



Abstraction: celebrating Australian women abstract artists

A National Gallery of Australia Exhibition
The Temporary Exhibitions Gallery

Friday 2 March – Sunday 20 May 2018

“Realistic painting has proved to be a blind alley. We have reached the end of that alley, and been obliged to turn around and retrace our steps. Now we have started on the new track, and already find it rich in new discoveries.” Dorrit Black, 16 March 1932

Abstraction is one of the most influential developments in art history. Evolving from avant-garde movements in Europe at the close of the nineteenth century, it has continued to flourish through to contemporary times. Women artists have been at the forefront of its development and yet, until recently, their contribution has been obscured from the art-historical narrative. This exhibition resurrects and examines the myriad of ways that Australian women artists have championed abstraction and kept it alive in the twenty-first century.

Dorrit Black

Provençale farmhouse 1928

oil on canvas on cardboard

36.8 × 47.6 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 2014



In Australia, it was progressive modernist women in the 1920s who were the chief protagonists in the opening up of avant-garde practices to artists at home, directing taste away from a growing conservatism and dominance of landscape and portraiture traditions. When the world turned decidedly modern at the outbreak of the First World War, it was largely women artists who embraced cubism and abstraction as a new path for Australian art. Importantly, they brought back the theories and practices they had learnt from masters in Paris and London to Australia.

By the 1950s, artists turned away from Europe towards America where they fell under the spell of Abstract Expressionism, and later geometric abstraction, minimalism and optical art. The importance of Indigenous women artists to the development of abstraction in Australia cannot be underestimated. Through her exuberant fields of colour painted on heroic scale, Emily Kame Kngwarreye opened up abstraction and gestural non-figuration to wider audiences. Today contemporary women artists are finding new pathways in abstraction and continuing the legacy of the early pioneering modernist women who came before them.

NGA
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National Collecting Institutions
Touring & Outreach Program

This exhibition is supported by the National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program, an Australian Government program aiming to improve access to the national collections for all Australians.

Grace Crowley
Abstract painting 1947
oil on cardboard
60.7 × 83.3 cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1959