



When Modern Became Contemporary Art

The Idea of Australian Art, 1962-1988

Charles Green, Heather Barker

This book is a portrait of the period when modern art became contemporary art. It explores how and why writers and artists in Australia argued over the idea of a distinctively Australian modern and then postmodern art between 1962, the date of publication of a foundational book, *Australian Painting 1788-1960*, up to 1988, the year of the Australian Bicentennial. The book reflects on why the embrace of Aboriginal art was so late in art museums and in histories of Australian art, arguing that this was because it was not part of a national story dominated by colonial, then neo-colonial dependency.

“For years Charles Green has been one of the most judicious and even-handed observers of the Australian art scene, both because of his international experience and his ongoing art practice with his partner Lyndell Brown. *When Modern Became Contemporary Art* begins with the excellent point that the study of art history has lagged behind artistic practice in contemplating Indigenous art. The book corrects that in the most welcoming way, by bringing hundreds—perhaps thousands—of points of reference, from anthropology, art history, journalism, curating, and the art market, into productive dialogue. Modernism, postmodernism, and Indigenous art are contested in Australia in ways they seldom are in other countries, so it is especially salutary to have guides as balanced, careful, generous, and collaborative as Charles Green and Heather Barker.”

-Professor James Elkins, E.C. Chadbourne Chair of Art History, Theory, and Criticism, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

“This book is a call to the future. It’s past time we paid more attention to post-1960s critics, for they articulated the new mood brewing, the postcolonial contemporary.”

-Professor Ian McLean, author of *Rattling Spears* and *Double Nation*

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Across nine chapters about art, exhibitions, curators and critics, this book describes the shift from modern art to contemporary art through the successive attempts to define a place in the world for Australian art. But by 1988, Australian art looked less and less like a viable tradition inside which to interpret ‘our’ art. Instead, vast gaps appeared, since mostly male and often older White writers had limited their horizons to White Australia alone. National stories by White men, like borders, had less and less explanatory value. Underneath this, a perplexing subject remained: the absence of Aboriginal art in understanding what Australian art was during the period that established the idea of a distinctive Australian modern and then contemporary art.

This book reflects on why the embrace of Aboriginal art was so late in art museums and histories of Australian art, arguing that this was because it was not part of a national story dominated by colonial, then neo-colonial dependency. It is important reading for all scholars of both global and Australian art, and for curators and artists.

Charles Green is Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Melbourne, author of *Peripheral Vision: Contemporary Australian Art* (1995), *The Third Hand: Artist Collaborations from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (2001) and (with Anthony Gardner) *Biennials, Triennials, and documenta* (2016). He is also an artist, working in collaboration with Lyndell Brown.

Heather Barker is an independent scholar and artist.

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Introduction

Aims

This book is a portrait of the period when modern art became contemporary art. It explores how and why writers and artists in Australia argued over the idea of a distinctively Australian modern and then postmodern art between 1962, the date of publication of a foundational book, *Australian Painting 1788–1960*, and 1988, the year of the Australian Bicentennial. Across nine chapters about art, exhibitions, curators and critics, this book describes the shift from modern art to contemporary art through the successive attempts to define a place in the world for Australian art. But by 1988, Australian art looked less and less like a viable tradition inside which to interpret ‘our’ art. Instead, vast gaps appeared, since mostly male and often older White writers had limited their horizons to White Australia alone. National stories by White men, like borders, had less and less explanatory value.

Our book is a contribution to understanding the history of modern and contemporary Australian art. We discuss art historians, art critics and artists, since artists’ works and words should inform historians of Australian art. And it was artists who put transcultural synthesis—art drawing on both Indigenous and modernist European artistic methods or else seeking to communicate across apparently incommensurate cultural lines—into practice long before art historians saw Indigenous art’s necessity in Australian art history.

Underneath this, a perplexing subject remained: the absence of Aboriginal art in understanding what Australian art was during the period that established the idea of a distinctive Australian modern and then contemporary art. This book reflects on why the embrace of Aboriginal art was so late in art museums and in histories of Australian art, arguing that this was because it was not part of a national story dominated by colonial, then neo-colonial dependency.

Our book is not intended as a contribution to Indigenous art history—others have written on that with far more knowledge than us—but to understanding the history of modern and contemporary Australian art.¹ We think art historians, critics, artists and curators very belatedly began to acknowledge the power of contemporary Aboriginal painting that had long been in many artists’ sights as inspiration and model, and in plain view on display in the