

The background of the entire image is an abstract artwork. It consists of numerous thick, expressive brushstrokes in three colors: bright blue, black, and white. The strokes are applied in a somewhat chaotic but rhythmic manner, creating a dense, textured field. Some strokes are vertical, some are horizontal, and many are diagonal. The white strokes often appear as if they are layered over the other colors, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is one of raw energy and gestural abstraction.

ROSS SEATON

Walking Man

Ted Snell

ROSS SEATON Walking Man

Ted Snell





Published by the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery,
University of Western Australia
Ross Seaton: Master of Nedlands
Ted Snell

The book is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. No illustration in this publication may be reproduced without the permission of the copyright owner. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

All artworks are copyright of the artist Ross Seaton and are reproduced with permission from the artist's estate. Copyright for text is held by Ted Snell and Amit Chakma. The moral rights of the artist and author have been asserted.

Editor: Pier Leach
Designer: Clare McFarlane
Photography: Lyle Branson, Fiona Cargill, Brendan Hutchens, Gareth Lindegger, Mary Moore, Alex Nikulinsky, Ted Snell
Printer: Scott Print

ISBN: 978-1-925793-29-1

Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery
The University of Western Australia
35 Stirling Highway, Crawley
Western Australia 6009

The publication is sponsored by generous donations from the community.

Measurements are height by width, or height by width by depth. An approximate measurement has been made when the works cannot be located.

Image left: *Abstract Grid* (detail), c2015, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 101.5cm
Previous page: Photograph by Brendan Hutchens (2020)
Cover: *Blue & Black* (detail), 2017-19, acrylic on clear plastic sheet, 200 x 650cm
Inside cover: Photograph by Brendan Hutchens (2020)



TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	..... 1
FOREWORD	..... 5
THE MASTER OF NEDLANDS	..... 9
BEING IN THE WORLD	..... 31
ARTIST SEEKER	..... 55
Autodidact	..... 61
On Walking	..... 71
Facts from Figures	..... 79
On Making	..... 89
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	..... 115



DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my granddaughters, Matilda, Frida and Rosa, whose presence in my life gives new meaning and hope.

Gannet 15/06/19, 2019, paint on paper, 42.3 x 30cm
Following page: Photograph by Brendan Hutchens (2020)





FOREWORD

The University of Western Australia is proud to present this catalogue documenting the life and work of an iconic Western Australian figure. Ross Seaton was known universally as the ‘Walking Man’, but although he was familiar to generations of Western Australians few knew that Ross was an artist, or indeed that he had been a student at UWA in the early 1970s.

One of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery’s roles is to showcase the best of Australian art and culture, and we have a firm commitment to presenting the work of local artists who make a significant contribution to the State. *Ross Seaton: Master of Nedlands* presents the first major exhibition by this Western Australian artist as a UWAway project at the Naval Store in Fremantle. The catalogue *Ross Seaton: Walking Man* documents the life of a remarkable man who remains an enigma, despite his ubiquity in our lives. Some of those lingering questions will be answered through this monograph, though some will remain a mystery following Ross’s sad death earlier this year.

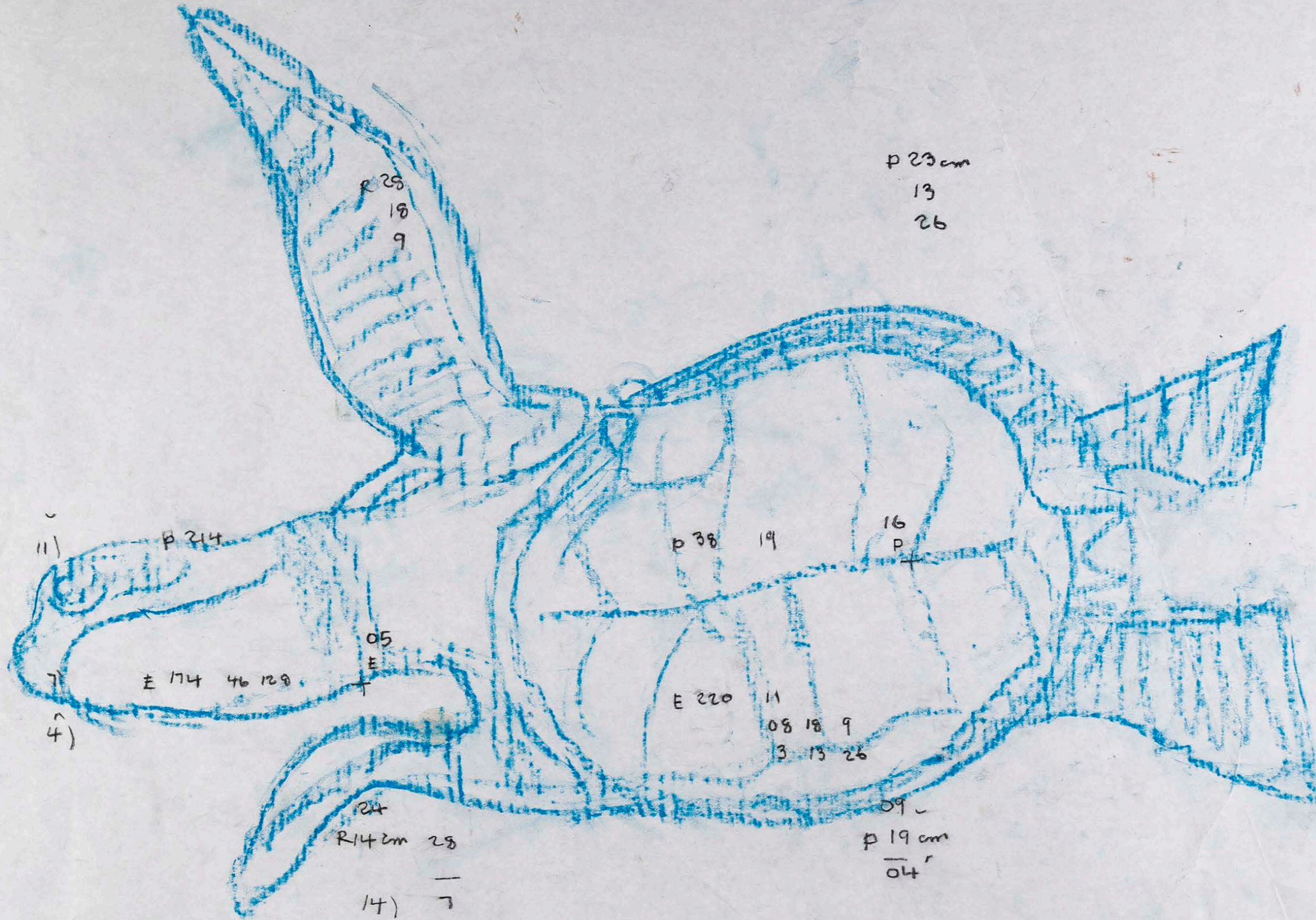
The University’s vision is to be the leading intellectual and creative resource for the communities it serves. Its teaching and research activities are enhanced by the rich base of cultural resources and enterprises that together provide the vibrant learning culture that is a prerequisite to a world-class education. The Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery enables students to develop as fully rounded individuals, with a balanced education enriched by involvement and knowledge of the arts. The Gallery is also an essential agent in building civic responsibility and social capital by helping our community better understand and celebrate its cultural heritage and the people who created that vibrancy: people like Ross Seaton.

This catalogue provides an insight into Ross’s practice and an opportunity to appreciate the contribution of this important local artist who worked with such dedication and purpose over the past five decades. The University is delighted to honour such a significant contributor to Western Australia’s cultural life.

A project like this relies on the work of many people. I would like to thank all those individuals who have so generously donated funds. In particular, my sincere thanks go to Professor Ted Snell and the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery staff.

Professor Amit Chakma
Vice-Chancellor
University of Western Australia

Image left: *Abstract Study* (detail), c2015, gouache & ink on paper, 22.5 x 24cm
Following page: *Untitled Drawing 25/10/16*, 2016, pencil and pastel on paper, 42 x 58cm



Ross Section 7.1.44



fig.1. Ross Seaton on Stirling Highway. Photograph by Fiona Cargill (11 June 2019)

THE MASTER OF NEDLANDS

*Everything is connected to every other thing.*¹

Ross Seaton

For many Western Australians Ross Seaton was the 'Walking Man'. He is a vivid memory, a point of reference, a marker in our unfolding lives. A feature of the local landscape for decades, he pushed his wheelbarrow along Stirling Highway making his daily journey toward the ocean. On the way he collected cardboard and other treasures left by the roadside; he was hunched over, always in shorts, his mahogany-brown legs wrapped in bandages and his eyes focused and alert. He was mysterious, uncommunicative, a compelling figure whose determined, focused and self-directed quest seemed so laudable in an increasingly controlled and directed world. He was his own man, a Don Quixote with his wheel-barrow Rocinante setting out each day to find meaning in the world. (fig.1)

Whether he reached his beachside destination or he was forced to return home by well-intentioned interruptions, he found evidence everywhere of a guiding intelligence that shaped life's experiences. As he undertook his daily perambulations he noted bus routes, cash receipts and house numbers, which he collected and recorded. Sadly, he left only a hint of the algorithm he had developed to provide answers to their secrets. Each trip was documented. Titled 'Wheelbarrow Walks', they are timed and dated on A4 sheets folded in eights, small enough to be held in the palm of his hand and marked with a pencil as he trudged along. Thousands of them, all indicating directions, listing bus routes and identifying personal landmarks (like Purdie's column, his childhood pet's tombstone). Living was activated research. Every day was purposeful, each walk was essential. Every document was created with urgency, to find an answer, to posit a solution, to seek clarity of the greatest mystery of all: existence.

The 'Walking Man' was part of my life. I watched him pass along Stirling Highway and noted his bulging wheelbarrow, full to the brim with cardboard. I mentally charted his movements as I passed on my way to work and on my way home at night. In a world of change, he was a constant. Then, several years ago, I noticed him in the front yard of a house in Bulimba Road, Nedlands, hunched over, brush in hand, working on a painting of considerable scale, an unfurled drop-sheet of black plastic covered with yellow rune-like symbols. I approached him to ask about his work but he closed down. I tentatively, respectfully offered compliments, expressing my enthusiasm for his work, but he folded up, literally, curled into himself and ignored my presence until I finally drove away. (fig.2)

I continued to see him on the streets and occasionally in his front yard, wielding a brush. The stacks of paintings expanded in the open garage. Regularly the large paintings changed, or were replaced. The lawn, or what was left of it, began to be littered with painted house bricks and used paint cans stuffed full of hardened brushes. An installation, a working art environment, a tantalising and mysterious gallery? I began to post images of the changing landscape of his front yard on Instagram, using the hashtag Master of Nedlands. (fig.3) I visited several times, as did my wife and friends, but the 'Walking Man' ignored us all, collapsing into introspection and waiting for us to depart. So, I wrote to him. In retrospect it seemed like a crazy option. Why did I think he would respond to a letter when he wouldn't speak to me directly? But he did.

