Kitson was acquired for the collection in the same year.

Over the last ten years, ceramics have been rethought within contemporary art, evident within SAM's collection of contemporary art in both ceramics and other media. For the contemporary artist, the idea of ceramics – in all its possible forms – is but one of many materials and processes available to examine and explore their own artistic practice. An expanded understanding of ceramics has encouraged artists and museum staff to rethink the potential uses of materials, how works are shown in space, and the possible ideas and themes that can be explored through the adoption and adaptation of ceramics.

Acquisitive prizes, and their accompanying exhibitions, have played a major role in the growth of SAM's ceramics collection. In the late 1960s and 1970s, art prizes across a range of art forms were important in the programming of contemporary artists in state and regional gallery exhibitions. They enabled regional galleries to engage with contemporary artists and showcase their works, which were otherwise not regularly shown in regional galleries as they are today. These prizes were often acquisitive, helping regional galleries to continue to build their collections. Towards the end of the 1970s, many regional galleries shifted away from this exhibition model, which many saw as a lesser way to support contemporary artists: there can only be one winner, judging can seem arbitrary, and there are less expensive ways for sponsors to support practising artists. Commercial sponsors, such as Caltex – whose involvement in Shepparton profoundly affected the growth of the collection – often looked for other ways to engage communities.

Nevertheless, awards and prizes continue, albeit in modified form. Many galleries and art museums still have significant prizes, which are always popular with audiences – such as the Archibald Prize run by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which

continued to tour to great acclaim and popular interest. These prizes also remain an important means for galleries to acquire works that would otherwise be outside their often-diminished acquisition budgets.

SAM's two major national acquisitive awards both focus on ceramics: the Sidney Myer Australian Ceramic Art Award, commenced in 1991, for contemporary Australian artists working in the ceramics medium; and the Indigenous Ceramic Art Award, for Indigenous artists working in the medium, commenced in 2007.

The Indigenous Ceramic Art Award was named in honour of the great Australian artist Dr Thancoupie Gloria Fletcher James AO, and has featured work by Alison Milyika Carroll from Ernabella, Hermannsburg artists, and local Yorta Yorta artist Vera Cooper. The award has also been important for the professional development of local Indigenous artists in the Shepparton region, through its cultural programs, and through professional development workshops developed by SAM in partnership with Gallery Kaiela.

Both awards have significantly expanded the SAM Collection of contemporary work. They were farsighted initiatives for a ceramics medium that was once seen as a secondary art, better suited to amateur potters – or women – but which has now returned to the mainstream of contemporary art.

Identity

Artworks from the SAM Collection that explore who we are, how we see ourselves, and how we wish others to see us coalesced into a theme of identity for this exhibition. Of course there are many identities: early depictions of colonial Australians, images of Shepparton's more recent social history as one of Australia's great multicultural successes, representations of aspects of Australia's Indigenous people, history and living culture, from bodily decoration, to portraits of proud Aboriginal youth, and Dreamings, and other works examining the religious and spiritual beliefs of many peoples. Such works reflect the changing nature of our community, and the broad diversity of people and cultures that have contributed to its success.

In the exhibition, a salon hang of pictures showcases the notable early portraits acquired for the collection during the late 1930s to 1950s, including paintings by Sir John Longstaff, Rupert Bunny, Jesse Traill, and William Dargie. A number were notable statesmen from the Shepparton district. Taken together there is a preponderance of men dressed formally in suits or military uniform. The women tend to a more intimate and sentimental gaze, depicted either at their toilette, doting over children, or swooning – a sentiment that I am sure drew the sympathy of audiences dealing with the central Victorian summer heat.

Stephen Benwell's *Busts* (2010) is a different kind of portrait, referencing and playing with classical traditions of portraiture and the sculptural bust. His hand-painted ceramic fragments and slightly mis-formed figures contrast with the traditional perfectly formed heroes in classical poses captured in marble or alabaster. Renee So also refers to a classical past, with *Bellarmines 1* (2010). Her ceramic figurehead on a plywood plinth alludes to the German tradition of Bellarmine beer jugs, and Greek classicism with fragmented helmet, and stylised beard and hair. For anyone growing up on a healthy diet of the Iliad and Jason's Golden Fleece, her depiction of beauty and power is both classic, and contemporary.

Contrasting with early painted portraits, works by contemporary Indigenous artists explore identity in many different guises. Fiona Foley's *Native Blood* (1994) presents the artist clothed in traditional islander dress, gazing directly at the viewer in three sepia toned photographs. It references staged studio portraiture traditions, and early ethnographic photographs of Aboriginal people. Alongside this work, Janet Fieldhouse's *Woven Armbands* (2007), which won the ICAA in 2007, consists of woven porcelain pieces inspired by traditions of bodily adornment and ornament of her own Tiwi and Torres Strait Islander culture. Brook Andrew critiques the early ethnographic traditions of measuring and photographing early Indigenous Australians by wrapping early found photographs and archival images of Aboriginal youth in red neon light. Tony Albert also presents images of proud young Aboriginal men, dressing them as superheros with target marks on their chests in reference to the rallies protesting the

police shooting of two Aboriginal teenagers in Sydney's Kings Cross in 2012.

