

Women artists as drivers of early art historical activities and alternative art historical narratives in Australia

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Heather Johnson, in an article for the anthology *Past/Present*, suggested that one of the phenomena of women's art in Australia is the manner in which it appears and disappears from view.¹ She did not see this slipping from public view as cause for complaint as had second wave feminists, but as a de facto tribute to the power of an art-form which like installation and performance art may be too powerful, challenging and complex to be captured by the mausoleum of the museum or critical acclaim. The elliptical comet-like orbit of women's art, in and out of critical acclaim, poses questions about the nature of how historical memory and institutions work in relation to Australian art. This paper delves into a diverse range of case studies to trace unfamiliar instances of the early understanding and practice of art history in Australia prior to the understood foundations of the discipline in the 1940s and 1950s. Given the manner in which much of the supporting and contextual narratives of women's art in Australia have slipped out of the accepted metanarratives, it collates examples of women engaging in a range of art historically inflected activities. These activities include what can be termed – perhaps a-historically given the close association of that term with the 1970s in both the popular and professional mind – as 'feminist' art histories centred upon women artists. Other examples that are documented here are conscious attempts to discuss or explain art's histories, rather than its present, both from an Australian perspective, but also with a particular emphasis on Northern Hemisphere material, in order to indicate an Australian sense of connectedness with the broader narratives of classical art history. Documentation has particularly emphasised lectures and other publicly visible attempts to set visual art in its historical and theoretical context during the period 1900-1940 including formally published texts and also the more ephemeral and romantic fora of tableaux and pageants.² All this material predates the often accepted emergence of art history in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s.

¹Heather Johnson, 'A Matter of Time' in Joan Kerr and Jo Holder eds. *Past present: the national women's art anthology*, North Ryde: Craftsman House, 1999, 40-47.

² Generally tableaux are static scenes in which performers do not move. They may be accompanied by live musical performances or recitations. Pageants involve movement and kinetic elements within the scenes, shifting and changes within one space, or movement from place to place (as in a parade) and some form of choreography or dramaturgy. There was often an overlap of personnel and directorial expertise, especially in the Australian context. In the period c1890-1945, tableaux and pageants had a documented visibility and legitimacy amongst Australian art professionals.

The range of art historical knowledge in Australia prior to the emergence of Bernard Smith in the Academy and Daryl Lindsay³ (or perhaps Lindsay's astute advocacy of Ursula Hoff)⁴ in gallery curatorial practice during the 1940s and 1950s has been underestimated. Certainly in their respective arenas of the gallery and the academy Smith and Lindsay brought a particular vision and coherent structure of art history to Australia. Their art history modality may have become the dominant version and certainly is the version that is currently seen to provide seed and catalyst for later developments, but it was not the only version. For the purposes of this paper the core of the argument is not the 'rightness' nor 'wrongness' of the methodological template expressed by early attempts to formalize art historical overviews prior to Lindsay and Smith, but the mere fact that they existed at a time when it has been assumed that there was little knowledge of a narrative and historical context to art and its production. The overlooking of much of the documentation of these early attempts to thread together and assimilate a variety of 'art histories' also relates to a persistent trait of mid twentieth century art history writing in Australia: alternative and minority positions are overlooked such as women artists, queer artists, artists outside the nationalist/landscape themes, talented but conservative artists, the often Eurocentric interests of design, applied arts and architecture. In retrospect in analysing and reviewing the practice of art history in Australia, via both academic and curatorial fora, a methodological preference for a vision that emphasised clarity and cohesiveness has persisted. However the surface and structural polish, if it may vouchsafe signs of curatorial and academic 'professionalism' or 'connoisseurship', ought not to be confused for being comprehensive or thoroughly informed. These ordered narratives generally achieved their desired order by means of rigorous exclusion of the incongruent material – *matter out of place* – that abounds in the more pluralistic content provided by the primary sources. To assimilate and document the actual range of art historical experiences in Australia one needs the elephantine bulk and ragged sprawl of the Moore/Kerr model rather than targeted and pared down narratives of Smith or the personally inflected idiosyncratic judgments of Robert Hughes and John McDonald.

There is an intermittent alternative narrative of Australian art history, looser, more phenomenological than analytical and far more inclusive than the accepted history. This alternative history has surfaced most clearly in the publications of William Moore and Joan Kerr. The latter brought undeniably scholarly standards to evaluating the non-canonical in Australian visual culture. With its multiple players and centers, this alternative modality of historical narratives tends to generate vast

³Daryl Lindsay was offered the post of Director in 1942. Daryl Lindsay encouraged the scholarship of his curator of prints and drawings, Dr Ursula Hoff, and also worked with Professor Joseph Burke to lift the standard of art scholarship in this country. Joan Kerr Joanna Mendelssohn <http://www.daa.org.au/main/read/3991> Daryl Lindsay (Sir).

⁴The career of Ursula Hoff could be claimed as a feminist case study – not so much that she was a visible feminist interventionist in the status quo in the manner of Kerr, O'Connor, McGilchrist, Rubbo, Burke et al, but in her record as a woman professional credibly acquitting a high position in the public eye. As this paper focuses on activities beyond the existing accepted definitions of the foundations of art history in Australia, her career is not so relevant in this context. However women lecturers at public galleries such as Allen, Preston, Taylor, Dickson and Lahey could have provided a precedent for Hoff's curatorial appointment.

structures rather than the crispness and ordered focus of a monograph or an exhibition catalogue. These wide lateral inclusive narratives of Moore and Kerr narratives could appear to be Dionysian – out of control – as opposed to the cerebral and ordered narratives of catalogues or conventional ordered art historical narratives. Virtually everyone and everything may be co-opted to be called art given its appropriate context. Perhaps even these texts even embody aspects of the chthonic in the loose post-Jungian/Paglia cultural commentary definition of the word – dark and devouring in its shapelessness and threatening to the order of the beautiful male mind and its products. Similarly the collections of the Women's Art Register in Melbourne represent a remarkable survival for three and a half decades beyond formal institutions of an inclusive, non judgmental, forum for capturing visual cultural activity which again emphasizes the expansiveness of the alternatively or low-interventionally curated art historical construct.

