



Cristina Asquith BAKER, Gemma BEN-ARY, Dorothy BRAUND, Lina BRYANS,
Mary EDWARDS, Linda FARDOE, Margaret FRANCIS, Adrienne GAHA,
Bessie GIBSON, Melissa McDOUGALL, Clare McFARLANE, Gina MOORE,
Margaret MORGAN, Maisie NEWBOLD, Susan NORRIE, Kathleen O'CONNOR,
Jean SUTHERLAND, Eveline SYME, Yvette WATT, Julie WILSON-FOSTER,
Sue WYATT from the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art

12 February – 10 December 2022 | Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery



Susan Wyatt, *Laverton girls*, 2003, oil on canvas, 120 x 177cm. © courtesy of the artist

This exhibition is an exploration of the performative nature of painting and identity.

Portraits are easily understood as visual representations of individuals – but the apparent ease with which we can read these images conceals how they have been produced. Artists have made countless decisions as they have applied pigmented oil paints to canvas to create a likeness. A chronological run of portraits in this exhibition is in dialogue with a wall of enigmatic and predominantly dark paintings by Susan Norrie. Norrie desires to break open the apparently seamless skin of paintings to reveal the motivations and social conventions of their making. Her lush and beguiling paintings engage with the subjective processes of both making and viewing art. The artist invites viewers to consider the uncanny and potentially troubling currents swirling beneath the surface.

What do we see and what can we know?

Portraits exist as partial representations that allude to the full character and nature of the individual. They may communicate something of the psychological

character of the sitter and convey a sense of the person beyond mere likeness. Much of the success of a portrait is dependent upon the sensitivity of the artist and their judicious decisions about which features to reveal and which to conceal. The tradition of portraiture in Western art history is founded upon portraits created for the powerful and wealthy. Sitters are posed and staged, wearing clothes and surrounded by objects that reinforce their status and importance. Contemporary artists, particularly those who do not identify as male or white, invariably challenge these conventions as they represent themselves and others in the public realm.

Artists' self-portraits also serve to display technical capacity and are an assertion of legitimacy. In *Vision stance*, 1997, Clare McFarlane presents herself stretching one arm forward as she looks beyond the painted surface. In choosing to depict herself immersed in contemplation of the unseen, she seeks to negotiate social conventions that would present her as passive and constrained by her gender. McFarlane's is an exception to the majority of self-portraits by women and non-binary artists in this exhibition which squarely

meet the gaze of the viewer. Julie Wilson-Foster's *Self portrait*, 1999, uses the device of a mirror such that her painted reflection meets our gaze. This is a joyful subversion of the tradition of female symbolic or allegorical figures who are depicted holding mirrors in order to present their body seductively for the viewer's voyeuristic gaze. Wilson-Foster is far removed from Narcissus as her contemporary self-reflection is fractured and very little of her body is visible within the constraints of the picture plane.

We are fortunate to be showing work by artists who have been finalists in Australia's Archibald Prize – including Mary Edwards and Susan Wyatt. The Archibald is an intriguing forum for consideration of who is noteworthy and how the genre of portraiture continues to evolve. Today, more abstract and non-representational artworks are included and perhaps there is a growing acceptance of a range of voices asserting diverse identities in the public arena.¹