When the phone rang a rough and muffled voice asked, 'Is that Ted Snell?'. I had no idea who it was; it had been many months since I sent the letter. 'Yes, who's speaking?' 'It's Ross, Ross Seaton.' I still had no idea. 'You wrote to me, about my paintings, about an exhibition.' It was the 'Walking Man', Ross Herbert Seaton, and he was keen to talk about an exhibition! He had checked me

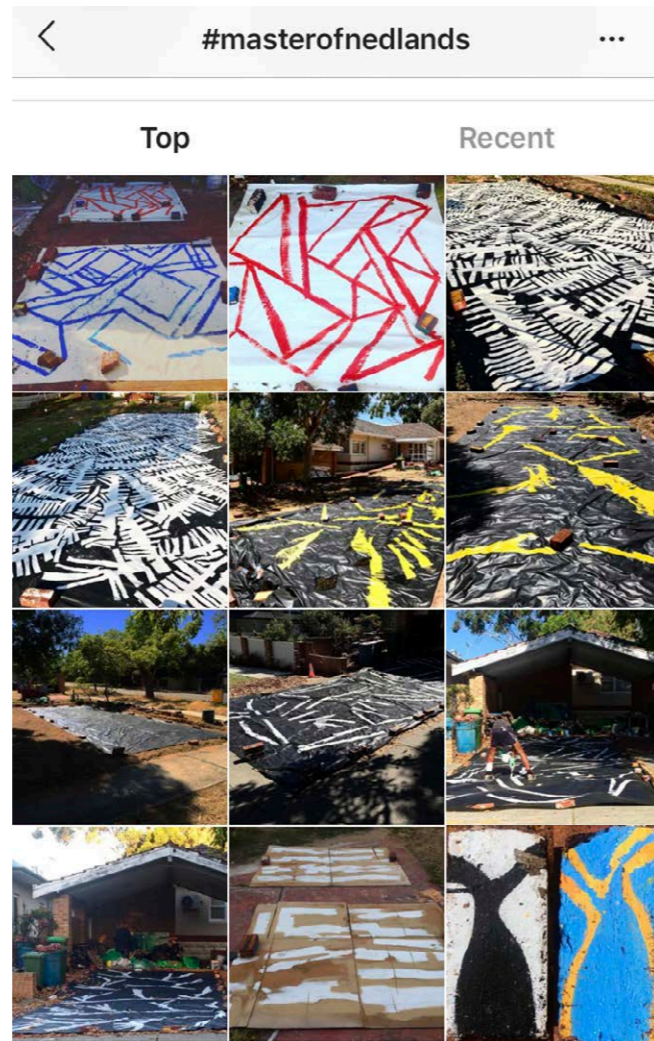


Image left:
fig.2. Front yard Bulimba Road. Photograph by Ted Snell (2016)

Image right:
fig.3. Master of Nedlands Instagram posts. Photographs by Ted Snell (2020)

out at the Nedlands library, read my books, reviewed my resume. He did his due diligence; only then did he follow up. I had passed the first test. We arranged to meet at Bulimba Road.

I was nervous when I pulled into the driveway. I wasn't sure if he would retreat into himself once again as he had on my previous, though uninvited, visits. Would he be prepared to talk seriously with me about an exhibition? It was a big commitment, one that would take a considerable amount of his time. Would he be coherent and articulate, could he be easily dissuaded from continuing? How should I handle our first meeting? At least I was there on invitation, but even so I stepped onto the front porch anxiously and leaned forward to knock. At that moment Ross lurched around the corner calling my name. I instinctively bent forward, because he was buckled over; a tall man reduced to half his size, staring back up at me through a tangle of hair and beard. 'Ted?' His bright eyes radiated from the dark hide of his face. 'Is that you, Ted?' He moved closer toward me on those mahogany-brown legs, festooned with weeping sores.



I bent lower and we exchanged greetings. Ross's huge shoes, worn to a thin wedge at the heel, guided us back toward open terrain, away from the house. Under the stinging heat of an unseasonably hot October day Ross quizzed me about my letter, about the promised exhibition, for details of where it would be and how many works would be on show? He was charming, yes charming! Enthusiastic, well-spoken, informed and alert to the many problems we would inevitably face in developing this massive project.

We wandered around the yard and he allowed me to pull back several of the black plastic paintings, each one covered with delicate patterns of white or yellow tracings, some like ancient inscriptions, others map-like. I was enthusiastic and said they would look wonderful in the gallery; they were so bold and powerful, with such elegance and strength. He

Paint cans in the garden at Bulimba Road.
Photographs by Ted Snell (2019)

nodded in acquiesce to my accolades and muttered grateful acknowledgement. I moved toward the front door, asking if his studio was indoors. Ross once again swiftly intervened and redirected me to the multi-coloured gate (each picket apparently painted with the left-over colour of a day's work) that led into the backyard.

The garden was piled high with green plastic bags full of cardboard, his wheelbarrows and an assortment of prams. Painted bricks littered the rampaging lawn, bursting forth in long tendrils from behind boards and discarded appliances. Paint cans overflowing with a cascade of congealed colour punctuated the matted field of buffalo grass and weeds. (fig.4) Everything stank of urine. Tiptoeing through the debris we moved toward the main outbuilding in a yard strewn with sheds, lean-tos and storage units. Once inside, Ross pulled out paintings and boards, tools and boxes with deft awareness from a chaos of bundles, piles and stacks. Paintings on cardboard from the 1980s, about two metres square, were stacked against each other, every one a construction of interlocking geometric forms; one of the first of the treasure hordes he uncovered. He clawed open more green plastic garbage bags full to bursting with paper and card. From one Ross began pulling drawings, exquisite depictions of animals, birds, landscapes and tools (hammers, saws, pliers and wrenches). Most were in blue crayon or chalk and all were inscribed with numbers. Across the top in pairs, separated into three fields was the date (day, month, year) and along the bottom his name Ross Herbert Seaton, and his birth date 07/01/44. Then other numbers were inserted, at the intersection of grids, in the flight path of birds, in a flurry along the back of an elephant.

'What do the numbers mean Ross?' I asked credulously.
'It's the Force, Ted, the Force.'
'The Force, Ross, what do you mean?' I said with unguarded excitement and high expectation.



Ross paused and looked through his piercing blue eyes. 'It's important Ted, important! Later, later.' My heart was beating and a blush crept down from my forehead till it electrified my cheeks and gave me away. Ross saw that he had captured me, had my total attention, lodged a hook into my consciousness that he would be able to slowly reel in whenever he wished. He slowly reiterated, 'Later Ted, later,' allowing the barb of promise to sink deeper.

Disentangled from the shed he shepherded me away from the back door of the house and out toward



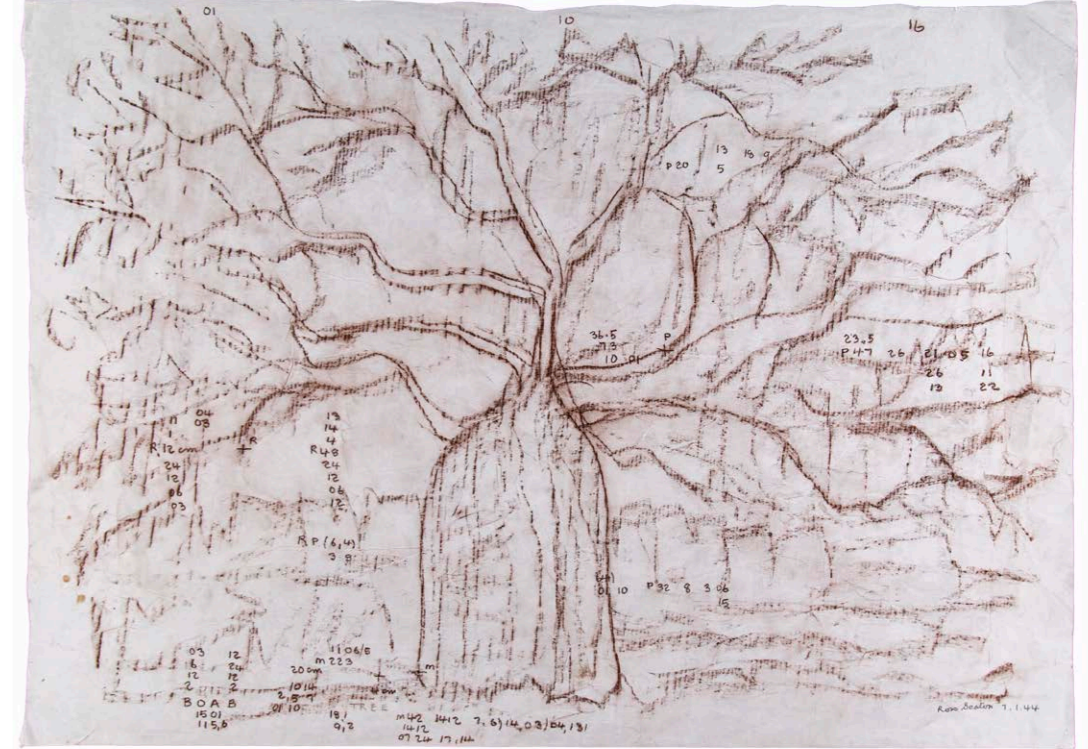
fig.4. Paint cans in the garden at Bulimba Road. Photograph by Ted Snell (2019)

the front yard and the driveway. My time was up. I promised to write him a letter outlining the plans for the exhibition and a contract to formalise the project. Ross nodded, waved and ambled back through the multi-coloured picket gate. I left ecstatic. My expectations were exceeded; he was the real deal as I had hoped. The work was interesting, there was a lot of it, Ross was serious, committed and articulate about his practice. He also seemed enthusiastic about an exhibition and aware of the work involved. There was so much more to find out, so many plastic bags to rummage through and drawings and paintings to discover and sort. It was an awesome task but with Ross's participation it was possible, just!