Feminist art histories

The nexus of the recording of women's art history and contemporary art practice is often popularly associated with the art and artists of the second wave feminist movement in Australia, as concretely illustrated by the close links between key players and events in the 1970s such as Kiffy Rubbo, director of the Ewing and Paton Gallery at the University of Melbourne, the early years of the Women's Art Register, the first curated exhibition by Janine Burke of historic Australian women's art, the Lip Collective and the promotion of the work of emerging contemporary women artists.⁵ Yet this exploration of art historical themes around women by enterprising practitioners can be traced much further back – particularly if one is attuned to the values of the first wave feminist movement. Material emerges if 'art history' is defined in a fairly broad context which includes various forms of 'sense making' around visual culture, including practitioner self-narratives, which extend to some historical reflection beyond discussing their own artwork. I will also add a caveat that I am working from the material that I know best: Australian visual culture and associated textual narratives from c1880 to the 1940s. Accounts of women artists and women engaging with visual arts historical or theoretical constructs and disseminating these constructs as an intellectual professional to a broader public may well also be found for previous eras as well.

Whilst historians can consolidate a presence of women artists back to the colonial period,⁶ the depth of supporting documentation to allow a narrative interpretation of the nature of women artists' careers and the range of their achievements only emerges at the time of the first wave feminist movement in the late nineteenth century and at the Federation era. For over a century interpretations and historical overviews of women artists in Australia have often been closely linked to periods when high profiled women artists were active. The link between

⁵ Janine Burke, *Field of Vision: A Decade of Change, Women's Art in the Seventies*, Ringwood: Viking, 1990, 1-16, Ailsa O'Connor, *Unfinished Work: articles and notes of Women and The politics of Art*, Richmond: Greenhouse, 1982 137, Juliette Peers, *A Short History of the Women's Art Register*, Richmond: Women's Art Register, 2005, 12-15.

⁶ Caroline Jordan, *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artists and the Amateur Tradition*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2005.

the first wave feminist movement and women artists is tangible. Three out of the first five female medical graduates of the University of Melbourne had artist sisters: Grace Vale and May Vale, Margaret Whyte and Janie Wilkenson Whyte, Clara Stone and Daisy Stone. The recent digitization of the 1891 Suffrage petition to the Victorian parliament⁷ reveals several artists including Jane Sutherland, Clara Southern and Florence Fuller amongst the signatories. For Sutherland who is such a fugitive figure, who has left so little trace of her taste and opinions despite the authority and clarity of her work, this historical document is a major discovery which pinpoints one aspect of how she wished herself to be seen and be counted in public: as a woman who wanted to vote in elections. The first Exhibition of Australian Women's Work 1907 reflected both the expansion of feminist views in Federation Australia and the expansion of art practice amongst women.

An emerging interest in art historical overviews by women coincided with first wave feminist activism in Federation era Australia. One of the oldest documented narratives on women artists written by women in Australia, as well as an early discussion of art history was presented at the women's cultural group, the Austral Salon, in Melbourne August 1907. Three women artists gave papers. Violet Teague lectured on the history of women artists from the Renaissance onwards, mentioning many major names including Kauffmann, Carriera and LeBrun – mostly figurative artists like herself. A fairly detailed account of this talk survives⁸ and we can see that Teague knew most of the names that are still considered to be important in overviews of women's contribution to European art history. The lecture that she presented closely relates to (or in fact may be) a manuscript that survives in her papers of a c1907 date⁹ and thus perhaps is one of the earliest accounts of women artists by a female writer and theorist in Australia. Janie Wilkinson Whyte followed on the same program by lecturing on Australian women artists, but little is reported of this lecture except that the women still had a struggle for recognition in Australia. Bertha Merfield talked of the opening that women may have in the crafts, but again very little is reported of her talk.

When considering the origins of women speaking and writing publicly on both contemporary and historic art, Teague is highly important. She is currently the earliest Australian woman artist for whom we have an academically tenable range of primary sources, particularly an oeuvre of writing and opinion. She published narratives on Australian and international art history and talked of historical artists during press interviews: for example she remarked on the beauty of Botticelli's work in *Table Talk* in 1901¹⁰ Moreover she also visible performed a woman-centric vision of history via organizing tableaux vivants from at least 1899 to the 1930s and in at least two Australian capital cities, Melbourne and Adelaide. Often these tableaux drew attention to women's achievements. *A Dream of Fair Women* 1910 was a set of posed tableaux, directed and arranged by Teague – who took responsibility for both arranging poses and costume and set design - that highlighted women's

⁷ http://wiki PROV.VIC.GOV.AU/index.php/List_of_1891_Women%27s_Suffrage_petition_signatories [online] viewed October 2010

⁸ *Brisbane Courier* 24 August 1907

⁹ Juliette Peers, 'Violet Teague: The (Woman) Artist as Critic', *Australasian Victorian Studies Journal* 6, 2000, 93.

¹⁰ Anon interview with Violet Teague *Table Talk*, 25 July 1901

romantic and stirring presence throughout history including Helen of Troy, Iphigenia, Cleopatra, Eleanor of Castile and Joan of Arc.¹¹ Her tableaux for the Women's Work Exhibition 1907 included an emphasis on a female presence within the humanist tradition and European culture through scenes of her own devising that celebrated women in Greek mythology – the Fates, Artemis and Athena, the latter as patron of women's arts and crafts. Whilst these tableaux may be seen as entertainments, they also claim the agora on behalf of a female spirit that is an alternative to the masculine norm. This utopian reworking of high culture by inserting dissonant - if romantic and poetic - female narratives synergises with first wave feminist constructs, although the ideal that Violet promoted was always more stylish and hedonistic than the earnest white mother of empire who is often associated by scholars with first wave feminism.¹²