Religion and spirituality are never absent from cultural identity. Leah King-Smith's photograph *Untitled No.5* (1991) of spiritual Indigenous elders protects viewers from one end of the gallery. Brent Harris' large, highly coloured *The Prophet* (2012) continues his exploration of aspects of Christianity and traditions of representation. His apostle, or Christ-like figure, hovers like a contemporary version of Piero della Francesca's *Madonna della Misericordia*, in a small church in regional Italy, with her small flock below. Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran's *Kala* (2014–15) is a riotous and exuberant exploration of Hinduism, and the many other religious and spiritual influences on contemporary Australia.

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The SAM Collection has always acquired contemporary work. As early as the 1949 catalogue, the un-named author of the introduction notes:

With contemporary work of all schools of thought, open mindedness is imperative. Part of the definite expression of today is concerned with the breaking of new ground, and the linking of new forms with earlier forms than those which inspired Roberts and Streeton. A broad view of art brings recognition that it must continually change.¹⁸

These were enlightened views then, and now. We continue to strive to break new ground while linking with the past through acquisitions for the collection, and through exhibitions. We look for local relevance, while engaging with global contemporary ideas. Themes and ideas from a broader contemporary context enable us to reflect on the times in which we live and work, and to draw out our own responses. It's not always comfortable. As the 1949 introduction concludes, 'To ask only for flattery of average vision or pleasant relaxation, is to entirely miss the supreme message of art.'¹⁹ It is the definitive response to those who might say, 'I know what I like'.

The SAM Collection has many highlights and outstanding artworks, but it is not encyclopaedic. The collection is missing voices: there were few women and no Indigenous artists acquired in the

early phase. Looking at themes of place, ceramics and identity, rather than working through the works chronologically or through traditional subject topics such as landscape, still-life and so on, reveals other voices, perspectives, and histories and makes us aware – at least in retrospect – of their absence. The themes also transcend traditional hierarchies of materials and history. Once traditionally seen as craft rather than high art, ceramics can now be shown alongside and in relation to other media such as painting and sculpture.

An exhibition of this kind can only give an inkling of the highlights and notable works in the collection. It is

a testament to those people who had the vision to build this museum, to acquire art, and to make arts and culture an essential part of a vibrant and healthy community. To see more of the works from the collection, I enjoy you to visit SAM again. Our thanks to those artists, both living and deceased, whose work we included in this exhibition – and to those who have contributed to the collection over 80 years, but whose work will have to be shown another time.

This will not be the last history of the SAM Collection. It adds a chapter to stories about place, identity and ceramics, that the collection and SAM will continue to tell for many years to come.

1 n.a., *Catalogue of the Shepparton Art Collection*, Shepparton City Council in 1949, p.3.

2 Ibid., p. 26.

3 Ibid., p. 28.

4 Coates, Rebecca, *The rise of the private art foundation: John Kaldor Art Projects 1969–2012*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2014, pp. 114–117.

5 Cr H. Terrill, commenting on the acquisition of John Perceval's *Delinquent Angel* (1961) in the 1970s, described it as a 'bit of stuff', and too expensive at \$2,700. See Dr John Lawry, 'The Oasis in a Desert, An account of the origins, development and directors of the Shepparton Art Gallery', *1997 Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramics Award* (ex. cat.), Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, 1997, p. 11.

6 Peter Timms, 'Introduction', *Catalogue of the Permanent Collection*, Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, 1975, p. 8.

7 Victoria Hammond (ed.), *Australian Ceramics*, Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, 1987.

8 William Joseph Pascoe, *Benwell & Potter Ceramics Exhibition* (ex. cat.), Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, 1989.

9 Joseph Pascoe and Katrina Ann Fraser, *Brown, 1970's Ceramics from the Shepparton Art Gallery Collection*, Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, 1991.

10 The exhibition toured to McClelland Art Gallery, Bendigo Art Gallery, Shepparton Art Gallery, The Exhibitions Gallery (Wangaratta), Mildura Art Gallery, Newcastle Region Art Gallery and Albury Regional Art Centre.

11 Joseph Pascoe and Katrina Ann Fraser, *Brown, 1970's Ceramics from the Shepparton Art Gallery Collection*, Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, 1991, p. 5.

12 Dr John Lawry, 'The Oasis in a Desert, An account of the origins, development and directors of the Shepparton Art Gallery', *1997 Sidney Myer Fund International Ceramics Award* (ex. cat.), Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton, 1997.

13 International Council of Museums (ICOM), *Code of Ethics*, http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Codes/code_ethics2013_eng.pdf, accessed 28 November 2016.

14 The Public Galleries Association of Victoria (PGAV), led by Chair Karen Quinlan, Director of Bendigo Art Gallery, advocate a separation of art galleries from the membership advocacy group, Museums Australia. PGAV believes that this museum organisation remains more focused towards its natural history museum members than gallery and art museum members.

15 n.a., *Catalogue of the Shepparton Art Collection*, Shepparton City Council, 1949, p. 4.

16 Ibid.

17 Glenn Barkley, 'Ceramics – The Long Tail', and Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, 'Fundamentalist Pottery vs. Contemporary Art', *The Journal of Australian Ceramics*, Vol. 55, No. 1, April 2016, pp. 11–16 and p. 52, respectively.

18 n.a., *Catalogue of the Shepparton Art Collection*, Shepparton City Council, 1949, p. 5.

19 Ibid., p. 6.