

From the modern to the contemporary – Adelaide’s evolving art scene

A fresh and comprehensive new narrative reveals how the Adelaide art scene post-World War II was an incubator of progressive ideas and talent, despite often being dismissed or disparaged in the wider mainstream history of Australian art.

Written by [John Neylon](#)



Making the film 'Painting South Australia, 1950–1955'. From left: J Campbell Dobbie, Stan Ostojka-Kotkowski (director), 'unknown friend with reflector', Douglas Roberts, Kristel (Kitty) Treloar and Mervyn Smith. Photo: Ian Davidson

In 1939, a landmark exhibition was presented at the Art Gallery of South Australia. The *Herald/Advertiser Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art* gave an Adelaide audience its first real taste of Modernism, particularly Cubist and Surrealist styles.

The project’s organiser and Melbourne art critic Basil Burdett shifted the playing field for art by arguing for an interdisciplinary approach, referencing modern science, psychology, literature and music. His close-out words in a letter to *The Advertiser* in 1939, have a contemporary ring:

“If much of modern art seems crazy to you then much of modern life must be so, too, for modern art is only its projection on canvas. One thing is certain – life is no longer simple, able to be covered by a stock of well-worn ideas. Neither is art, if it truly expresses the present, and is not just a pale reflection of the past.”

This exhibition inspired an emerging crop of young artists (later known as the Adelaide Angries) to experiment with form, colour and ideas.

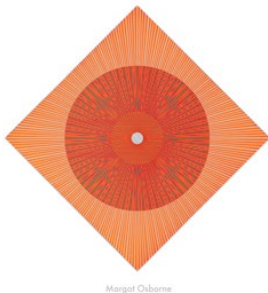


Installation view, *Advertiser Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art*, 1939, Art Gallery of South Australia. Photo: supplied

Cut to 1975. Same space (the Art Gallery of South Australia). Noel Sheridan's *Everybody should get stones* was composed of 25 tonnes of river stones strewn across the floor. Sheridan said at the time that the work was designed to provoke questions about art itself. Critic Ivor Francis, a champion of the Adelaide Angries' revolutionary aims, was not impressed. He found the work to be "didactic and patronising", and singled out its "reliance on the mumbo jumbo of pseudo-scientific documentation".

And so the wheel turned in Adelaide, each decade and generation of artists pushing and debating the boundaries of what art could or should be – completely free to be whatever it likes or fulfilling a social contract for the betterment of society.

The Adelaide Art Scene Becoming Contemporary 1939–2000



Margot Osborne

Hundreds of artists plus curators, gallerists, administrators and engaged public audiences have contributed enthusiastically to this complex mosaic of endeavour. But until now it is doubtful if any could visualise, let alone understand, the overall picture. In this regard, published histories of Australian art have been unhelpful.

Margot Osborne, editor and lead writer for *The Adelaide Art Scene: Becoming Contemporary 1939–2000*, observes that: "The history of Adelaide's contemporary art scene... was always an 'Other' history to the mainstream history of Australian art, as told from the vantage point of Sydney and Melbourne. Viewed from afar, progressive art in Adelaide was dismissed, disparaged, or faintly praised as being a derivative, less interesting version of those cosmopolitan art scenes."

With the publication of *The Adelaide Art Scene*, the local art community now has the visual evidence and an overarching narrative to envisage itself otherwise. In this fresh narrative, Adelaide has since the post-World War II era emerged as an incubator of progressive ideas and talent, constantly invigorated by the arrivals and departures of artists moving from other parts of Australia and from overseas.



Street decorations designed by Stan Ostoja-Kotkowski on King William Road for the 1966 Adelaide Festival. A chapter in *The Adelaide Art Scene* is devoted to Ostoja-Kotkowski. Photo: supplied

Many substantial publications have previously contributed to this narrative about Adelaide's transition from the modern to contemporary. These include art-historical and genre-specific publications associated with the Art Gallery's exhibition program, and other texts appearing in art museum catalogues, articles, SALA monographs and the like. But honestly, even for seasoned art writers/commentators, making sense of the period from the late '80s into the '90s – with its constantly churning topography of artist collectives, counter-culture initiatives and preference for theory-based practice – remained a challenge.



Nancy Claridge in the Claridge House living room c. 1956 with a mural by Wladyslaw Dutkiewicz. Photo: supplied

Locally, Nancy Benko's 1969 publication *Art and Artists of South Australia* has finally been relieved of its duty to tell "our" story. Weighing in at 740 pages, *The Adelaide Art Scene* is the biggest elephant in the room.

And how do you wash (or read) this particularly large creature? My advice is to start with Osborne's introduction and summary of contents, then head for the nearest bunny hole of interest provided by a team of writers.

If you want to be more than surprised by Adelaide design sophistication of the 1950s, then begin with Georgina Downey's survey of Adelaide's domestic interiors in the '50s.

Philip Jones' overview of the emergence of an Adelaide Aboriginal art "scene" sets up an absorbing field of research and storytelling for others to follow. The overview provided by Catherine Speck, Doreen Mellor and Nici Cumpston of First Nations art in the context of Adelaide should be read in association with Jones' essay.

If you want to arm wrestle with the escapades of the so called "A team" (a term coined by Ken Bolton in the late '90s that covers a diversity of artists associated with various modes of post-modernist practice), then Michael Newall's wide-ranging survey of this era is the place to start.



Yvonne Koolmatrie, *Eel traps*, installation for Murrundi, CACSA 1993.

This all-encompassing publication, with its copious illustrations, comprehensive end notes and various biographies, references and chronologies, is strategically designed, with Osborne's overarching narrative anchoring the reading. The addition of a "from the archives" anthology of critical writing, sourced from media reviews, catalogue essays, and journal articles across the period 1939–2000, foregrounds a wide variety of critical reflection and in doing so honours the work of many writers who have contributed to public discourse across the journey.

A criticism of sweeping historical narratives is that they often reflect the views of a single author. So many voices have contributed to *The Adelaide Art Scene* it could be considered Adelaide contemporary art's Rosetta Stone, a useful key for translating recent history. But the real work of joining the dots and seeing how the various thematics of

painting/sculpture/public art/craft and design, photography, printmaking, feminism, cultural and individual identity and so on all overlap, belongs ultimately to the reader.



Sue Rosenthal, Women's Work:
Which Weapon?, 1996.