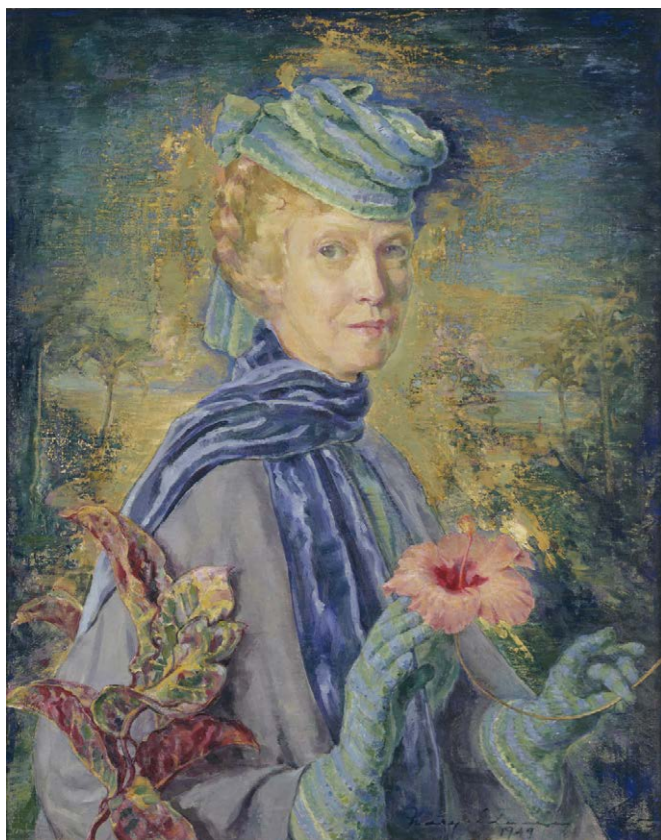
Susan Cooper Wyatt, a Maduwonga and Wongatha leader and artist, completed a full-length portrait of author Doris Pilkington, author of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Wyatt's painting was selected for the 2003 Archibald Prize and celebrates Pilkington as an Indigenous leader while also acknowledging the ongoing impact of the Stolen Generations. While the full richness of Pilkington's life, stories and knowledge may not be possible to communicate via her portrait, Wyatt has captured her

grace, composure and steady gaze as she stands in the desert by the rabbit-proof fence. In 2020, Susan Wyatt's son, Meyne Wyatt, won the Packing Room Prize as selected by Art Gallery of NSW staff from the Archibald Prize exhibition.² Wyatt's self-portrait, with one eyebrow raised, is an open challenge to viewers. As a professional actor, is the portrait a representation of his 'true self' or of him playing a part? The artist appears to revel in the uncertainty that is the result of his strategic adoption of multiple identities. This exhibition includes two paintings by Susan Wyatt: *Laverton girls*, 2003, a painting of three friends who Wyatt met while working as a nurse; and a self-portrait that was commissioned in 2004.³

French artist and writer Claude Cahun wrote an essay, "Bedroom Carnival" in 1926 in which she considered identity as being a series of changing roles or masks:

I remember it, it was the Carnival. I had spent my solitary hours disguising my soul. The masks had become so perfect that when the time came for them to walk across the plaza of my conscience, they didn't recognise each other. I adopted the most off-putting opinions one by one, those that displeased me the most had the best chance of success. But the make-up that I employed seemed indelible. I scrubbed so hard to wash it off myself that I took off my skin. And my soul, like a flayed face, no longer had a human form...⁴

1. <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/archibald/enter/>; accessed 6/1/22. Consistent with the terms of the will of the late J.F. Archibald dated 15 March 1916, the prize is awarded to the best portrait 'preferentially of some man or woman distinguished in art, letters, science or politics, painted by any artist resident in Australasia ...'
2. Vincent Namatjira was awarded the Archibald Prize for *Stand strong for who you are* in 2020.
3. Conversation with the artist, 12/1/2022. The two works are now part of UWA's Cruthers Collection of Women's art, having been gifted to the University when works from the Cruthers family's private collection were donated to UWA on the signing of a deed of gift in 2007.
4. As quoted and discussed in Jennifer L. Shaw, *Exist Otherwise: The life and works of Claude Cahun*, Reaktion Books Limited, London, 2017, p 79. Cahun was born Lucy Schwob.



Mary Edwards, *Self portrait with hibiscus*, 1949, oil on canvas, 75.5 x 60cm.