A feminist history can be tracked through her performances: the subjects of her pageants included famous women and women-centric events, French history, British history, the history of fashion and also great works of 'world art'. These tableaux were an important forum for making phenomena which were distant both geographically and temporally seem real and tangible for Australian audiences, particularly if we follow the theory of Anita Callaway that mobile pageants or static poses representing historic and artistic images are a medium of commentary and interpretation around paintings and a feminist interpretation of culture and history.¹³ Pageants and tableaux remained still popular until at least the Second World War as a fundraising and entertainment device and women artists often were the directors of such events. Dora Wilson, who had worked with Violet Teague on the tableaux 'Modern Beauty in Ancient Settings' for the Arts and Crafts Society in 1930, organised tableaux of favourite paintings in 1940¹⁴ and Lois Hyett still was organising tableaux of 'old masters' - thus referencing base level understandings of 'art history' - in the regional city of Geelong in 1940 to aid the war effort. Another selection of 'living pictures' depicting 'old masters' was presented by the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors in 1941.¹⁵ As much as being a somewhat old fashioned activity and Victorian throwback, these 1940s tableaux also speak of a community level knowledge and recognition of 'art history', that ensured that there would be some degree of acceptance and approval when the more professional and systematic level of art historical activity via the diasporic Vienna school began to make an impact in Australia.

Although not reflecting the nationalist imagery of masculine labour that was customarily read as the default art code in Australian settler culture throughout much of the twentieth century, Teague can be defined as an influential and foundational figure from several different methodological perspectives. In terms of classical art history she makes a visible contribution through referencing in lectures,

¹¹ *Argus* 20 September 1910

¹² For example Phillipa Mein Smith, 'Blood, Birth, Babies, Bodies', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 17: 39, November 2002, 305-323.

¹³ Anita Callaway, 'Melbourne's Theatre of War: Art on the Home Front during WW1', *Australian Antique Collector*, July-December 1999, 143-146.

¹⁴ 'Party for French Red Cross' *Argus* 12 April 1940

¹⁵ Juliette Peers, *More Than Just Gumtrees: A Personal Social and Artistic History of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors*, Malvern: Dawn Revival Press, 1994, 99.

texts and tableaux to communicating in Australia the grand tradition of European art as well as the stylistic influences from historic and contemporary artists including Gainsborough, Reynolds and Sergeant in her own work. She also could be seen to represent what are often called the 'new art histories' when she presented a very early representation of fashion history over the last ten centuries as part of a pageant in Adelaide in 1910.¹⁶ Most notably and also somewhat unexpectedly, given that she is often perceived as partly outside the accepted mid-twentieth century narrative of Australian art history, and given her visible links to upper class female social life and the establishment Anglican Church, she is a major art historical forerunner in terms of a re-focused post colonialist approach to art history.

Notably in 1934 when organizing a fundraising exhibition for Hermannsburg mission, which vouchsafed a healthier personal amenity for Indigenous people, Teague reminded her colleagues that donating a painting was but a tiny personal cost to an individual artist, when once the land and the water had all belonged to the people of Hermannsburg and the Indigenous people of Australia.¹⁷ This sense of displacement is not the standard *Terra Nullius* doctrine. Teague's acknowledgement that settler culture ought to make restitution for a loss challenges both the complacency of previous generations in claiming implicitly rightful ownership by 'civilised' whites, but also the implicit complacency of current intellectual belief that acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty by *thoughtful* white Australians is a recent movement and proof of the cogency of modern public intellectual celebrities who acknowledge such sovereignty. In Teague's view *someone* had *owned* the land and the cost to the urban white people of 1934 of making a small donation or buying an artwork was nothing in comparison to the cost borne by those who no longer owned the land. Raising money for Indigenous people she claimed was a 'small act of restitution' to those indigenous people who had 'survived 100 years of our occupation'. '*Occupation*' is Teague's own word, and it predates the public use of this word by Indigenous and white Australians in more recent years. Her presaging of post-colonial vocabularies demonstrates the potential for artists, who may be read as being not essential to the core narrative of Australian art history, to challenge mainstream understandings of its parameters.

A few days later in the press Teague also recounted some of the mythologies about water and the creation of the local creek told to her at Hermannsburg.¹⁸ Here she acknowledged the manner in which the Indigenous residents of the area regarded the land and its resources and also mediating – albeit by way of her summary – a different perspective of viewing the landscape and natural resources within a public forum. Again, as with all these art historical actions discussed throughout this article, the key point is the *fact* of this intervention and documenting its presence, rather than debates about the politics of the details of methodologies. Rather than seeing Indigenous culture as dying, and its frailty

¹⁶ *Adelaide Advertiser* 4 August 1910

¹⁷ Letter to the Editor *Argus* 20 January 1934 – the letter is signed with a pseudonym, but it is preserved in family papers as by Teague

¹⁸ *Argus* 2 February 1934

offering a suitable platform for the first wave 'mother of empire' to demonstrate the superiority of her vision of public space - gentle and nurturing, against the commercial sexualised masculine norm, Teague advocated a different power relation. She suggested that Indigenous myth gave directives to white Australia for appropriate action. Just as by working together the two dreamtime serpents advocated for the land and its inhabitants against the cruel sun who was causing widespread suffering, so too should the artists of Melbourne work together to achieve a difficult, but morally imperative, aim of raising money to enable the people of Hermannsburg to have a reliable water supply.¹⁹ Teague was also normalising Indigenous styles of narrative into the newspaper as a lived modern space and away from the museological cordon of ethnography.

Another early narrative of women artists was presented by sculptor Margaret Baskerville in a lecture to the 'Shorthand writers and typists association' in June 1917.²⁰ From reports Baskerville does not talk of art history as much as equity and what would later be termed 'sexism'. Here again we have an artist who does not register greatly in the standard accounts of Australian art history anticipating ideas that are more closely associated with later generations. In Baskerville's case she references the intense debates of the mid 1970s around the women artists' career trajectories and expectations, which for Burke characterised the moment of the feminist art revolution in the 1970s and 1980s.²¹ Like Teague, although perhaps lacking the grace and facility or the intellectual insights that characterised the latter's working life, Baskerville treads an odd line of being neither wholly conservative nor wholly radical. She challenged late Victorian and Edwardian notions of the *a priori* non-competitiveness of women's art in a professional arena, but concurrently as a practitioner was never more than a fairly plain representational sculptor,²² relatively unleavened by 'New Sculptural' poeticism and ambiguity. This interstitial identity between radical and conservative, as much as her gender, has kept her marginal in later accounts.