Over the next few months we visited several times. My colleagues Anthony Kelly and Lyle Branson from the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery joined me and together we cajoled Ross into allowing us to relocate some of the paintings to the Gallery, for 'safe-keeping'. Each work we shifted into the truck was more difficult to procure than those already

packed. Given access to a new cache of drawings, small painted panels, paintings on Holland blinds or new rolls of paintings on plastic our first thought was to take them back to the security of the gallery, where they could be stored, in some cases dried out, de-infested and photographed. Ross had other ideas. Many extraordinary works were proffered, discussed and walked over toward the waiting truck, only to be retrieved by Ross at the last minute. A stack of exquisite drawings (pastel and pencil on paper) when pulled in handfuls from a green plastic bag, were so intricate and detailed that my enthusiasm acted as a deterrent. (fig.5) After allowing me to sift through twenty or more, Ross gathered them once again and began stuffing them into their gaping green repository. 'Later Ted, later, they need more work, not finished yet,' he mumbled, and they were gone, re-deposited into the chaos of a green metal shed. There in the damp, shrouded in spider-webs, stacked under other bags full of paper and board, they would remain undamaged, hopefully!

fig.5. Untitled Drawing, (Boab) 13/9/16, 2016, pastel and pencil on paper, 42 x 58cm



On the next visit I asked about the drawings, whether they were finished, if we should load them up? Ross ignored my questions and offered other works to view, this time on cardboard and very different but equally intriguing. However, at the end of the day they too stayed wrapped in plastic, leaning against a fragile shelter, exposed to rain and myriad insects, grubs and invasive tendrils. Each work was important and their connectivity to each other was in some way linked to their proximity. They needed each other and Ross needed them. Certainly, the large plastic works were deteriorating, perhaps some of the drawings he let us take were of less importance, or maybe he allowed some to go to keep us interested, but whatever the reasons he let those works go, securing additional works became an even more arduous process. Rarely did we leave with anything more than a handful of artworks.

The promised interview to glean information about his life and discover more about 'the Force'¹² was also regularly postponed. While touring the garden in search of works to include in the exhibition I asked if I could record our conversation on my phone. Ross agreed, but would then set off at high speed to another location while I trailed behind holding out my phone in the hope of capturing some *bon mot*, some fragment of conversation or some explanation or clarification about each new work encountered. My

wife Mary joined us on occasions. Her conversations were most useful. Ross trusted her, enjoyed her company and Mary asked personal questions; the kind I wouldn't think of asking. 'Can I, do you, will you, why?' questions, delivered with infectious optimism. Unfortunately, most of his answers on those recordings were difficult to interpret due to the wind and because of Ross's already muffled responses.

Despite the hiccups in our planning, Ross remained focused and enthusiastic about the exhibition. I would receive the occasional phone call asking about our next visit, hoping Anthony and Lyle would be joining me, and Mary too, '... but not Wednesday or this week, or Thursday. Come on Friday Ted, next week Ted, Friday!'

Initially we had hoped to show Ross's work at Pakenham Street Art Space (PSAS) in Fremantle, and had booked in a time for late 2019, but that proved impractical and we were forced to re-schedule to an exhibition in the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery from August until December 2020. I sent through the paperwork but it was never signed. We proceeded and printed the details with an image of Ross's work in our published program for 2020. Handing him a copy late in 2019, I explained we would need the document signed. 'Send it again Ted, can't find it, again will you, please!' I did but again nothing was forthcoming.

Image right:
fig.6. Ross Seaton letter re: exhibition (2020)

Then, in March, Ross was taken to Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital. His brother Kevin called me to tell me what had happened because Ross had expressed concern that I might not be able to contact him. A few days later I received a telephone call from his consulting doctor, who spoke to me briefly before handing on the phone to Ross. I asked him about Ross's prognosis. 'He's better than he thinks he is, it's treatable,' the doctor explained, 'but Ross is very concerned about not returning home.' A week later another call from a social worker, this time reporting that Ross was getting worried about the exhibition. When he handed the phone to Ross he seemed in high spirits, though there was a sense of urgency in his detailed questioning about the exhibition. I agreed to visit and talk through the plans and record the oft-postponed interview. Ross restricted to a bed offered the perfect

opportunity for a recorded interview, about the works, his life, those numbers and, of course, 'the Force'. But COVID-19 precautions had been imposed and when Mary and I arrived at the hospital we were not permitted to enter. We delivered some ANZAC biscuits she had made and a pack of drawing materials and paper she had prepared for him, but we couldn't visit Ross to talk or record that interview. Then a handwritten letter arrived in an envelope stamped Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, addressed to Professor Ted Snell, UWA Art Gallery, Harold Wilson Art Gallery, Stirling Highway U.W.A. 6009. It was written on one of the sheets of rag paper Mary had included in his drawing pack (fig.6):

Professor Ted Snell UWA ART GALLERY

I authorize you to remove any art painting or drawing from 50 Bulimba Rd, Nedlands and put it on view (computer) I have a P.O. Box ... that could be used to advertise the work without disclosing the ad 50 Bulimba Road, whoever is interested would pay for work and the work sent to them (to avoid the VIRUS), The painting from the Packerham Gallery would be sold from 50 Bulimba Rd or any other paintings. There is a green shed on the North fence full of paintings and various others around the yard on plastic, plywood. You are free to take any of them and put them on UGN as well. Also drawings (tube oil) paintings, 7,3000, wall paper or any other in the living room or sheds or anywhere else. In the side sleep out there are some large canvases in the ceiling above to 2 in particular 2 12 x 6 oil paintings of the American's Cup 1986. I know it is a huge task, I think you should have someone to help. There is some workers that will help you. That you should not hesitate to sell work to pay wages. That you should charge whatever you like. You put an insurance of \$500 on the Packerham group. You should charge much more that of the order \$2,000, 3,000, \$5,000 to 10,000 or in some instances \$1,000,000. They could be sold the next day for 2, 3 times that - I expect that you find something to with that money or the other.

The paintings should be sold from 50 Bulimba Rd Nedlands, and you Ted Snell I authorize have the right to do that at will.

Ross Seaton 070144

Ross Seaton

Note: If the task is of such a proportion, ~~to you~~ you could send photographs to other places for example the 10mx4m Black & White on the from front yard (about 3 down) I ~~could~~ I photographed to the Australian Newspaper

Professor Ted Snell UWA ART GALLERY
I authorize you to remove any art painting or drawing from 50 Bulimba Rd, Nedlands and put it on view (computer) I have a P.O. Box 306 Nedlands that could be used to advertise the work without disclosing the ad 50 Bulimba Rd, who ever is interested would pay for work and the work sent to them (to avoid the VIRUS) The painting from the Packerham Gallery would be sold from 50 Bulimba Rd or any other paintings. There is a green shed on the North fence full of paintings and various others around the yard on plastic, plywood. You are free to take any of them and put on UGN. Also drawings (tube oil) paintings \$73000, wall paper or any other in the living room or sheds or any ~~else~~ where else. In the side sleep out there are some large canvases in the ceiling above to 2 in particular 2 12 x 6 oil paintings of the American's Cup 1986. I know it it is a ~~very~~ huge task I think you should have someone to ~~help~~ help there is some workers that will help you

That you should not hesitate to sell work to ~~pay~~ pay wages. That you ^{should} charge whatever you like. You put an insurance of \$500 on the Packer group. You should charge much more that of the order \$2,000, 3,000 \$5,000 to 10,000 or in some instances \$1,000,000. They could be sold the next ^{day} for 2, 3 times that - I expect that ~~that~~ you find something to with that money one way or the other

The paintings should be sold from 50 Bulimba Rd Nedlands, and you Prof Ted Snell I authorize have the right to do that at will ,

Ross SEATON 070144

Ross Seaton

Note If the task is of such a proportion, ~~to you~~ you could send photographs to other places For example the 10m x 4 m Black & White on the ~~front~~ front yard (about 3 down) ~~send~~ (photograph) to the AUSTRALIAN NEWS ^{paper}

A few days later, in another phone call, I had to explain to Ross that the gallery was not a commercial enterprise and we were not able to sell works or to arrange sales. However, the exhibition would go ahead and as soon as we were able to visit him we would confirm plans and develop a strategy for working through the stacks of artworks in the sheds and throughout the house.

This was Ross’s life’s work, it was important to him, obviously, and valuable. Clearly miffed with the insurance value I had ascribed to the work for removal to the gallery, he was determined to assign a more realistic sale price. From his perspective he added: ‘You should charge much more than that of the order \$2,000, 3,000, \$5,000 to 10,000 or in some instances \$1,000,000’ was his estimate, and at that they were cheap. He foresaw a doubling or tripling of those prices would follow. Ross’s estimate that some of the works could be sold for \$1,000,000 is particularly revealing. In a footnote he identifies one of the large works on plastic ‘10mx4m Black & White on the front yard (about 3 down)’ as potentially a work that deserved national press coverage. Ross was aware that I was a contributor to *The Australian* and was confident that once alerted to one of the large works on plastic sheeting collectors and connoisseurs across the country would be vying for the chance to acquire it.

Clearly, for Ross, some paintings were more significant than others. The description of this particular work as ‘about 3 down’ identifies it as having greater value, perhaps because of the meaning it held about ‘the Force’. This would account for a price that was

almost beyond comprehension. It would be enough to pay for assistants to sort through the thousands of artworks in his home and for other expenses, ‘I expect that you find something to do with that money or the other’, he added knowingly. Ross realised the scale of this project and the condition of the works and the preparation required to organise the exhibition.

Most importantly for me, this was an affirmation of Ross’s trust, which I could not ignore or lightly dismiss. Ross was determined that the exhibition would go ahead and he would do anything he could to ensure the successful completion of this task. He had finally put on paper his agreement to the show and was giving me *carte blanche* to achieve that goal.

In early April, Kevin rang to tell me Ross had been moved to a nursing home, Amana Living in Mosman Park, and would soon be able to have visitors. However, before we would be allowed entrance, both Mary and I would need flu shots and a certificate of injection. Shortly after, I received a telephone call from another social worker at Amana, checking to confirm I had received another letter they had crafted together and to inform me that Ross was looking forward to seeing us soon. I arranged a time for a visit and we organised to pick up the paperwork from our pharmacist. A day later the letter arrived:



Black & White: The Force, 2017-19, acrylic on plastic sheeting, 200 x 520cm

Mr Ted Snell
University of Western Australia

23 April 2020

Request from:

Client Name: Mr Ross Seaton

Date of Birth: 7 January 1944

Client Address: 50 Bulimba Road, Nedlands, 6009

I am writing to you in regards to Mr Ross Seaton who was admitted to Amana Living Transitional Care at Mosman Park on 21 April 2020.

