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Interviewing artists from *The Field* (1968): the use of acrylic paints in a seminal exhibition of Australian colourfield painting

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Introduction

Artist interviews are utilised in contemporary conservation practice to gain a deeper understanding of the artist's intent. This method gathers intangible information not obtainable through technical investigation that can often directly impact the conservation of modern and contemporary artworks. Contributing to this growing area of research is a series of filmed artist interviews, forming part of a larger conservation project investigating the relationship between acrylic emulsion paints and Australian formal abstraction in the 1960s. The interviews were conducted with artists featured in the seminal exhibition, *The Field* (1968), presented at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Australia. According to the original exhibition catalogue, acrylic paint was used in 60% of the featured works (Finemore, 1968). These interviews help verify the paint media, while offering insights into material history from the perspective of artists to give context to artistic intent. The result is a useful conservation resource that builds our technical knowledge of Australian colourfield painting.

The Field

Opening the NGV's new premises on St Kilda Road in August 1968 was *The Field* (Fig. 1), the first comprehensive Australian exhibition of colourfield painting and abstract sculpture. The inaugural exhibition included 74 works by 40 artists and helped advance the careers of a generation of Australian artists who practised the style of hard-edge abstraction. Curated by Brian Finemore and John Stringer, *The Field* was a deliberate departure from the style of work collected and exhibited up to that point by the Gallery, and included artists such as David Aspden, Sydney Ball, Janet Dawson and Dick Watkins.

The NGV is currently working towards a major exhibition which will recreate *The Field* for the exhibition's 50th anniversary in 2018. The curators, Tony Ellwood, Director, and Beckett Rozentals, Curator, Australian Painting, Sculpture and Decorative Arts to 1980, are currently in the process of locating (or determining the fate of) all works exhibited in the original exhibition. The process of revisiting the exhibition involves surveying the participating artists

to contribute to a multimedia component for *The Field Revisited* exhibition, scheduled to open at The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia in 2018.

Video-recorded artist interviews

The Field provides a convenient cross-section of the movement of colourfield painting that developed in tandem with various technical advancements in modern synthetic paints, including the invention of acrylic paints. Nearly 50 years on, the artworks created during this time and for this exhibition have attracted renewed interest, particularly regarding their conservation and treatment. Documenting artist intent through dialogue with living artists is an important aspect of this process. Professionally video-recorded interviews have proven to be an effective way to achieve content that is not only rich with technical and historical data, but also visually engaging for audiences. It offers an entry point into the dialogue as the artists speak to camera as they talk about their materials and tools in detail (Fig. 2). The interviews for this project can be viewed via the project website: www.conservingcolourfield.net

Key findings

The artists' responses reveal the significance of acrylic paints to the development of Australian colourfield painting, through their discussion of the unique handling properties of acrylics that enabled painters to achieve the characteristic flat, expansive areas of unmodulated colour. The artists verified their use of a variety of acrylic brands, which supports ongoing research into the take-up of international brands, such as Liquitex® (America) and Rowney Cryla (England), as well as locally manufactured acrylic paints by Australian companies. A few artists also recalled experimenting with various types of paints (such as poly-vinyl acetate (PVAc)), including formulating and mixing their own paints, often with the assistance of a paint chemist or supplier.

Overseas travel was important in the take-up of acrylic paints, as it enabled artists to learn about and acquire various brands not available in Australia until the mid 1960s. However, only 11 of the 40 *Field* artists had travelled internationally during the '60s and relied on sourcing acrylic brands as they became available (Stringer, 1984). The artists also addressed the conservation of their work: a few acknowledged their endeavours at restoring their own paintings, re-painting sections to reinstate the pristine qualities of a scratched or damaged surface. This aspect of their responses offers valuable insight that can inform future treatments of their work.

Conclusion

These interviews are a timely and important historical record of the technical significance of Australian colourfield painting. The findings correlate and corroborate ongoing conservation research into the works featured in *The Field*, providing evidence to support the take-up and distribution of early acrylic paints in Australia. Overall, the artists' responses demonstrate a range of working methods and choice of materials: Col Jordan and Alun Leach-Jones were found to be fairly consistent with their choice of acrylic brands and technique, while other artists, like Ron Robertson-Swann, were more flexible and experimental in their approach. PVAc paints were used along with, or in place of, acrylic emulsion paints for practical and economic reasons, revealing the challenges involved with investigating acrylic paints which emerged alongside a variety of other synthetic paints. These interviews reinforce the value of

conservation enquiry to the field of art history and exhibition development, and demonstrate what is gained from, and would be potentially lost without, documenting the intent of these important artists.

Technical parameters

A Canon XC10 camera with fixed manual zoom lens was used to capture High Definition quality footage. Three-point lighting was achieved with a StudioPRO Photography Continuous Premium Daylight LED 600 Light Panel and Croma Bi-Color On-camera LED compact light. A RØDE NTG2 shotgun microphone and a Zoom H5 Handy Recorder were used to obtain 24-bit/96kHz audio recording. A videographer assisted with the recording process.

References

Finemore, B. 1968. *The Field*. Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria; Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW.

Stringer, J. 1984. Why – The Field. In: *The Field Now*. Melbourne: Heide Park and Art Gallery, pp.15–17.

Captions

Figure 1 *The Field*, National Gallery of Victoria, 1968. Left to right: Col Jordan, *Daedalus series 5*, 1968. On floor: Col Jordan, *Knossus II*, 1968; Eric Shirley, *Encore*; Alun Leach-Jones, *Noumenon XX first light*, 1967; Harald Noritis, *Come away*, 1968; James Doolin, *Artificial landscape 68-1*, 1968; James Doolin, *Artificial landscape 67-6*, 1967. On floor: Tony Coleing, *Untitled*, 1968.

Photograph courtesy National Gallery of Victoria

Figure 2 Video still of Alun Leach-Jones speaking about his paints and techniques.

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