

---

# Sublime Cocktail

Mary Eagle

---

THE EXHIBITION MURMURED, with Baudelaire, of *Correspondences*. Wesfarmers' collection has a high proportion of major paintings, each warranting close attention. What elated me, however, was the unusual rightness of the play between works of art. It was years since I had seen a non-thematic display (the *Sublime* is limitless, so hardly a theme) that reached into works of art obliquely and exercised the art of comparison with true inspiration.

Facing the incomer at the National Library of Australia was Howard Taylor's painting *Bush fire sun* (1996). Blazing red through haze, the orb pins one with god-like glare. Adjacent was *Hung fire* (1995), an equally uncompromising work by Rosalie Gascoigne. Assembled from cut pieces of red road sign, it retains the peremptoriness of the raw material in the staccato eloquence of colour, light and lettering.

Opposite was another pairing, of national history paintings, as darkly tragic as the first pair had been incandescent. Rover Thomas's *Tomato Creek and Ord River* (1984) shows the place where Jack Kelly shot a mob of blackfellows. Marked in the work are telltale tracks and crematorium smoke with other signs indicative of how history gives form to the earth and memory. Russell Drysdale's *Youth at Broome* (1958), by way of agreement, shows the basic earth — even the sky is brown. On this pervasive colour, the town on the horizon is strewn like white bones. Up front looms an Australian youth of Japanese-Aboriginal-European-Emu descent.

Two such brilliant combinations could not happen by chance. To my delight, the exhibition supported others equally enlivening. In one, an austere attention to tone by painters Ralph Balson, Robert Hunter and Carol Rudyard, casually cut across the art-historical periods that separate Balson in the 1930s and 1940s from the reductive colour-field painters of the 1960s and 1970s, and opened the way to long-ago reflective painters such as Vermeer and Piero della Francesca.

Some of the links forged between works of art were not those that leap immediately to the eye. For instance, Queenie McKenzie's *Artist's country* (1993) was not next to Hector Jandany's painting but with Fred Williams, Lloyd Rees, Godfrey Miller and Emily Kngwarreye, and a sculpture by Howard Taylor. The unlikely group shared the complexity of showing country as both depth and surface, and active, too,

as in a tree falling (Williams), piercing (Taylor), the passing of the moon across the sky (Miller), an unimpeded journey across country (Kngwarreye) and levitation above a tall barrier in paintings by McKenzie and Rees.

A display of visual art by several artists involves the same issue as an anthology of poetry by different authors, or a concert of music by more than one composer. There is an element of interference, of riding over the integrity of each work for the sake of building a second coherence between them. To be effective, the correspondence has to strike as true to each work, yet the combination will be artificial, for art simply isn't created with those extraneous contexts in mind. It is a disadvantage that, whereas a poem or musical composition takes its time (literally), visual art has its main presence in the cocktail of museum displays. Those used to be hung

according to chronology, nation, medium, an evaluation that had been determined historically, and a Ham, Shem and Japheth broad kind of 'culture' typification. The neutrality of the categories having been questioned in recent decades, many Western art museums played with alternatives, mixing media, disregarding national boundaries, disrupting the chronology, re-evaluating quality and variously redefining culture. The effect was to increase controversy, incidentally proving that all displays are biased. That conceptual shake-up (not necessarily the new displays themselves) undoubtedly took attention away from works of art as objects of unique power, and gave it to the politics of their combination. Observing this, curators at the National Gallery of

Australia in the 1990s made it a rule that each work of art should be well served by its display. The best of that evolving art of context sprang to life again in the Wesfarmers exhibition, under the curatorship of Helen Carroll.

I recommend the catalogue essays by Carroll, Betty Churcher, Brenda Croft, Richard Kohn, David Malouf and Margaret Seares for their cumulative effect. The *Sublime*, so interpreted, would make a good collection policy. Is that, perhaps, the key to Wesfarmers' success?

## Catalogue details:

*Sublime: 25 Years of the Wesfarmers Collection of Australian Art*

Wesfarmers Arts, \$35pb, 146pp, 0 9580437 0 1

Archived at Flinders University: [dspace.flinders.edu.au](http://dspace.flinders.edu.au)