Mr Seaton will be remaining at our facility for a period of up to 12 weeks undergoing assessments and restorative care prior to permanent placement.

Mr Seaton would like Mr Ted Snell from UWA to access the property and remove art and associated items prior to a clean out of the property by services.

Mr Seaton would like to thank Mr Ted Snell for this service.
If you require additional information, please contact Ross or the Social Work at Mosman Park on

Kind Regards

.....
Social Worker

Signed Ross Seaton 7 1 44
Mr Ross Seaton



Image left:
Photograph by Mary Moore (2019)

Ross's determination to formalise our arrangement indicates an increased anxiety, most likely prompted by that ominous line within the letter, 'Mr Seaton will be remaining at our facility for a period of up to 12 weeks undergoing assessments and restorative care prior to permanent placement'. Prior to permanent placement! Ross must have been traumatised by the prospect of never returning to Bulimba Road and even more so with the thought of the 'clean out of the property by services'. COVID-19 meant further isolation, and though he kept drawing and making plans for the forthcoming exhibition, the anxiety of never returning home to fulfil his mission in life must have been an agonising realisation.

On Saturday 23 May, when we had planned to pick up our certificates of flu injection, in preparation for our visit to Amana Living the next day, Kevin rang. He informed me that Ross had died. It was a shock and a surprise. Ross had seemed so engaged with the project when we had last spoken on the phone, only a week before. I mumbled by condolences to Kevin and his family and sought an internal point of anchorage in the maelstrom of my anxiety. Had we done enough? If only we had moved more adroitly to secure those certificates. What would we have said to Ross given the opportunity? The only certainty was that the exhibition must go ahead, but without Ross it was so much more daunting. Without the interviews, the clarification of 'the Force' and details about dates and numbers, times, materials and context. Without Ross, the scale of the task was amplified massively.

That evening, I posted on Instagram 'Vale Ross Seaton' with a photograph of Ross and myself looking at one of the large plastic paintings in his front yard, which my wife Mary had taken the previous year. Then the story was picked up by the ABC. The response was extraordinary. So many people clicked their approval. Within a day there were several hundred likes, then almost five hundred with seventy-eight comments. 'He made an impact on our family over the years,'

said one, and another wrote, 'I love this story, he was part of our lives growing up and seeing him almost daily, I have often thought about what his story was.' For so many it was the intrigue of Ross's life story, how he had got to this point, what drove him on, that fascinated them and made Ross such an important marker in their lives.

GProjects recalled, 'Coming out of the surf at Isolated one sunset to watch him paint big blue squares splattered across various large flattened cardboard boxes, all sort of interlinked and spread out across the rocks along the shore. He kept glancing up at the sun descending and then back at his work, reading or decoding what he was seeing and translating it into his painting at speed as if he was racing against time or something. Then, just like that, he was done and was off with his wheelbarrow into the night. The man knew and saw things in a different light.' The awareness that Ross had insights, that he was delving deeper into the experience of living, gave us all a sense of the wonder that was available, if only we took the time to embrace it: '... he gave our community a constant reminder of many qualities and values that we let slip too easily as we drift into complacency and take what we have for granted,' added another astute commentator.

For many though it was just the shock that Ross had gone and would no longer punctuate our days that caused them to pause and comment: 'Oh such a loss, what a stunning man', 'I say thanks and farewell', 'I was thinking about him just yesterday', 'I will always remember him'. That sense of loss — of the constancy we so relished and which was no longer present in our lives — was exacerbated for others by the added disappointment of not making an effort to speak with Ross. A number tried, 'I did stop to talk to him on a couple of occasions but he was otherwise engaged!', while others wished they had: 'I never plucked up the courage to speak to Ross. A very good reminder that every person has a story.' For most it was enough to ponder on what that story might have

been: ‘I was always intrigued to know more’; and to wish him well, ‘He sounds like a very driven fellow and I kind of hope he’s at peace with the meaning of life, wherever he is now.’

The responses to that first Instagram post and later to an interview on 30 May with Gillian O’Shaughnessy, broadcast on ABC 720 local radio in Perth, indicated the level of deep respect and connection Ross had engendered over the past fifty years. On Facebook, four hundred more left their tributes. ‘He was a good man’, ‘RIP Ross... your absence will be noticed’ and many wished him well: ‘Rest in Peace dear Ross... No longer shuffling along the streets of this life but walking tall throughout the next, wherever that may be.’ ‘It will be sad not to see you in your front yard painting. RIP Ross, your postie.’ For still others it was a moment of recognition: ‘He was my science teacher in 3rd year high school.’ As with the Instagram posts there were other commentators who saw Ross as an exemplar: ‘Like many I would see Ross regularly and he came to be quite an inspiring and grounding character; for whatever reason he influenced my energy instantly. I never felt sad for him, I felt as though he was where he wanted to be... maybe this was a false sense of intuition but he seemed content and I admired the simplicity of his life’ and ‘Your work is done Ross, your time to rest Amen!’

Ross’s funeral was held at Karrakatta cemetery on 27 May, 2020. At the wake following the service the small cohort allowed under the COVID-19 restrictions (Kevin, his wife Melanie and their son Stephen, Mary and myself, our family friend Elizabeth Malone, my two colleagues from the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and three neighbours) shared stories about Ross, his life, and of course his extraordinary legacy of thousands of artworks, some stacked in the storage units Kevin had discovered in Naval Base. Plans were made to clear them out and offers of assistance were gratefully accepted. Melanie provided cake and sandwiches, Kevin and Stephen filled our glasses. Matthew Flaherty read a poem, written by his 14-year-old son, which captured so eloquently the impact of Ross’s presence on so many lives:

Oliver Flaherty (2019)
THE WALKING MAN

*There is a person across the road,
An old man bent from head to toe
He walks for miles along the street
Pushing a pram and scuffing his feet*

*He paints on car or plastic all day
Listening to cricket on his old Sanye
Dashes of yellow, blue and red
He paints long strokes that can’t be read*

*He’s bent over this pram with his shorts half down
Walking long miles from home to town
He pushes his pram rain, hail or shine
Along the streets through all the grime*

*He travels this way from dawn till dusk
To shop for food as everyone must
Gathering trinkets along the way
Brings purpose to his boring day*

*You cannot miss the Walking Man
With his wrinkled face and leathery tan
Growling and cursing the local kids
For messing with his paintpot lids*

*The neighbourhood drivers slow for a second
To take a look at the local legend
Wondering briefly what brought him here
They hurry on without a fear*

*He is a source of speculation
Where does he get his determination?
Painting and painting and painting all day
The art is eventually put away*

*Who does he talk to? Nobody knows
Maybe willy wag tails and the crows
Next time you pass the Walking Man
Give him a wave, if you can.*

Walking man's art



Ross Herbert Seaton
Artist
Born: Perth, 1944
Died: Perth, aged 76

At Karrakatta on May 27, a small cohort of family and friends paid their last respects to Ross Herbert Seaton.

As the rosemary was passed around and each offered their quiet tribute, the Hollies' 'He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother' filled the socially distanced space between us.

The song's central message of duty and care poignantly evoked the crucial relationship in Ross' life, with his brother Kevin. It was Kevin who gave the eulogy and stood resolutely at the graveside with his family to greet the mourners.

Ross was born on January 7, 1944, while World War II still raged in Europe and the Pacific. Growing up on Bulimba Road in Nedlands, where he lived almost his entire life, Ross and Kevin enjoyed the rough and tumble of boyhood. It was played out around the empty lots, the river, and on the nearby beaches. Ross was good with his hands, he was always drawing and he built his own Pelican yacht. "He was always mucking around on the river," Kevin recalls.

After high school, he went on to complete a science course at Perth Technical College and then a teaching qualification, before starting his professional life as a science and maths teacher in Kulin and Wagin.

Teaching gave him the resources to travel, and in the early 70s, he set off for Europe

to see the enticing treasures in the Louvre and the National Gallery in London, the Sistine Chapel and churches throughout Europe that he had previously only read about and studied in coloured reproduction. It was a pilgrimage that fuelled his passion for making art.

The memories of that experience remained an inspiration as he set down the world around him in pencil, pen, or chalk line on sheet after sheet of computer paper. While he maintained himself by teaching part-time at Mercedes College, he searched for some underlying meaning that would make sense of the universe. It was a pursuit that gradually filled his waking hours.

And he walked, he walked a lot. Every day, he set off to the beach or the river, collecting materials to paint on, especially cardboard and ply. For generations of West Australians, the image of Ross, hunched over, in shorts throughout summer and winter, bandages on his legs and pushing a wheelbarrow, is embedded in memory.

He was for many "The Walking Man", the man who relentlessly made his way towards the ocean, no matter what the weather. He didn't engage in conversation; it was a journey of discovery, full of information that needed to be computed and processed.

License plate numbers, receipts and randomly sourced codes were clues to some overarching algorithm that would somehow explain the anomalies of this phenomenal world. One day, somehow! Back on Bulimba Road, he

recorded these numbers, often in elaborately gridded patterns or appended to drawings of birds, elephants, crocodiles, and horses. Soon, his house began to fill with drawings and paintings on cardboard, ply and roller blinds — room after room stacked high with sacks of drawings, piles of paintings.

Sheds filled to bursting point in the garden, one after another, and so he began to paint on large sheets of builder's plastic.

Unrolled on the verge of his home, held down with bricks (also painted in bright enamel colours), he covered the plastic with bold graphics and strange rune-like letters. "It's the Force," he whispered one day when I asked what the numbers meant. "The Force?" "It's important, but later, I'll tell you later," he added, leaving the mystery alive.

Sadly, it remains a mystery.

Ross was taken to Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in March and was informed that he would not be able to return home to Bulimba Road. COVID-19 meant further isolation, and though he kept drawing and making plans for his forthcoming exhibition, the anxiety of never returning to his work and fulfilling his mission in life must have been agonising. Ross died on Friday, May 22. He is survived by his brother, Kevin, and his family.

A selection of his remarkable body of work will be presented in an online exhibition arranged by the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia in December.