Cahun's writing predates theories of performativity as a framework to consider gender as led by feminist philosopher Judith Butler and other post-structuralist writers.⁵ Cahun contends that language and the body can act as masks or disguises as people constantly

adopt various social roles and identities. There is the potential for a growing dissonance between public projections and an internal sense of self. Cahun considered identity to be performative in the sense that we take on roles in relation to social and cultural constructions of race, class, sexuality and gender, with 'femininity' yet another. The artist's understanding of a non-essentialised and fluid sense of self resonates with contemporary discourses relating to identity.

Mary Edwards' striking *Self-portrait with hibiscus*, 1949, is likely to have been hung in the 1950 Archibald Prize exhibition.⁶ Edwards was recognised as a portrait painter of note, with her paintings characterised by "the use of brilliant colour, applied with the greatest daring and bravura."⁷ The selection of over 50 of her portraits for multiple Archibald Prize exhibitions is now overshadowed by her role in the controversy surrounding William Dobell's winning portrait of artist Joshua Smith in 1943. Mary Edwards and Joseph Wolinski made a case against the Sydney National Gallery trustees and Dobell but were unsuccessful in having the Archibald Prize revoked. Giving evidence at court, James McDonald, a former director of the Sydney and Melbourne national galleries, described the portrait as "being outside the realms of portraiture."⁸ Discussions about the limits of portraiture continue today.

5. See Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'*, Routledge, New York, 1993 and Judith Butler, "Performative acts and gender constitutions: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory", In *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, December, 1988, pp. 519-531.
6. Email communication with AGNSW staff who believe that it was hung in 1950, 4 June 2020. The recto of the work is marked with an 'A' in white chalk consistent with works selected for the Prize. Mary Edwards' self-portrait, *Heritage*, 1932, was selected to be reproduced on the cover Joan Kerr's (ed) important reference book, *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book, 500 Works by 500 Australian Women from Colonial Times to 1955*, Craftman House, Sydney, NSW, 1995.
7. "Richly Coloured Portraits", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 1940, p 6.
8. "Dobell Portrait Painting Action Opens", *The Mercury*, Hobart, Tasmania, 24 October 1944, p 16. The controversy sits within the broader context of the influence of modernism.



Susan Norrie
Model one / Chardin study II (Room for error series), 1993, oil on plywood, 90 x 90cm
Model four (Room for error series), 1993, French polished shelf, glass pane, lacquered base, ebony top, glass eye-cleaning vessel, 37 x 65 x 33cm
 © courtesy of the artist





Clare McFarlane, *Vision stance*, 1997, oil on canvas, 61.5 x 86.5cm. © courtesy of the artist

Intriguingly, in later life Edwards (exhibiting as Mary Edwell-Burke) denied her previous artistic practice, repeatedly refusing to acknowledge that the paintings were hers. *Self-portrait with hibiscus*, 1949, was purchased at auction by Sir James and Lady Sheila Cruthers in 1997, and *Portrait of a woman*, 1944 was acquired from Gould Gallery, Melbourne, in 1982. UWA holds a letter from Mary Edwell-Burke, dated 1984, when she was a resident of Suva, Fiji, in which she denies that she painted the 1944 portrait. She writes:

*The portrait enclosed is not my work – if it is signed Mary Edwards it might be the work of another Mary Edwards – there was one – it is a very common name. I dropped it and since about 1952 I have used my legal name – I have the birth certificate.*⁹

Perhaps Edwards reverted to her birth name and relocated to Fiji to free herself from her many public personas.

Masquerading, masks and disguise are the preserve of both Cahun and Norrie. Cahun's interest in what the masquerade hides and the motivation to don masks, is consistent with Norrie's interrogation of what lies beneath slick and reflective surfaces. Both artists consider the mechanisms of representation and identity, of art and life. And both are motivated to challenge their audience to identify alternate ways of operating in the world.