Baskerville notes that there were more women artists than male but fewer achieved success – mostly because they did not work consistently. She acknowledged that art was a study and women had to apply themselves, but advised women to follow their own instincts rather than seeking opinions of men. In her view the crafts were opening up a new forum for women artists. Baskerville

¹⁹ If we read the serpents as representing Indigenous culture – it could be suggested that Teague was ascribing agency, initiative and noble selflessness – quintessential values claimed for imperial man – to the Indigenous. Whilst the modality and occasion may ascribe patronising motivations to Teague, at the same time this is a radical dissonance against 1930s norms when dealing with Indigenaity. That my interpretation of Violet's action as subverting imperialist norms is correct is backed up by her description of a possible 'Japanese invasion' of Australia as 'much desired' because in its wake she would be able to obtain fine printmaking supplies more easily – a *bon mot* that appeared artlessly naïve but simultaneously sophisticatedly ironic and her advocacy of the rabbit as fleeting grace against the grounded and cruel Australian farmer. Juliette Peers, Entry on Portrait of Theo Scharf by Violet Teague in Joan Kerr ed., *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book*, Sydney: Art and Australia and Craftsman House, 1995 20.

²⁰ Melbourne Letter *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 June 1917

²¹ Janine Burke, *Field of Vision*, 11-16, 19-23.

²² Graeme Sturgeon is particularly underimpressed by her and talks of her as 'capable enough but lacking both refinement and originality'. Graeme Sturgeon, *The Development of Australian Sculpture 1788-1975*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978, 51.

was frequently interviewed in the press throughout her lifetime especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It is no exaggeration to describe her as one of the highest profiled and visibly professional female artists working in Australia, prior to the emergence of Margaret Preston as a dominant force both in art practice and in the 'arts industries' of Australia in the 1920s. For a period between about 1910 and the arrival of Paul Montford from Britain in 1923, Baskerville won most of the major sculptural commissions in Melbourne. Preston knew of Baskerville and validated her on strongly feminist terms in her 1938 essay on 'Pioneer Women Artists' as 'that wonderful Margaret Baskerville, who was the first woman in Australia to complete a statue', noting that her statue of Sir Thomas Bent was 'enormous'.²³

Beyond these initiatives, a further trace of the range of art historical knowledge available in Australia during the early 1900s is in the near complete run of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors minutes which give fairly detailed overviews of the activities at their monthly meetings. These minute books are, like Teague's papers, amongst the few primary sources that survive around non-stellar artists of the pre-1920 period. Even in the very first decade of the society 1900-1910, lectures were presented on European art including living artists such as Mr. and Mrs. Stanhope Forbes and Isaac Israels by artists who had returned from overseas and had first hand knowledge. Other lecture subjects included papers on Leighton and Rossetti. Meetings also featured, in a clear art historical act of self education, the showing and discussing of photographs, prints and postcards of 'old paintings'.²⁴

Women artists and art historical activities in the interwar years

The two decades after the First World War were a period of visible success for Australian women painters. At this date women artists particularly became champions of contemporary art; possibly as it was a space that was less dominated by established – thus masculine - names and practices. In the generation of modernism, art historical narratives were consolidated in print and in lectures by artists such as Mary Cecil Allen, Eveline Syme and Margaret Preston. Syme presented a history of women artists in Victoria for the anthology *Centenary Giftbook* 1934,²⁵ which Joan Kerr believed may be the first historical overview on Australian women artists by a woman.²⁶ Although the lectures discussed above by Teague, Whyte, Merfield of 1907 and Baskerville of 1917 predate Syme's essay, her text was published complete, unlike the earlier lectures. The essay was a brief, but appreciative, appraisal with a stylish and vivid choice of words when analyzing paintings that offers insights into the various painters' oeuvres. Preston wrote a

²³ Margaret Preston, 'Pioneer Women Artists', in Flora Eldershaw ed., *The Peaceful Army: A Memorial to the Pioneer Women of Australia*, this edition Ringwood: Penguin, 1988, 138.

²⁴ Juliette Peers, *More Than Just Gumtrees*, 12-18.

²⁵ In Frances Fraser and Nettie Palmer eds., *Centenary Gift Book*, Melbourne: Robertson & Mullens for The Women's Centenary Council, 1934, 83-86.

²⁶ Joan Kerr, 'Monographs, Articles and Exhibition Catalogues', in *Past Present*, 177.

similar overview for the *Peaceful Army* – a NSW-based version of the *Gift Book* published to mark the 1938 sesquicentenary of Australia.²⁷

Perhaps the most significant textual contribution to early art historiography made by an Australian woman artist during the interwar modernist period was that of expatriate Australian artist Mary Cecil Allen who published *Art the Mirror of the Passing World* in New York in 1928 and *Painters of the Modern Mind* in New York in 1929.²⁸ This latter book was one of the first accounts of modern painting by an Australian and based upon her familiarity with public collections in the United States. It is not a chronological art history *per se*; rather it is a thematic survey of non representational and formalist elements in modernist art. However, *Painters of the Modern Mind* grounds and explains contemporary art by means of precedents found in art history. It betrays neither fear nor scorn for ‘modern art’ and *inter alia* demonstrates Allen’s wide-ranging knowledge of art history. *The Mirror of the Passing World* was based around formalist themes, which also referenced art history, and celebrated, as the introduction states, ‘the consistently fresh approach of the old masters’.²⁹ The two volumes were transcripts of lectures sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation in 1927 for the ‘People’s Institute’³⁰ in New York, the Adult Education branch of the Cooper Union.