Professor Ted Snell AM CitWA, Director, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia

To place death notices in the classifieds advertisement columns, please call 13 22 80.
If you would like to recommend someone who has recently died as a subject for this page, contact Kerrie Adamson.
Phone: 9482 3174 ■ Fax: 9482 9040 ■ Email: kerrie.adamson@wanews.com.au ■ Post: GPO Box N1025, Perth, WA 6843

Kevin posted a death notice on 28 May 2020.

SEATON (Ross Herbert): 07.01.1944 - 22.05.2020 Loved son of Herbert and Mabel (both dec). Brother of Kevin, brother-in-law of Melanie, Uncle of Stephen. A creative and artistic person.

On 9 June *The West Australian* published the obituary I wrote. (fig.7)

fig.7. Ross Seaton obituary
The West Australian
9 June 2020

OBITUARY

Ross Herbert Seaton
Artist
Born: Perth, 1944
Died: Perth, aged 76

At Karrakatta on 27 May 2020, a small cohort of family and friends paid their last respects to Ross Herbert Seaton. As the rosemary was passed around and each offered their quiet tribute, the Hollies' *He ain't heavy, he's my brother* filled the socially-distanced space between us. The song's central message of duty and care poignantly evoked the crucial relationship in Ross's life, with his brother Kevin. It was Kevin who gave the eulogy and stood resolutely at the graveside with his family to greet the mourners.

Ross was born on 7 January 1944, while the Second World War still raged in Europe and the Pacific. Growing up in Bulimba Road Nedlands, where he lived almost his entire life, Ross and Kevin enjoyed the rough and tumble of boyhood. It was played out around the empty lots, the river, and on the nearby beaches. Ross was good with his hands, he was always drawing and he built his own Pelican yacht. 'He was always mucking around on the river,' Kevin recalls. Following high school, he went on to complete a science course at the Perth Technical College and then a teaching qualification at Teacher's College, before beginning his professional life as a science and maths teacher in the rural communities of Kulin and Wagin.

Teaching gave him the resources to travel, and in the early seventies, he set off for Europe to see the enticing treasures in the Louvre and the National Gallery in London, the Sistine Chapel and churches throughout Europe that he had previously only read about and studied in coloured reproduction. It was a pilgrimage that fuelled his passion for making art. The memories of that experience remained an inspiration as he set down the world around him in pencil, pen, or chalk line on sheet after sheet of computer paper. While he maintained himself by teaching as a part-time employee at Mercedes College, he searched for some underlying meaning that would make sense of the universe. It was a pursuit that gradually filled his waking hours.

And he walked, he walked a lot. Every day he set off to the beach or the river, collecting materials to paint on, especially cardboard and ply. For generations of Western Australians, the image of Ross, hunched over, in shorts

throughout summer and winter, bandages on his legs and pushing a wheelbarrow, is embedded in memory. He was for many the 'Walking Man', the man who relentlessly made his way toward the ocean, no matter what the weather. He didn't engage in conversation; it was a journey of discovery, full of information that needed to be computed and processed. License plate numbers, receipts, and randomly sourced codes were clues to some overarching algorithm that would somehow explain the anomalies of this phenomenal world. One day, somehow!

Back in Bulimba Road, he recorded these numbers, often in elaborately gridded patterns or appended to drawings of birds, elephants, crocodiles, and horses. Soon his house began to fill with drawings and paintings on cardboard, ply, and roller blinds — room after room stacked high with sacks of drawings, piles of paintings. Sheds filled to bursting point in the garden, one after another, and so he began to paint on large sheets of builder's plastic. Unrolled on the verge of his home, held down with bricks (also painted in bright enamel colours), he covered their meterage with bold graphics and strange rune-like letters. 'It's the Force,' he whispered one day when I asked what the numbers meant. 'The Force?' 'It's important, but later, I'll tell you later,' he added, leaving the mystery alive.

Sadly, it remains a mystery. Ross was taken to Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in March and was informed that he wouldn't be able to return home to Bulimba Road. COVID-19 meant further isolation, and though he kept drawing and making plans for his forthcoming exhibition, the anxiety of never returning to his work and fulfilling his mission in life must have been agonising. Ross died on Friday, 22 May. He is survived by his brother Kevin and his family. A selection of his remarkable body of work will be presented in an online exhibition arranged by the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia in December.

Professor Ted Snell AM CitWA
Director, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery
University of Western Australia



fig.8, 9 & 10. Naval base storage unit. Photograph by Ted Snell (May 2020)

In the week following the funeral Kevin, Stephen and two of Ross's neighbours, Simon and Matthew, planned to break the seal on the three storage units to uncover what treasures had been so valuable, so important, that it was no longer possible to store them at Bulimba Road. At \$200 a month for each unit, the cost over the past decade had escalated and due to his infirmity Ross had not paid his bill for six months, so there was some urgency in clearing them out. When Kevin, Stephen and I arrived, we were led through a maze of roller doors to three adjoining units at the end of one corridor of pre-fabricated buildings. Each had been padlocked and without a key the manager wrenched the first one open with a crowbar. Together we pushed open a door that had been sealed for at least five years. When it finally succumbed we stood, jaws on the asphalt in front of a wall of those ubiquitous green plastic bags. Stacked to the roof and with only enough space to pull down the roller-door there must have been thousands of bulging bags. As the sunlight steamed in the layers of disturbed dust rose up to create a mysterious, ethereal shroud that veiled the treasure in a golden haze. (fig.8-10)

The next unit was the same. Once jimmied open it was also stacked floor to ceiling with green plastic bags. Only the third had some vacant floor space. When I entered a soft cushion of dust captured my tentative footprints, leaving a Neil Armstrong impression in the floor's virgin moonscape. A rising cloud of particles was electrified by the slanting rays of morning light as I moved toward the first low stack of bags and

carefully prised one open. Cardboard! Just cardboard, raw without drawn or painted marks. One sheet after another of folded or unfurled boxes. The material he had collected every day, the same cardboard I had seen stacked up in his wheelbarrow all those years before, carefully curated and stored for a decade. Why?

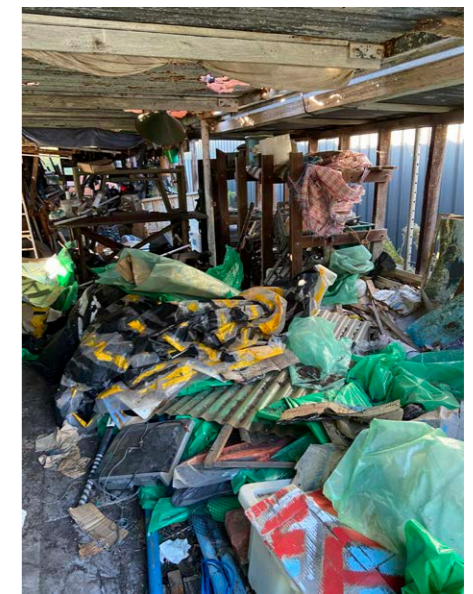
As Kevin, Stephen, Simon and Matthew dismantled the edifice of unit one I tried to assess whether it contained artworks. One after another was filled with raw cardboard. Then bags of receipts and a full bag of Tip Top bread plastic bags, each one neatly folded. Everything had been kept, newspapers, plastic bread ties, packaging and more of the same until, at last, a bag of paintings. Another stack of salvaged bags grew in the corner of the third unit as the first and then second units were cleared and taken to the nearby tip. Among the treasures were bags of the 'Wheelbarrow Walks', folded sheets with minuscule inscriptions detailing his journeys! There were also paintings on Holland blinds and painted cardboard works, hundreds of them. These Kevin dutifully returned to Bulimba Road when the last of the three units was finally cleared and the floors swept clean.

Ross was a hoarder! Upon filling the available sheds in his backyard he added more, then lean-tos and when no further space was available he rented a storage unit, then another and finally a third. He transported all that cardboard, all those sacks of packaging, all that stuff, the 40 kilometres down to Naval Base where it sat undisturbed for years. 'Everything is connected



Image above:
fig.11. Backyard, Bulimba Road. Photograph by Ted Snell (2019-20)

Image below:
fig.12. Sheds, Bulimba Road. Photograph by Ted Snell (2019-20)



to every other thing' Ross believed and so everything was important, it all needed to be kept for reference, filed away for later examination, when needed. For this reason, it was impossible to discard anything, the distress at the thought of getting rid of this resource would have been too great. It does seem apparent that Ross had an obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, which meant that despite his collecting – which lead to increasingly cramped living conditions, even unsanitary conditions – it wasn't possible to discard items or allow others to leave his protective control. (fig.11-12)

How this collection of materials, bags of packaging and detritus informed his work is hard to explain, but there was an urgency in his decision to make paintings that recorded the everyday experiences he encountered. This repository of stuff fed that compulsion and enabled its transformation into a grand narrative about humanity's existence on this planet. Everything is connected and that sense of connectivity was linked to a greater force: 'I believe there is a Force, like in Star Wars, not going too far, but there is a Force and there must be because things gets out, beyond your control and you wonder where it's coming from and you think well now that's coming from physics or it might be coming from music.'¹³

Wherever it came from, it was there to be interrogated, documented and communicated. Though communication was restricted. For most who tried to engage with Ross, as the Instagram and Facebook comments suggest, there wasn't much generosity or will to share. The very public nature of his artworks' production — many were done in his front garden, open to the general public, or on the beach — might suggest a willingness to share; however, those that tried were quickly rebuffed. I had the same experience. Later, driven by the urgency of his own situation Ross realised that unless something was done, some options were embraced, others might not get the chance to see his work and learn

from them. And this was clearly important to him. It was at that point that he decided to confide in me and work toward a major, public exhibition where a wider audience could engage with the ideas he had harvested from years of walking, thinking, researching and recording.

Following Ross’s death I was approached by two filmmakers, Brendan Hutchens and Patti Brook, who were interested in making a documentary about Ross and his work. Focused around the exhibition we were planning and following my attempts to uncover his work and investigate his life and the circumstances that shaped his work, the documentary would be a fitting tribute to the ‘Walking Man’. Following the extraordinary responses to the press articles and in particular to the radio interview I had undertaken with Gillian O’Shaughnessy on ABC 720 local radio, which Patti had organised, we began to map out how we might construct a film without the main character. Ross would be the absent presence we would have to conjure up from interviews, photographs, stories and of course, through his work.