Norrie's paintings explore the deep wells of societal expectations, traditions and art historical references to



Melissa McDougall, *In the city*, 1992, oil on canvas, 76 x 61 cm. © courtesy of the artist



Linda Fardoe, *Obsession II*, 2000, acrylic on board, 51 x 50.5cm. © courtesy of the artist

shed light on contemporary issues. For example, the Baroque oval frame of 'untitled (Determined series)', 1985, references the ornate frame profiles that were popular from the late 1700s to the mid-20th century. In this exhibition, Norrie's contemporary work is in dialogue with the oval framed historical painting, *Self portrait*, by Cristina Asquith Baker, c. 1890. The scissors stand in place of a human face – defiant and obtuse, mimicking the rudimentary elements of a portrait with the two hollows as eyes and the sheathed, steely blades a long, narrow face.

French artist Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin utilised many such ornate frames for his showing of still life paintings in the 1765 Salon.¹⁰ Chardin was renowned for his realistic still lifes and paintings of domestic scenes, and it is his *Boy with a Spinning Top*, 1738, that is the source image for Norrie's *Model one / Chardin study II* (Room for error series), 1993. In this image, a youth is intrigued by the spin and balance of the top, with the boy surrounded by markers of knowledge and learning. Chardin painted this work during the Age of Enlightenment, in 18th century Europe when writers and philosophers challenged established beliefs and systems, and reason and scientific proof were thought to triumph over superstition and belief. While the trajectory of the spinning top is determined by the laws of physics, there is also the element of chance. Chardin was consistent in including symbols that refer to the transience and fragility of life.

Reason, individuality and scepticism were seen as tools to counter the excesses of the church – thus the emergence of medicine, representational democracy,

9. Letter from Mary Edwell-Bourke, postmarked 2/6/1984, artist file.

10. As documented in *Chardin: eight still life paintings in the 1765 Salon*. Christian Michel, "The oval frame in 18th century France", 1987, English translation published on The Frame Blog, <https://theframeblog.com/2021/01/11/the-oval-frame-in-18th-century-france/>; accessed 7/1/2022

concerns for the conditions of women, freedom of speech and equality. However, women continued to be subject to societal and institutional barriers and were not considered to be aligned with science or the rational. Norrie has taken on the mantle of creator and artist to re-frame Chardin's investigations, reducing his image to a flat, screen-printed reproduction. The technique and process Chardin utilised to create the illusion of luminosity and three-dimensionality has been stripped away and the artifice of its production revealed. In *Model four* (Room for error series), 1993, a replica of the spinning top appears alongside a blown-glass vial used to rinse eyes clean. The glass surface acts as a lens upon which the viewers own image is thrown, distorted and reflected. So what is our role in the piece and what traction do we have?

As Marcel Duchamp described in his 1961 lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York:

*...the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.*¹¹

A viewer crafts meaning and coherence from visual cues on the basis of their own experiences. 'Untitled [woman in blindfold]', 1988, foregrounds the charged act of looking as the artist presents us with an image of an individual who appears blindfolded and so robbed of agency. Yet, the paradox is that painted eyes can see as much as eyes that are painted blindfolded. Science, lenses and rationality allude to visual and literal truths



Susan Norrie, *Untitled* (Périphérique series), 1989, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 90.7cm. © courtesy of the artist

yet these very engagements accumulate to speak of blindness in a more metaphorical sense. They delineate the limits of reason and rationality to define potential impediments to vision, thus the title of this series, Room for error. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes things as having depth – a voluminosity – which allows for them to be seen, but also have an unseen side. He characterises depth as 'pre-eminently the dimension of the hidden'.¹² Accordingly, we are not able to grapple with an object in its entirety and Norrie exploits this inherent slippage in her work.

Les romans de cape et d'épée III, 1987, depicts the heroic romantic lead amongst a liquid landscape which is populated by fractured and fantastical creatures. In this scenario, who is the villain and who is the love interest? Characters appear from the murky depths and then slip away before fully revealing themselves as the viewer attempts to formulate a coherent reading from the confusing visual montage. *Untitled* (Périphérique series), 1989, operates very differently in appearing to be only surface, as if built from the tacky excesses of the vacuous greeting that is countlessly repeated. The cursive script falls beyond meaning to become abstract swirls and flourishes that punctuate the glazed surface. The resulting taut skin denies depth, just as the trite 'Happy Holidays' negates the possibility of a range of human emotions.