To mention the Carnegie Corporation’s sponsorship of Mary Cecil Allen’s lectures in New York highlights a key forum where women proactively disseminated knowledge of art history in Australia during the interwar era: lectures at public art galleries. Also under the auspices of Carnegie Corporation funding Preston presented a series of lectures on art history at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1938. The manuscripts of the lectures survive in the art research library of Art Gallery of New South Wales, possibly copies (roneo printed?), were bound and at least informally circulated, as suggested by the surviving presentation of one set of the lectures. This content covered various significant eras of art – not necessarily based upon the gallery’s actual collection – and could be defined as stand-alone considerations of the history and theory of art. Together the set of lectures formed a cohesive chronological overview of western art history to the present (i.e. 1938). Preston also discussed some non European cultures especially Chinese, Japanese and Mexican. The lectures betray (and perhaps are slightly limited by) the characteristic taste of their era, especially the unease with Victorian art (she described Victorian England as ‘that age of bad art’), but still deserve commendation. The ‘art history’ presented is pleasing and cohesive, with a clear and confident trajectory, as one would expect from all that is known about Preston through her work and records of her life.

²⁷ Margaret Preston, ‘Pioneer Women Artists’ in *Peaceful Army*, 134-139.

²⁸ *Art: the Mirror of the Passing World*, New York: Norton, 1928, *Painters of the Modern Mind*, New York: Norton, 1929.

²⁹ *Art: the Mirror of the Passing World*, xii.

³⁰ According to a biographical note in the catalogue of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution <http://siris-archives.si.edu/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=1V87D34K48544.45097&profile=all&uri=link=3100006~!110634~!3100001~!3100002&aspect=Browse&menu=search&ri=2&source=~!siarchives&term=Allen%2C+Mary+Cecil%2C+1893-1962+Mirror+of+the+passing+world.&index=#focus>

Preston's lectures remain valid as cultural documents. Admittedly the narrative and analysis is not in-depth, given the range of material, eras and cultures that Preston covered, but the prose is engaging and vivid and offers pleasurable reading seven decades later. Her Carnegie Corporation lectures at the Art Gallery of New South Wales predated the set of lectures entitled 'The Art of Today and Yesterday' organised by Bernard Smith and Dr Georg Berger in 1941. The latter have been described as 'most probably the first series of lectures of this kind in Australia'.³¹ Yet in Sydney Preston had already presented a structured and informed 'art history' several years earlier in 1938, which can still be recognised as such, even given the vast changes in sophistication and resources that marks the profession today.

Preston, like Teague, lectured widely to many groups on art related subjects. She presented a second series of lectures at the Art Gallery of New South Wales for the Carnegie Corporation in 1939, which centred more on technical details and working methods for different art media, but also included some discussion of art history. The records of Preston's life document a wide variety of lectures and published art writing, theory and criticism, over at least four decades. She presented public lectures as early as 1907 and published writing from 1916 onwards.³² In some cases rather than taking an art historical or theoretical approach, she writes on the nexus of cultural/travelogue narrative that was a popular reflection of the lifestyle of Australian elites in the mid twentieth century. Some of her talks may have been what is now called 'infotainment', rather than educational resources, but so surely is much narrative generated by Australian arts professionals at public galleries for a general audience even today. However she also lectured regularly to professional bodies such as the Arts and Crafts Society of New South Wales, the Art Students' Sketch Club and the Teachers' Federation Art Society and these talks and lectures were further discussed in the press.

Radio broadcasting offered Preston a new forum during the early years of the Second World War, during the intense flourishing of cultural life that marked Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane during the war years, despite the material hardship and shortages. Her papers at the Art Gallery of New South Wales library document the range of her broadcasting activities. She appeared in the 'the Adventures in Art' sessions and also in a series – again in the nature of an art historical survey – broadcast by the ABC.³³ A number of notable artworld figures contributed to this series including Frank Medworth, James Haughton James, Sydney Ure Smith and Elenore Lange,³⁴ a sculptor, art theorist and refugee from Hitler, who lectured widely on art history and art theory in Sydney during the

³¹ <http://shaps.unimelb.edu.au/community/bernardsmith/biography.html>

³² A comprehensive index to Preston's lectures and publications around art is found in the CD-Rom published with the catalogue of the exhibition Deborah Edwards, with Rose Peel and Denise Mimmochi, *Margaret Preston: Art and life*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005.

³³ Clipping - notice in *Wireless Weekly* 31 May 1941 in Preston Papers, Art Gallery of New South Wales Library.

³⁴ Lange's career is discussed by Geoffrey Batchen, 'Looking through the Prism; the Sculpture of Elenore Lange', in Maryanne Dever ed., *Wallflowers and Witches*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994, 48-62.

1930s and 1940s.³⁵ This radio series, which Georg Berger described as ‘the scientific approach to art - an outline of the history of Civilisation and Art’, had a visible overlap in themes and speakers to the course instituted by Smith and Berger at the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation Art Society. In the radio syllabus both Bernard Smith and Margaret Preston gave one lecture each, amongst the presentations of other artists.³⁶

Preston was not the first Australian woman artist to lecture in a public program associated with a major Australian gallery. Possibly Mary Cecil Allen’s mid 1920s lectures given at the National Gallery of Victoria could claim that honour. She left Australia in 1926 when Frances Gilles, a travelling American, heard her speak at the National Gallery and decided that Allen would be an ideal guide to the galleries of Europe.³⁷ By the end of the decade Allen had established herself in America where she lectured at public galleries and universities. In the interwar period American public galleries and museums saw the presentation of *de facto* adult education curricula and outreach programs as equally important as acquiring artworks to their mission and prestige. When travelling overseas and in light of a wider exposure to artistic theories and personalities, Allen shifted in technique from tonalism to a light modernist style.

She returned to Melbourne for several months across 1935-1936 and used her old links to Melbourne art circles and the University of Melbourne³⁸ to disseminate information about contemporary art developments. She was hailed as a celebrity, showered with honours by radical and conservative organisations, and herself acted in various official capacities for Melbourne-based groups relating to modern art, feminism and tertiary education, including assisting the fundraising for building the University Women’s College³⁹ and speaking at the national conference of the Federation of Australian University Women.⁴⁰ During her visit Allen also presented a number of lectures at various venues including at the National Gallery of Victoria and a series of lectures about modern and historic art as a standalone curriculum under her own management. Topics included art historical themes such as ‘Gothic Form and the Modern Spirit’ and she also showed slides of works by Picasso, Braque, Delaunay, Picabia and Matisse.⁴¹ Some of her former colleagues who had

³⁵ Like Gertrude Langer of Brisbane (1908-1984) an art history PhD from the University of Vienna married to the former practice leader of Peter Behren’s studio, Elenore Lange (1893-1990) belonged to the worldwide diaspora of art historical skills from Central Europe.