Wishing to respect Ross’s integrity and to fulfil the trust he put in me to bring his work to that wider audience, drove me down diverging and intriguing pathways. Conversations with his brother Kevin and his wife Melanie and their son Stephen provided many insights into Ross’s life and the care and careful negotiations required to maintain a relationship with this distant, self-obsessed individual. It was not easy when his parents were alive and even more so when they both died, and Ross was alone at Bulimba Road. Stories of their shared childhood fed by my persistent desire to know more about what shaped Ross and led to his creative output.

Other avenues opened up through communications via Facebook, Instagram and the print media. A message on my voicemail from Ross’s sister-in-law Isobel Lacy alerted me to his marriage and

the whereabouts of his former wife, Marilyn Lacy. Meetings with Isobel and conversations with Marilyn provided more insights into Ross’s life and to the early manifestations of his artistic interests and passions. Emails and phone calls from former students highlighted Ross as an inspirational teacher who changed lives and left an indelible memory. Conversations with medical practitioners who came into his orbit and with his GP revealed the seriousness of his physical condition, the chronic pain he endured, the hardship and constraints on activity that resulted from those conditions. Ross was unfurled to me through these exchanges as a very complex man, a driven man, whose independence and originality came at significant cost.

With so much interest in Ross, it was important to answer the questions everyone wanted to know — why did he walk, what was his medical condition, why didn’t he engage with people, what were the material conditions of his life — while maintaining his dignity and respecting his artistic integrity. Ross was an artist, he was serious about work and understood its importance. Whatever else shaped this project the final arbitration was always whether it respectfully presented his practice as an artist and facilitated gaining the widest possible audience for his work. The exhibition, this book and the documentary are all conceived as a tribute to Ross. His work and the example of his life are his lasting legacy. (fig.13-14)

Images right, above:
fig.13 & 14. Ross painting front yard Bulimba Road.
Photograph by Ted Snell (c.2016)

Image right, below:
Photograph by Brendan Hutchens (2020)
Following page:
Photograph by Brendan Hutchens (2020)



1. Ross Seaton in conversation with Ted Snell, December 2018.
2. Although I was never given entrée to the secret of ‘the Force’, in the Amana aged care facility Ross whispered to his brother Kevin that ‘the Force’ was ‘The good the bad and the ugly’. ‘He repeated it several times, just to be sure I got it,’ Kevin explained. Linking a Spaghetti Western and a scifi film like *Star Wars* is indicative of Ross’s merging of contemporary culture with science, art and ideas.
3. Ross Seaton in conversation with Ted Snell & Mary Moore, August 2020.





BEING IN THE WORLD

*Life is a fiction a drama that demands continuous creation no matter the apparent cost.*⁴ – Ross Seaton

*Nothing is given to man on earth except a potential and the material on which to actualize it. The creator lives for his work. He needs no other men. His primary goal is within himself.*⁵ – Ayn Rand

In January 1944 Australia was in its fourth year of fighting in the Second World War, with troops engaged in campaigns in New Guinea, Bougainville, New Britain and Europe. The Soviet army had defeated the German army at the Battle of Kursk and the Allies were planning for the invasion of Europe. At home the Australian public were immersed in another battle – over art and the nature of portraiture – sparked by the award of the Archibald Prize to William Dobell for his gangling portrait of fellow artist Joshua Smith. Into this world of conflict and opposing ideologies, Ross Herbert Seaton was born on the seventh of the month, a Friday.

Ross’s father Herbert had been stationed in Darwin with the AIF when Ross was born, moving back to Perth in 1946. His mother Mabel had been a secretary and shorthand typist who worked for the RSL in ANZAC house, which is where she met Herbert. After the war they started their family, first Ross, then Kevin arrived in 1948 and two further children who tragically died within a year of their births. Herbert set up home with his wife Mabel and young family in Bulimba Road Nedlands. A number of relatives already lived nearby, including Mabel’s mother who lived down the road at number 46.

Initially occupying a weatherboard home with a bullnose veranda built at the front of the block at number 50, Herbert used his building skills to construct a new dwelling toward the rear, before pulling down the original house in 1950.

Ross and Kevin enjoyed the rough and tumble of boyhood that played out around the empty lots, the Swan River, and on the nearby ocean beaches. Ross was good with his hands, constantly drawing and even building his own Pelican yacht. (fig.15 & 16) ‘He was always mucking around on the river,’ Kevin recalls. Their father studied at night to earn his A



fig.15 & 16. Ross Seaton and Kevin Seaton as boys. Photographs c.1954



fig.17. Herbert Seaton’s business sign. Photograph by Ted Snell (2020)

Image opposite: Ross’s shoes in the garden at Bulimba Road. Photograph by Ted Snell (2020)

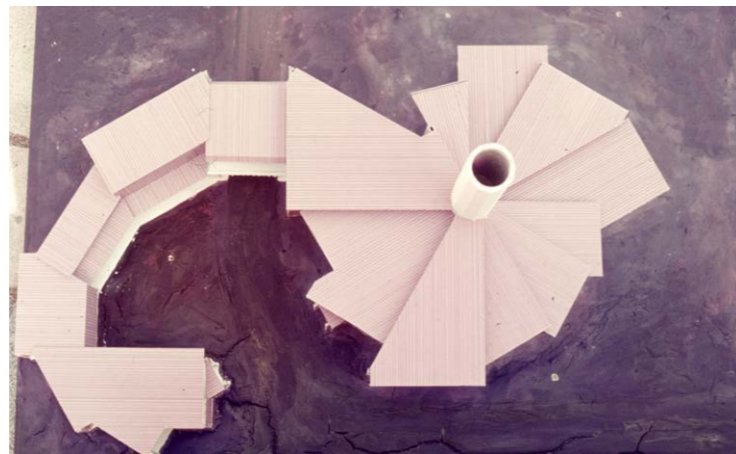


fig.18 & 19. Model made as an architecture student at UWA
Photographs c.1970

Class registered builder's licence and in the late sixties started his own company, HJ & ME SEATON Registered Builders. (fig.17)

Both boys attended Claremont Practising School, down the road from the family home and Ross, who showed great academic aptitude, went on to Hollywood High School. Upon completing his Junior Certificate, he was forced to move to John Curtin High School in Fremantle to undertake his Leaving Certificate because the new Hollywood High School was not able to take students through their entire secondary schooling. Ross was an excellent student earning good grades. This intellectual skill was balanced with the skills he learned from his parents, as his brother Kevin recalls: 'Ross received unbridled support from Mum and Dad especially when he was receptive in his younger life. Dad taught him all about building and exposed him to drawing plans and architecture. The house at 50 Bulimba was a fertile ground of building material and many physical objects which provided Ross with inspiration and understanding of the physics of the way things fit together including shape and form that has become evident in his later paintings.'⁶

Ross's interest in mathematics and science spurred him on to further study at Perth Technical School in 1962, where he completed a Diploma in Applied Chemistry, before accepting a bursary from the Education Department to study toward a Teacher's Certificate at Claremont Teachers College. Then, with

his formal education concluded Ross was sent to the country in 1965 to teach Maths and Science, first at Wagin then in 1967 at Kulin District High School. Former student Neil Argent remembers Ross as a teacher who was highly respected by the students and very popular. 'He made us laugh, always spending the first five or ten minutes of each lesson feeding the good-humoured rivalry between the town kids and the farmers.'⁷ Bespectacled Ross on one occasion caused considerable consternation by informing his students, as they sat in their classroom in a small country town in 1967, that one day '... you will be able to pull a device out of your top pocket and talk to anyone in the world'. They scoffed at the time but his prescience remained embedded as a powerful memory.

Despite the positive impact he had on his students, Ross was searching for a more creative outlet and enrolled at the University of Western Australia in the Bachelor of Architecture degree. (fig.18-19) He was awarded two years' credit for the diploma he had completed and so enrolled in the third-year units in 1967, earning an A in Architectural Science 31 and Bs in the History and Theory of Architecture 33 and Human Ecology 34, with Cs in Design 30 and Technology 32. In his final year he again did well in Architectural Science, scoring a B, but only averaging Cs in his other units, with the exception of Design 40, which he failed. According to Marilyn Lacy, who Ross had met at the Conference of the Evangelical Union on the Gold Coast at the end of 1968, he '... refused



fig.20 & 21. Ross Seaton. Photograph by Marilyn Seaton (1970)
Marilyn Seaton. Photograph by Ross Seaton (1970)



Image above: Ross Seaton and Marilyn Seaton, UWA grounds (1970)



fig.22, 23 & 24. Ross Seaton and Marilyn Seaton, St Cuthbert's Church, Darlington. (23 October 1970)



Image left: Ross Seaton. Photograph by Marilyn Seaton (c1970)
Image right: Ross and Marilyn Seaton. (c1970)



to complete assignments he found unworthy of his talents'. Despite coercion from the Head of School, which included an afternoon on the Swan River on his yacht and an invitation to dinner, Ross would not be moved and he refused to submit his final project.(fig.20-21) The following year he converted to a Bachelor of Science. Unfortunately, Ross's dissatisfaction with higher education continued and he failed Physics 30 in 1971, withdrew from Mathematics 32 and failed Mathematics 38 when he did not attend class. The following year he was failed in both his Mathematics and Physics units for non-payment of fees.

During this period, Ross was spending an increasing amount of his time painting and drawing, and romancing his new girlfriend. After the Evangelical Congress, Ross and Marilyn's relationship developed back on the UWA campus, where she was studying History on a Commonwealth scholarship. The couple was engaged in July 1970 and plans were made for a wedding, just one month hence. Marilyn's mother was excited about the prospect of the wedding of her eldest daughter, and her two sisters were overjoyed

at the thought of being bridesmaids. However, while the Lacys worked on their plans for the forthcoming Saturday wedding, with a catered wedding breakfast and all the trimmings, Ross was formulating other ideas. He made numerous recommendations that Marilyn supported. At first it was decided that the bridesmaids would wear mauve (Ross's favourite colour), then only days before the ceremony he changed his mind and decided there would be no best man or bridesmaids. The girls were distressed, and when the next change was announced we can only imagine Mrs Lacy's distress. Instead of a Saturday wedding followed by the catered breakfast the event would take place on a Sunday, and in Darlington, at St Cuthbert's Anglican Church. Ross was an Anglican but Marilyn's family were Baptist, her parents having served as missionaries in Africa. Marilyn supported Ross and the families finally all agreed on his amendments, though in retrospect she wondered whether all these changes and vacillations were evidence that Ross was becoming a 'reluctant groom'.