Helen Grace notes Norrie's inherent "lack of confidence in regulative authority, taking us into the bunkers of the underworld, seeking refuge from the ravages of environmental damage, or the possibility of catastrophe."¹³ The artist continues to work to bring issues to public attention in the belief that her audience can recognise injustice and wrongdoing in order to transform. Similar to Norrie's blindfolded woman, Gemma Ben-Ary's unblinking glass eyes appear uncanny and disconcerting. Ben-Ary references tropes relating to vision and power; of looking and being looked upon.¹⁴ *The Abyss* works refer to the countless sentient eyes that witness environmental devastation and ecosystems on the brink of collapse. The eyes continue to watch as humans pursue destructive actions and there is a sense that all animals represented, human and other, are equally at risk. Ben-Ary's embellished oyster-shell works are contemporary expressions of the tradition of jewelled miniature love mementos from the 18th century.¹⁵ With just the eye of their lover or partner painted and worn, the portrait is both specific yet able to conceal their lover's identity. As much as a mask conceals one's identity, the focus upon a single eye also safely disguises the sitter.

When challenged by representations that interrupt or defy our expectations, we begin to recognise the constructed nature of what is presented as 'truth', the 'conventional' or 'natural'. Assertions of value are not

11. Lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19, 1961. <http://www.fiammascura.com/Duchamp.pdf> accessed 10/1/22.

12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwest University Press, Evanston, 1968, p. 219.
 13. Helen Grace, "Underground Passages" in *Susan Norrie: notes from the underground*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2003, p. 26. Grace's commentary was written in relation to Norrie's later work that addresses environmental catastrophes.
 14. In addition Ben-Ary's objects can be contextualised within second-wave feminism which marked the reclamation of vaginal iconography and central core imagery which refuted Surrealists and French theorists' associations of female genitalia to the void and abjection. The works were inspired by American band Ween's 6th studio album, *The Mollusk*, released in 1997, which was nautical in theme with regular reference to molluscs and eyes.
 15. Eyes from Gemma Ben-Ary's *The Abyss* series were first shown in the 2020 exhibition entitled *Lust for Lustre* which was held at Ellenbrook Gallery, Western Australia, curated by Gemma Ben-Ary and Rizzy.

objective but subject to criteria that shift and change. Necessarily we come to recognise the hierarchies of power that operate in our society to privilege particular ways of knowing and being. In this moment, when social conventions and expectations falter, we may contend with awkward realisations and grapple with uncomfortable subjects. Collective actions can shift the dynamics of social power. The artists in this exhibition exploit painterly techniques to interrogate notions of absence and presence, artifice and perception. Their paintings elicit visceral and emotional responses as we recognise that we are terribly flawed and beautifully fragile humans. Yet we also have the capacity to transcend our failings, realise alternate ways of operating in the world and transform.

Lee Kinsella
Curator



Gemma Ben-Ary, *The Abyss series*, 2019, oyster shell, glass eye, polymer clay, dimensions variable. © courtesy of the artist

LIST OF WORKS

All works are from the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, The University of Western Australia

Susan NORRIE

Les romans de cape et d'épée III, 1987, oil and enamel on canvas, 248 x 198cm

Untitled (Périphérique series), 1989, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 90.7cm

Be seeing you (*Dance of the dead*), 2005, oil on canvas, 140 x 133cm

untitled [woman in blindfold], 1988, oil on canvas, 36 x 26cm

untitled (Determined series), 1985, oil on plywood, 62 x 51cm (oval)

Susan NORRIE

(on display from 25 June 2022)

Inquisition / three, 1996, pleated cotton, wood, glass, 135 x 75 x 10cm

Inquisition / two, 1996, oil on canvas, wood, glass, 86.2 x 61.2 x 10.1cm

Model one / Chardin study II (Room for error series), 1993, oil on plywood, 90 x 90cm