³⁶ See the printed overview of the series in Preston’s papers

³⁷ Frances Derham, ‘Allen, Mary Cecil (1893 - 1962)’ in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A070048b.htm>. For a recently published overview of Allen’s career that appeared after the presentation of the lecture upon which this paper is based see Anne Rees, ‘Mary Cecil Allen: Modernism and Modernity in Melbourne 1935-1960’, *emaj* issue five, 2010, <http://www.melbournartjournal.unimelb.edu.au/E-MAJ/pdf/issue5/rees.pdf>

³⁸ She was the daughter of Professor Allen of the University of Melbourne and grew up on campus in one of the now mostly demolished imposing houses that the University built in the nineteenth century to house its senior staff. Allen had enjoyed a high reputation as a tonal painter in Melbourne during the early 1920s.

³⁹ *Argus* 5 May 1936

⁴⁰ *Argus* 21 August 1935

⁴¹ *Argus* 27 September 1935

seen her depart Melbourne as a tonal realist⁴² and reappear as a synthetic cubist cum classical modernist were shocked by the developments in her art. Yet her talks were so popular that her final lecture at the National Gallery of Victoria, a week before she sailed away from Australia, was packed to standing room only. On other occasions her lectures were special attractions during extended evening opening hours at the Gallery.⁴³ Not only Allen's professionalism is documented by her activities in Melbourne, but also the existence of a sympathetic community who were engaged with similar ideas as she was promoting.

The National Gallery of Victoria acquired another female lecturer after the departure of Allen in the 1920s – the far less famous Stephanie Taylor. She was a representational watercolourist and etcher trained at the National Gallery School. The source of her art historical knowledge is unknown, although she studied under Bernard Hall, who was director of the National Gallery of Victoria. Hall possessed a wide knowledge of art and design history that became a foundation for the Gallery's future expansion and greatly assisted in setting its trajectory as the premier collection of international historical art and design in twentieth century Australia. Yet what Taylor lacked in establishment kudos, unlike Mary Cecil Allen who was born and worked in the cream of Melbourne's intellectual society, she made up for in energy and profile. She lectured regularly at the gallery for about a decade until Daryl Lindsay was appointed.⁴⁴ In 1934 she was lecturing on the Tiepolo *Banquet of Cleopatra* and during the 1930s also gave lectures on the Flemish altarpiece and the National Gallery of Victoria's Rembrandts, amongst many other subjects.⁴⁵ She presented a 14 week course of illustrated lectures on Australian art in the Centenary year in 1934 at the Emily McPherson College, (now RMIT),⁴⁶ of which I currently have no more details than brief advertisements. In 1934 a second set of lectures by Taylor on Australian art was included in the University of Melbourne's extension program, a 'workers' education' scheme.⁴⁷ Most of the other subjects in the scheme were taught by professors and senior staff of the university. Whilst Taylor was not on faculty, she was one of the few lecturers teaching in the extension program who were not university staff members. However Taylor's lectures should be noted as an emergent presence of theorizing around visual cultural history at the University of Melbourne over a decade before the establishment of the Herald Chair of Fine Arts. Perhaps her appointment by the University also could suggest that Taylor was not regarded in the 1930s as entirely amateur or lacking competence. Indeed the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed that 'hundreds of art lovers' had enjoyed her lectures and noted that the Athenaeum Club had made a list of outstanding public lectures delivered in Melbourne and that Taylor had been selected for this

⁴² Frances Derham, 'Allen, Mary Cecil (1893 - 1962)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A070048b.htm>

⁴³ *Argus* 27 August 1935, 9 July 1936.

⁴⁴ Possibly some of her duties in regards to public programs at the gallery were during the late 1940s taken over by Joan Lindsay. Taylor after ceasing to lecture at the Gallery then managed a Melbourne commercial gallery in the mid 1940s to 1950s, the Velasquez Gallery.

⁴⁵ *Argus* 20 May 1934, 9 October 1935, 10 November 1936, 3 December 1937.

⁴⁶ *Argus* 4 May 1934

⁴⁷ *Argus* 29 March 1934

honour alongside major scholars from the University of Melbourne of that era, Professors Osborne and Crawford and Sir Ernest Fiske.⁴⁸

In 1937 the Housewives Association nominated Taylor as a potential trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria⁴⁹ – a move strongly opposed by Alice Bale and also Max Meldrum, who saw gender as not being an issue to raise in relation to art gallery appointments.⁵⁰ There were angry letters and statements in the press, pro and contra, including from the women's section of the United Country Party.⁵¹ The issue of a female Trustee was still on the Country Party's agenda nearly two years later, although they did not nominate a candidate.⁵² Like Preston, Taylor also lectured on the radio, for the ABC station 3LO, and the subjects of her talks often overlapped her gallery and university lectures. Presumably her lectures were recorded on shellac as they were broadcast in Sydney and Canberra, indicating a large potential national audience in Australia for her discussions on art history during the 1930s. She wrote frequently to the newspapers about art matters and never hesitated to put her views forward before more high profiled co-professionals. In 1929 she criticized Arthur Streeton for mentioning only one woman artist in an article outlining the history of Australian art. She noted that works by '70 or 80' Australian women artists had been bought by public galleries across the country and listed a group of Australian women who had received major awards and honours overseas.⁵³ Taylor's letter is an informative snapshot of women's status in Australian public collections at this date and indicates how women artists' status in the public eye was more secure between the wars than in the 1950s and 1960s.

Her most compelling and unexpected claim to a place in art historical memory came in 1938 when she put forward the then astonishing proposal that the University of Melbourne should establish a 'Chair of Art'. This request was not for a general humanities appointment, but a request for a *fine arts* or *art history* specialist position as her letter to the *Argus* shows. The mention of a donated collection of reproductive prints of 'masterpieces' from the Carnegie Corporation to the University of Melbourne affirms that what Taylor was requesting was undoubtedly a chair of *art history*, as too the *Adelaide Advertiser* reporting that Taylor was proposing that the University should establish 'a course in art appreciation'.⁵⁴ The Registrar of the University went on the public record to state that the University had more urgent needs than a 'Chair of Art' specifically in response to Taylor raising the question.⁵⁵ She in turn was not fazed.