On Sunday 23 August 1970, a pall of apprehension hung over the party as Marilyn, dressed in her long



fig.25 & 26. Marilyn and Ross on their honeymoon (1970)

white gown, and her family drove up the steep incline of the Darling Ranges. Although a number of uninvited people had turned up and filled the pews there was one key person missing: Ross. Mr Lacy drove his mildly panicking daughter round and round the small hamlet of Darlington until word arrived that Ross had finally turned up, in a borrowed duffle jacket that was several sizes too small. The two families, arrayed on either side of the chapel, waited anxiously when the priest asked for the ring and Marilyn's family's worst fears materialised. There was no ring. Quickly Mrs Lacy offered up her own and though much larger than required for her daughter's petite fingers, it was adequate for the job. Ross and Marilyn were married.

The photographs at the church are a tableau of mixed emotions.(fig.22-24) The Lacy family's stoic expressions are counterbalanced with Ross's grin and Marilyn's beaming smile, her head nestled into her husband, her veil framing her radiant face. Following a cup of tea, the small party fractured and Ross and Marilyn returned to 50 Bulimba Road where they spent their first night as a happy couple entwined in Ross's single bed. Their honeymoon was a trip north, as Marilyn remembers, 'Ross and I left the day after the wedding in Ross's father's station wagon and drove up to Carnarvon. We spent a night somewhere near Lucky Bay sleeping in the car (we couldn't afford hotels) on the edge of a cliff (we arrived in the dark and didn't realize our peril until the next morning). Ross caught a garfish and cooked it on a portable gas stove; that fish was delicious, I still remember it.'(fig.25-26)

Ross's *laissez faire* approach to planning for the wedding was echoed in his disregard for their future accommodation. He had previously been sharing a huge house in 9 York Street, South Perth, which had been part of the Sisters of Saint Joseph Convent. Although he assumed they would move in as a couple with his fellow architecture students, it was unfortunately a plan Ross had not shared with his

mates. They promptly moved out, leaving the young couple to cope with paying the full rent. Although very short of money — Marilyn had a Commonwealth scholarship and Ross worked off and on with his builder-father on architectural plans for renovations. Whenever money was available Ross bought art materials, instead of the paying back rent or buying food. From his studio he generated an endless stream of new paintings in chalk, acrylic and dye on unprimed canvas. (fig.27)

As Marilyn describes the house it '... sat on a large block of land and was beautifully built out of brick with tuckpointing. There were three bedrooms, a huge living room with three French doors opening onto a verandah, and a large well-lit attic which became Ross's studio. He was creative in furnishing the house – our bed was a heavy wooden garage door cantilevered over a wooden crate with a mattress made out of foam pads. He constructed wardrobes out of plywood and steel rods he found somewhere. Broken deck chairs were mended for relaxed seating and bentwood chairs for the kitchen. On the front door, was a plaque ROSS SEATON ARCHITECT'.⁸

Although he had not completed his degree at UWA, Ross believed he was an architect like his heroes Frank Lloyd Wright and Howard Roark, the central character in Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead*. 'Nothing is given to man on earth. Everything he needs has to be produced. And here man faces his basic alternative: he can survive in only one of two ways—by the independent work of his own mind or as a parasite fed by the minds of others'.⁹ It was a mantra Ross lived by according to Marilyn, despite their difficult situation and the debts that kept accruing, Ross would accept no compromise, make no allowance, brook no disagreement. He was a 'creator' and his responsibility was to his creativity alone.

The creator served nothing and no one. He lived for himself. And only by living for himself was he able to

achieve the things which are the glory of mankind.
Such is the nature of achievement.¹⁰

The couple stayed in the York Street house while both were enrolled students, Marilyn studying toward a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History in 1971, and then a Diploma of Education, while Ross attended occasional lectures for his Physics degree. (fig.28) In the first year of their marriage the young couple took a holiday down south where they photographed each other on the beach, the ocean crashing in on the rocks below. Copies were sent as a birthday present to Marilyn’s mother on 13 September 1971, with a brief note from Marilyn ‘To dearest mother from Marilyn and Ross’, and a poem by Robert Browning, carefully transcribed by Ross.

Robert Browning (1855)
LIFE IN A LOVE

Escape me?
Never—
Beloved!
While I am I, and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both,
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other pursue.
My life is a fault at last, I fear:
It seems too much like a fate, indeed!
Though I do my best I shall scarce succeed.
But what if I fail of my purpose here?
It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
To dry one’s eyes and laugh at a fall,
And, baffled, get up and begin again,—
So the chase takes up one’s life, that’s all.
While, look but once from your farthest bound
At me so deep in the dust and dark,
No sooner the old hope goes to ground
Than a new one, straight to the self-same mark,
I shape me—
Ever
Removed!

Looking back, Marilyn wondered whether this gesture ‘... reveals how conflicted he felt about loving and marrying me. It is, maybe, a plea for understanding? He did not do things like this without a purpose’.¹¹ Was it intended as a confession that his love was driven by fate and not for romantic fulfillment, that it was a burden he was forced to carry and that even at his best, he ‘shall scarce succeed’?

Most of his time Ross painted, experimenting with various media and styles – oils, acrylic, chalk, and dyes on fabric. He wanted to see what could be expressed with just one colour, and the challenge of controlling dye on fabric presented an irresistible challenge, even though it was very expensive. One of these works, a landscape, Ross allowed the UWA Physics Department to acquire. According to Marilyn it was the only artwork Ross parted with during their time together.

Degrees of ability vary, but the basic principle remains the same: the degree of a man’s independence, initiative and personal love for his work determines his talent as a worker and his worth as a man.¹²

Howard Roark’s mantra provided Ross with the confidence to keep working. It wasn’t for the enjoyment or edification of others, he had no interest in self-promotion or selling his art, or even exhibiting it, the works he created where his own creative journey, and that was beyond the comprehension of others. Any admiring comments from friends or relatives were annoying and pointless as he deemed their opinions worthless. They had no ability to pass judgment on his work. When bulldozers arrived to demolish the elegant old building to make way for new town houses, Ross worked all night, furiously covering all the walls with paintings and drawings. It was the perfect canvas, a raw and open space that would cease to exist the following morning. There was no need to take a photographic record, to document his achievement, it was enough that it was done and done well.

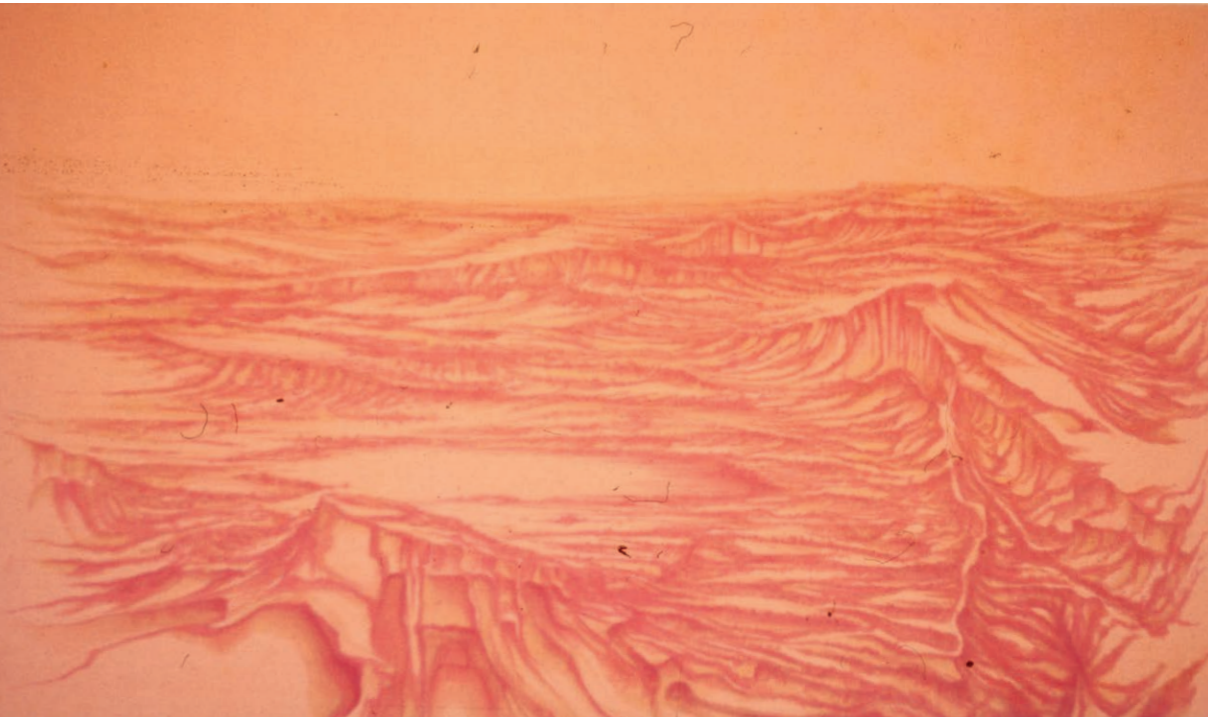


fig.27. Red Landscape (1971)

The reasoning mind cannot work under any form of compulsion. It cannot be curbed, sacrificed or subordinated to any consideration whatsoever. It demands total independence in function and in motive.¹³

Forced to move into a nearby small apartment, leaving all the furniture Ross had constructed from recycled materials still inside, they started life anew in a much more constrained space. At this time, from 1974–1975, Ross returned to teaching, though only part-time. He was offered teaching in Mathematics and Science at Mercedes College, a Catholic Girls School in the City where Caroline O’Neil remembers him as ‘unusual, quirky and very bright’. It’s hard to imagine Ross, the focused artist who would brook no interruption, dealing with a class of 20-30 fifteen-year-old girls, and indeed he did not last long. Throughout this period Ross did not stop painting. Needless to say, his behavior put the relationship with Marilyn under considerable strain and after six years

the couple separated and the *decree nisi* became absolute on 4 September, 1981. In 1978 Marilyn moved to the United States, marrying Robert Rivkin in San Francisco on 30 January, 1982.