Model four (Room for error series), 1993, installation, French polished shelf, glass pane, lacquered base, ebony top, glass eye-cleaning vessel, 37 x 65 x 33cm

PORTRAITS HUNG IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

Cristina Asquith BAKER

Self portrait, c. 1890, oil on canvas, 52 x 43cm (oval)

Kathleen O'CONNOR

Self portrait, n.d., oil on panel, 64.5 x 53cm

Eveline SYME

Head of a woman, n.d., oil on board, 53 x 46cm

Bessie GIBSON

Portrait of Madame May, 1938, oil on canvas, 74 x 62.5cm

Maisie NEWBOLD

Portrait of a lady with coloured scarf, c. 1937, oil on canvas on composition board, 70 x 60.5cm

Margaret FRANCIS

Lady with a green face, 1939, oil on cardboard 68.5 x 56.5cm

Jean SUTHERLAND

Self portrait with floral shawl, c. 1940, oil on canvas, 62 x 51cm

Lina BRYANS

Phil Freedman, c. 1939, oil on board, 58 x 55cm

Portrait of Arthur Davies, 1946, oil on board, 75 x 64.5cm

Mary EDWARDS

Portrait of a woman, 1944, oil on canvas, 70 x 68cm (oval)

Self portrait with hibiscus, 1949, oil on canvas, 94 x 87cm

Dorothy BRAUND

The picnic, c. 1956, oil on Masonite board, 70 x 96cm

Margaret MORGAN

Self portrait, 1988, oil on canvas, (four parts) 48 x 47.5cm (overall dimensions)

Yvette WATT

Self portrait, 1999, oil on canvas, 66 x 60cm

Adrienne GAHA

Self portrait with earrings, 1988, oil on board, diptych: 30.6 x 61.9cm (overall dimensions)

Clare MCFARLANE

Vision stance, 1997, oil on canvas, 61.5 x 86.5cm

Melissa MCDUGALL

In the city, 1992, oil on canvas, 76 x 61cm

Gina MOORE

Portrait in paint, 2004, oil on board, 50 x 50cm

Linda FARDOE

Obsession II, 2000, acrylic on board, 51 x 50.5cm

Julie WILSON-FOSTER

Self portrait, 1999, oil on canvas, 30 x 30cm

Susan WYATT

Self portrait, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 83.5cm

Laverton girls, 2003, oil on canvas, 120 x 177cm

Gemma BEN-ARY

The Abyss (series II), 2021 – 2022, oyster shell, glass eye, polymer clay, dimensions variable (13 individual pieces)

Note: measurements are outer dimensions, including frames

CURATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Always was, always will be Aboriginal Land

My thanks to the artists and their representatives for their support of this exhibition. Particular thanks to Susan Norrie for so generously engaging with UWA students as part of a collection research project.

Thank you to Professor David Sadler, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education), Jo Faulkner, Associate Director, (DVCE), and my LWAG colleagues for their part in the realisation of this exhibition and associated programs. I thank to Jessyca Hutchens, Gok-Lim Finch and Kate Hamersley for their insightful comments on my essay.

I would also like to acknowledge Helen Carroll, Curatorial Advisor to the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art and the Sheila Foundation Limited (SFL) for supporting the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art at The University of Western Australia.

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Signwriter: Jae Criddle

The estate of Mary Edwards has been advised that her work will be reproduced.

Cover image:
Susan Norrie, untitled (Determined series), 1985, oil on plywood, 61 x 51cm (oval)



Julie Wilson-Foster, *Self portrait*, 1999, oil on canvas, 30 x 30cm. © courtesy of the artist

The University of Western Australia would like to acknowledge that this exhibition takes place on Noongar boodjar, and that Noongar people remain the spiritual and cultural custodians of their land, and continue to practice their values, languages, beliefs and knowledge.

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Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery



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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA, Australia 6009
P +61 (0)8 6488 3707 W uwa.edu.au/lwag
CRICOS Provider Code: 00126G