Sir,-The registrar of the University (Mr. A. W. Greig) considers that the community has more urgent needs than that of a Chair of Art. That he should express such an opinion is itself proof of the urgency, since, I

⁴⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* 30 April 1938

⁴⁹ *Argus* 10 December 1937

⁵⁰ *Argus* 11 December 1937, 20 December 1937

⁵¹ *Argus* 25 September 1937

⁵² *Argus* 1 April 1939

⁵³ *Argus* 26 November 1929

⁵⁴ *Adelaide Advertiser* 2 May 1938

⁵⁵ *Argus* 30 April 1935

presume, he is looking at the question merely from a utilitarian angle. There is a grave danger that our Australian universities are tending to break away from the cultural values of life. There is an urgent need for the more lasting and beautiful things. A Chair of Art would not cost very much. One was lately founded at Manchester with a lectureship, of £125 a year, and the recent donation of an art library and reproductions of famous pictures from the Carnegie Corporation to our own University adds a further nucleus to the foundation. Australia is the only part of the British Empire with its 30 universities that has not already established a Chair of Art ⁵⁶

The *Advertiser* believed that there was some tentative interest in Taylor's proposal, but Greig the University Registrar thought that an architectural chair was more important than an art history chair. However if a private benefactor were to come forward and provide funds for the proposal, it could go ahead.⁵⁷ Indeed it was precisely in this manner through a privately funded chair, that art history entered the University of Melbourne, *eight years* after Taylor proposed the need for such a chair.

Not only Sydney and Melbourne State Galleries employed women artists as lecturers, but Enid Dickson was similarly employed at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, in the 1930s and also at the University of Queensland for the Workers Education Association. Dickson was trained at the National Gallery School Melbourne, again under Bernard Hall, and worked in Brisbane and Sydney. She specialised in representational pastel portraits of ballet stars and theatrical personalities, having captured the attention of visiting ballerina Anna Pavlova who allowed her to sketch backstage in the 1920s and she continued to sketch Australian and international ballet companies over the next three decades.⁵⁸ Her work is now held amongst the dance-based thematic stream within the Australian National Library collections, Canberra.

However the Queensland Art Gallery particularly relied upon the skill and professionalism of artist Vida Lahey in the interwar years and mid twentieth century. On occasion she lectured at the gallery and it published her lecture 'Art for All' in 1940. As Stephanie Taylor lectured at the University of Melbourne, so too did Lahey present occasional lectures at the University of Queensland, and as with Taylor, Lahey delivered similar material to her public gallery lectures. She also taught children's art classes at the Queensland Art Gallery. Lahey's contribution extended even to a curatorial role as from 1923 she sat on an advisory board recommending purchases for the Gallery's collection. To enable the Brisbane Gallery have greater buying power she founded the Queensland Art Fund in 1929, which was intended to consolidate the Gallery's holdings and enhance its mission as a cultural provider. Her most significant art historical action was the foundation of the Queensland Art Library, a body closely associated with the Art Gallery. Based on funding from the Carnegie Art Corporation to buy images and art history

⁵⁶ Stephanie Taylor letter to the editor of the *Argus* 4 May 1938

⁵⁷ *Adelaide Advertiser* 2 May 1938

⁵⁸ Enid Dickson's career is documented on the website http://www.eniddickson.com/bio_long.html [viewed October 2010]

teaching materials, the Queensland Art Library offered a reference collection, discussions on art, occasional exhibitions and art history lectures, many of which were presented by Lahey herself. She lectured on Manet in 1938 and the Renaissance in 1937 and 1939.

Lahey too can be considered an art historian in her own right. She collated some of her ongoing researches and critical observations in a more permanent form with her history of *Art in Queensland*, 1959. Her narrative was the first regionally based historical study of Queensland art published to that date and not superseded until very recent years. The importance of Lahey's history cannot be overlooked and it received curatorial endorsement through the imprimatur of the Queensland Art Gallery who acted as co-publisher. If assessed in terms of its qualitative merits, not simply as a fascinating phenomenon, her text stands up today as surprisingly modern in that it was a history of art institutions and professional bodies as well as heroic creative individuals. The content was assured, informative and totally professional in its approach. In attempting to track early historiographies of Australian art, Lahey again emphasizes how women artists had been responsible for solid groundwork in establishing the *idea* of the practice of art history and also the dissemination of art historical knowledge, before the establishment of art history as an academic discipline in Australia, which is the familiar starting point.

As with Violet Teague, Lahey not only offers grounding in what could be seen as a traditional vision of art history, she also offers an early foretaste of a post-colonial approach to art history. The first lines of her history of Queensland art erases settler artists as primary heroes and reminds the reader that 'in order to see the first examples of painting Australia, one needs not to look in the art gallery but in the hidden caves and on sheltered rock faces'. She affirmed that indigenous artifacts should be recognised for their cultural merit and not dismissed as ethnographic curios⁵⁹ In a Brisbane context, Lahey herself had already played an important part in the process of rethinking and validating indigenous art, when the Queensland Art Library mounted the first exhibition in that city that claimed Indigenous creative products as art rather than anthropology.⁶⁰

Looking at the case studies of Preston, Lahey and Taylor we note the consistent presence of the Carnegie Corporation in all these early attempts at art historical public education in Australia during the 1930s. The link is strongest of course with Preston as the Carnegie Corporation actually sponsored her lectures. Lahey's lectures were supported by the Carnegie funded visual and textual reference materials. In Melbourne Taylor used the presence of Carnegie sponsored art historical resources at the University of Melbourne to validate her suggestion that a chair in visual arts scholarship be established. Furthermore Mary Cecil Allen was funded for activities and projects in North America which facilitated her publications in the late 1920s.

⁵⁹ Vida Lahey, *Art in Queensland 1859-1959*, Brisbane: Jacaranda, Press for The Queensland National Art Gallery, 1959, 1.

⁶⁰ Bettina MacAulay, *Songs of Colour the art of Vida Lahey*, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1989, 25. This text gives a detailed overview of Lahey's curatorial and gallery work as well as her oeuvre of paintings.

Women as anomalous to art historical narrative

Moving on from the interwar period when women artists were high profiled and active, the picture changes; women were relatively invisible in the post-war expansion of the art critical and curatorial system in Australia. In these years of expansion and consolidation of professional art history and curation, this system centred upon towering masculine figures such as Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale and equally monolithic historic figures such as Tom Roberts and Louis Buvelot. One also notes the masculine collusion between curators, favoured historical artists, a sense of Australia's 'greatness' and the 'cowboys' of expanding capitalism in the boom post war years, as documented in Jayson Althofer's recent article on the nexus of influence represented by the Lionel Lindsay Art Gallery, founded 1959 by Robert Bolton, a road transport and trucking magnate, in Toowoomba and named in honour of major Australian artist and critic, Lionel Lindsay.⁶¹ This institution is a particularly rich case study due to the founder's extremely unselfconscious conservatism and clear obsession with a heroic vision of settler culture, but the invisibility of women stands out across the whole political spectrum on the left as well as the right. The other notable element of the Lionel Lindsay Art Gallery and Library was the sense of bonhomie which extended upwards from an individual entrepreneur as far as the Prime Minister Robert Menzies, a long practiced interventionist in the art curation and theory arena from the 1930s onwards.⁶²

By the post-war era Lionel Lindsay linked the 'right' type of art and orderly and responsible art curation to the cause of opposing socialism within Australian politics, as well as teaching people about an 'Australia' that he and his patrons – including Menzies - saw as rapidly being swamped by the alien hordes of non-British migrants as well as the slackness of the younger generation in the 1950s, no longer pioneers or Anzacs.⁶³ These fears of a betrayal of a supposed glorious tradition were closely linked in this milieu to women artists. Lionel Lindsay had already in the 1940s identified women as lax and lazy painters who wanted easy and quick shortcuts and for whom the fallacies of modernism had as easy an appeal as they did for Jews. He had no qualms about pursuing the latter in print, despite the 'complications' - as he somewhat superficially acknowledged - offered by recent publicity around Nazi 'atrocities' to anyone wishing to discuss Jews as a racial subgroup. 'Today there are more women painters than men ... the superficial nature of modern painting attracts their light hands: picture or hat all is one.'⁶⁴

Given the cyclic presence of women in Australian visual arts with periods of visibility and periods of less discernable presence as noted by the arguments of Heather Johnson that introduced this paper, women's anomalous status is not absolute. At times especially in the early twentieth century it remains low-key, and at times it is overtly schismatic as in the 1970s. That women's art triggers intense

⁶¹Jayson Althofer, 'Lover of the real Australia and sane art': William Bolton MBE and the Lionel Lindsay Art Gallery and Library', *Australian Library Journal*, 56: 3-4, 2007, 233-250.

⁶² Althofer Lover of the real Australia, 240-241.

⁶³ Althofer Lover of the real Australia, 245-246.

⁶⁴ Lionel Lindsay, *Addled Art*, London: Hollis and Carter 1946, 26-27, 32 and direct quote 53.

and somewhat irrational reactions amongst Australian intellectuals and in the agora can be seen from as recently as the mid 1990s, when Joan Kerr catalyzed heightened emotions during the National Women's Art Project in 1995. The vituperative content of public discourses in national newspaper suggests that we are dealing with hyperdramas beyond the stated and surface content – witness her pillorying as Madame Mao⁶⁵ and Pol Pot seeking to destroy by her Maoist 'Great Leap Forward' all that was beautiful and civilised in white Australia – and that of course represented by great white male investment artists.

Yet we must also note that on the one hand from the 1980s onwards, women artists and critics have increasingly overlapped with the mainstream. Concurrently on the other hand in very recent years there is a tendency for young practitioners to pick up on the 'Indie' model seen in film and music where the non canonical form their own structures and networks. With the increasing emphasis on art theory and writing texts around art in art schools and the moving of the professional teaching of art from the polytechnic to a university based context (or the upgrading of the polytechnic to a university status), the curator/academic and maker are becoming increasingly blurred. This overlap will also impact upon the nature of generating and preserving art historical narratives. The self-generated and curated narratives of practitioners, such as seen in exegeses for practice-based and creative Fine Arts 'PhDs by project', may well play an increasing role in regulating or setting the overall collective art historical memory.

Activism of the 1970s constituted a visible second wave of feminism, whilst the consolidation of the women artists' presence through both institutional development and the uptake of art theory represents a third wave that has commenced in the 1980s and continues to the present day. In my role as teaching practitioners in visual culture rather than art history students, I can note an acceptance of 'performativity' and sexuality, and diversities of gender and cultural positionings in the 1990s which has consolidated the position of women in contemporary art. Yet within the forum of art history, particularly in the sphere of public gallery display, the position of the female practitioner – notably before the accepted entry point into the canon of women via modernist icons such as Preston, Thea Proctor and Grace Cossington Smith - remains far less resolved.

There is currently an incipient fourth wave of feminist practice with the current interest amongst very young emerging practitioners in 'craftivism', 'new crafts', 'neo-craft' and craft-based nostalgia which curiously traverses the whole political spectrum from 'guerilla knitting' to 'Madmen-inspired retro', to wearing and retailing vintage clothes, to the extreme capitalist banality of the over-iced cupcake explosion, with its sugary ziggurat of frosting quite unlike the original patty-pan cakes of the Menzies era. This new emerging fourth wave is linked to grass roots and sub cultural expressions such as the 'slow' movement, green and sustainability community activism, anti technological interventions and urban cultural jamming. The emphasis on making, on opting in, on developing sometimes selective historical narratives to justify precedence that are strongly female centric,

⁶⁵ By John Macdonald and Jacques Dellaruelle as quoted by Susan Steggill, *Joan Kerr in Context: a Biography*, PhD Thesis in Creative Writing, Sydney: University of New South Wales 2009, 174.

indicates that this potential fourth wave of feminism is linked to the flattening and broadening of cultural narratives under the fixed hierarchies of the canon.

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