In retrospect, despite the reaction and commentary of many of her friends and family, for Marilyn the importance of their relationship, their union and love was deeper and more profound. Her younger self remains an active agent. That Marilyn still sees the vital and passionate man full of fire and ambition searching for his destiny, which sadly did not include her. Her brother Edward Lacy, on hearing the news of Ross’s death wrote a poem titled *An Artist* in which he echoes Ross’s own anguish at the end of the marriage, ‘Compulsion to control in order to create; Compulsion to create in order to control’ was Edward’s assessment. Six years after their divorce was finalised, Ross also mused over the collapse of the marriage in a notebook dedicated to a planned novel and made a similar assertion that:



Image above:
fig.28. Marilyn Seaton graduating (1971)



Image below:
Ross and Kevin, (c.1974)

A marriage requires mutual respect for each other's mind, body and spirit. Most however, either become possessive or pathetically dependent on their spouse, so that neither is able to give any light or energy to the other. The law only recognizes divorce. God does not. A divorce is separation ... so that each individual can restore the confidence and faith they once were blessed with.'¹⁴

Although clearly not reconciled to their divorce, Ross decided that he needed to restore his 'confidence and faith' and so set off to see the great artworks and architecture of the Renaissance and the Western canon by embarking on his own version of the grand tour. The trip took him throughout Europe on a pilgrimage to the centres of culture, to Rome and Florence, Venice, Paris and London. Identifying with Howard Roark once again, he sought out great artists, men like Michelangelo and Leonardo, as mentors and role models.

Throughout the centuries there were men who took first steps down new roads armed with nothing but their own vision. Their goals differed, but they all had this in common: that the step was first, the road new, the vision unborrowed, and the response they received—hatred. The great creators—the thinkers, the artists, the scientists, the inventors—stood alone against the men of their time. Every great new thought was opposed. Every great new invention was denounced.'¹⁵

When his money ran out, Ross reluctantly contacted his father and negotiated a ticket back home, moving into the sleepout at the back of Bulimba Road. This became his home for the next forty years. There was a bed, and shelving for his books, a small space to work and access to the toilet and laundry. It was enough to set up a self-contained unit. Without venturing into the main house, and rarely speaking with his parents, Ross began his very solitary life, becoming more and more

self-reliant, introspective and uncompromising. What his parents thought we can only imagine as he spent his days preparing his vegetarian meals in a rice cooker on the back step, working in the yard in the workshop/shed at the rear of the block and setting out each day on his walk to the ocean. His brother Kevin reports that Ross would even refuse to join the extended family for Sunday lunch despite entreaties from his mother to share a family meal. However, as Kevin relates his parents '... continued to show love and concern for Ross through many dark days he went through. If it wasn't for them Ross probably would not have made it to where he did. Although it is important to have a quest (the Force) this takes a terrible toll on ones' physical well-being. Having loving, stable supportive parents was critical to his wellbeing.'¹⁶

Ross stayed in the sleepout till 1998, when it became so packed with paintings, drawings and books that he was forced to move into the laundry to sleep. There, on the concrete floor, curved to allow the flow of water into a drain, he found comfort and preferred this site — his head under the sink his long legs and curved back arched toward the door — to any other for a further fourteen years. In 2012, he moved into the main house, which he occupied till his death.

That backyard workshop soon filled with his scavenging and at one point his father forbade him from bringing any more cardboard onto the property. Each trip was a quest for materials to make art and he amassed a store of surfaces to paint on that overflowed from the original workshop to several more sheds and lean-tos that Ross gradually added over time. First in a wheelbarrow, then a series of discarded prams he renovated for purpose, Ross would embark each day down Bulimba Road to Stirling Highway, then on towards Cottesloe or Fremantle, sometimes making it to the ocean for an invigorating swim, sometimes, when interrupted, returning home abruptly.

Over the decades Ross was sighted on many occasions at the beach drawing, writing notes or staring out to sea. Stones and shells stained with blue paint at Sandtrax (a popular surfing beach) are the evidence of this activity. The paintings he made were piled back onto his wheelbarrow for the trip back to Nedlands and storage in large green plastic bags. These journeys were all documented with meticulous attention to the details of time and direction, numbers recorded from passing buses, receipts and points of interest. In one dated 29 April 1992 (fig.29) he records the following:

29/4/92	29/4/92
MJD 844080 STUNG \$10.00	6.26 DC 6.27 DC 19*
1054 [103] CAUGHT	1989 \$2.00 + \$10.00 844080
BUS TICKET NO 8181	1984 50c 1976 CHANGE
AT THE BUS STOP	HT 50 Bulimba Nedlands From \$1.00 1985 BUS TICKET 8181
NEXT TO NEDLANDS LIBRARY	At 6.12pm
223? E 6.18pm AT CLAREMONT	572 [104] REAL TIME
BAY VIEW TCE | STLNG HWY	W.6.32 AV CC/DC
209 [282] N|E	C.C. \$2.00 1989
6.20 (6.19)pm 20*	DC 6.34 \$10.00 844080
C.C TIME D C 6.16pm	From 50 BULIMBA RD NEDLANDS
D.C TR 5 GOLBINS [W]	SAW JOHN
2+2+1 CC	1982 50c 1982 10c 1982 20c
TR 1084[] E 6.25	COMMONWEALTH 1981 20c
125 [] W 6.25 CC	GAMES
	19* 6.38 DC 6.35/36CC

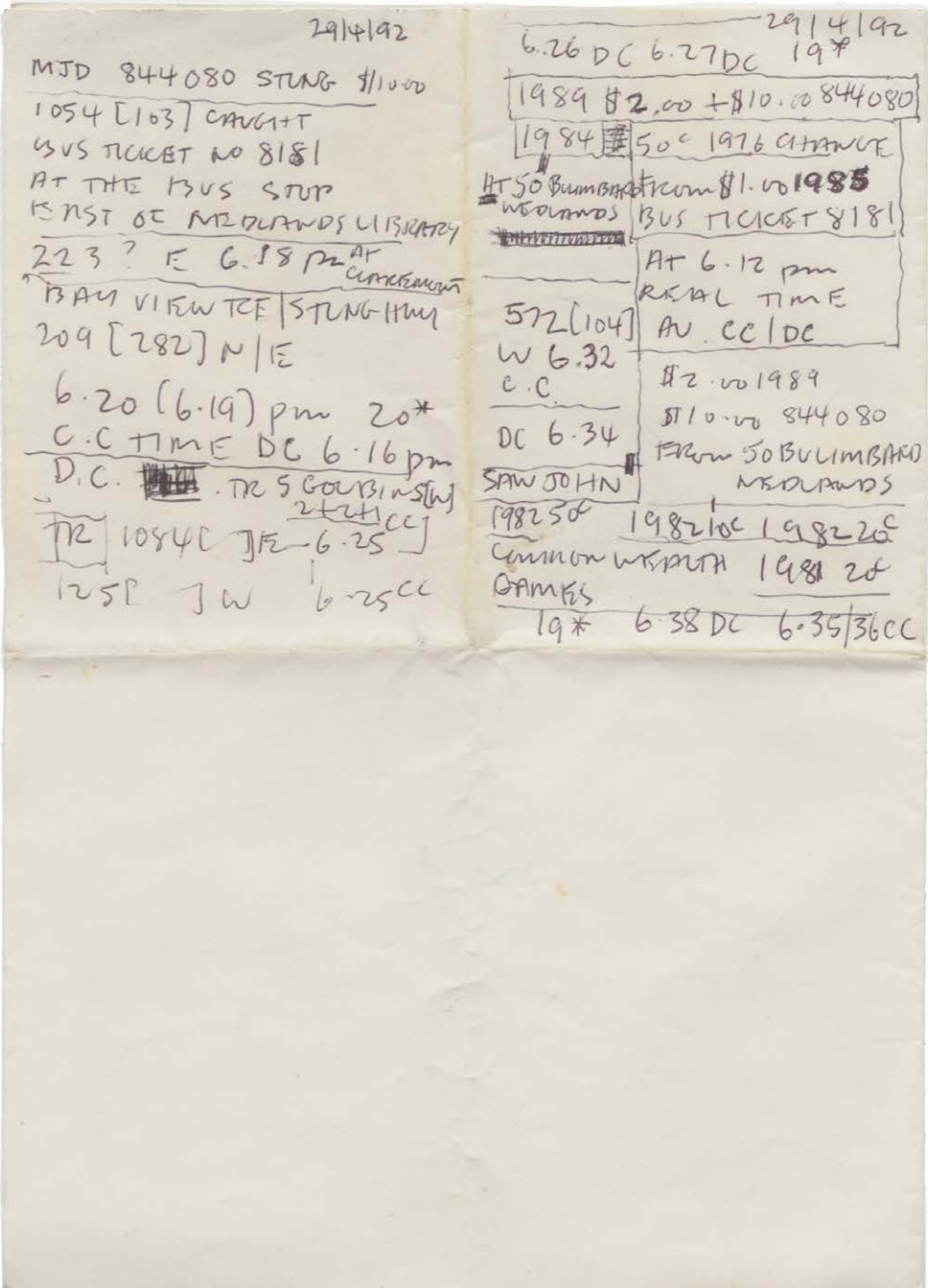


fig.29. Walking diaries (1992)

While some of these notations remain cryptic others are clear and somewhat banal, listing times of day, bus ticket numbers and monetary transactions. But the sheer number of these documents and Ross's obsessive attention to the detail of his life is astonishing. That he was able to craft meaning from these details is even more intriguing and beguiling.

Another dated 1 September 2005 indicates another level of documentation that includes references to Purdie's column (the grave marker for his childhood pet cat), a stylised map of his journey along Stirling Highway, a run with his wheelbarrow and times linked with other numerical notations. (fig.30) Whatever their meaning they clearly had significance for Ross, who was extremely diligent in documenting each event, every day.

<div><div>A010905</div><div><div>61XRS 1611,56</div><div>50 Bulimba Rd, Nedlands</div><div>Ross Herbert SEATON</div><div>07014418pm</div><div>17116,5</div><div><div>Purdie's</div><div>Column</div><div>7/3,10</div></div><div><div>22/66/10</div><div>3/11,8</div></div></div></div>	<div><div>010905</div><div><div>B V T C</div><div>STLNG Hwy</div><div>X X</div><div>W</div><div>WALK</div><div>Running whl barrow</div><div>DC 12:19pm (7</div><div>614</div></div></div>
<div><div>010905</div><div><div>CALL</div><div>BUS 1312 (</div><div>6,4</div></div></div>	<div><div>010905</div><div><div>CALL</div><div>BUS 1344 (</div><div>2,8</div></div></div>

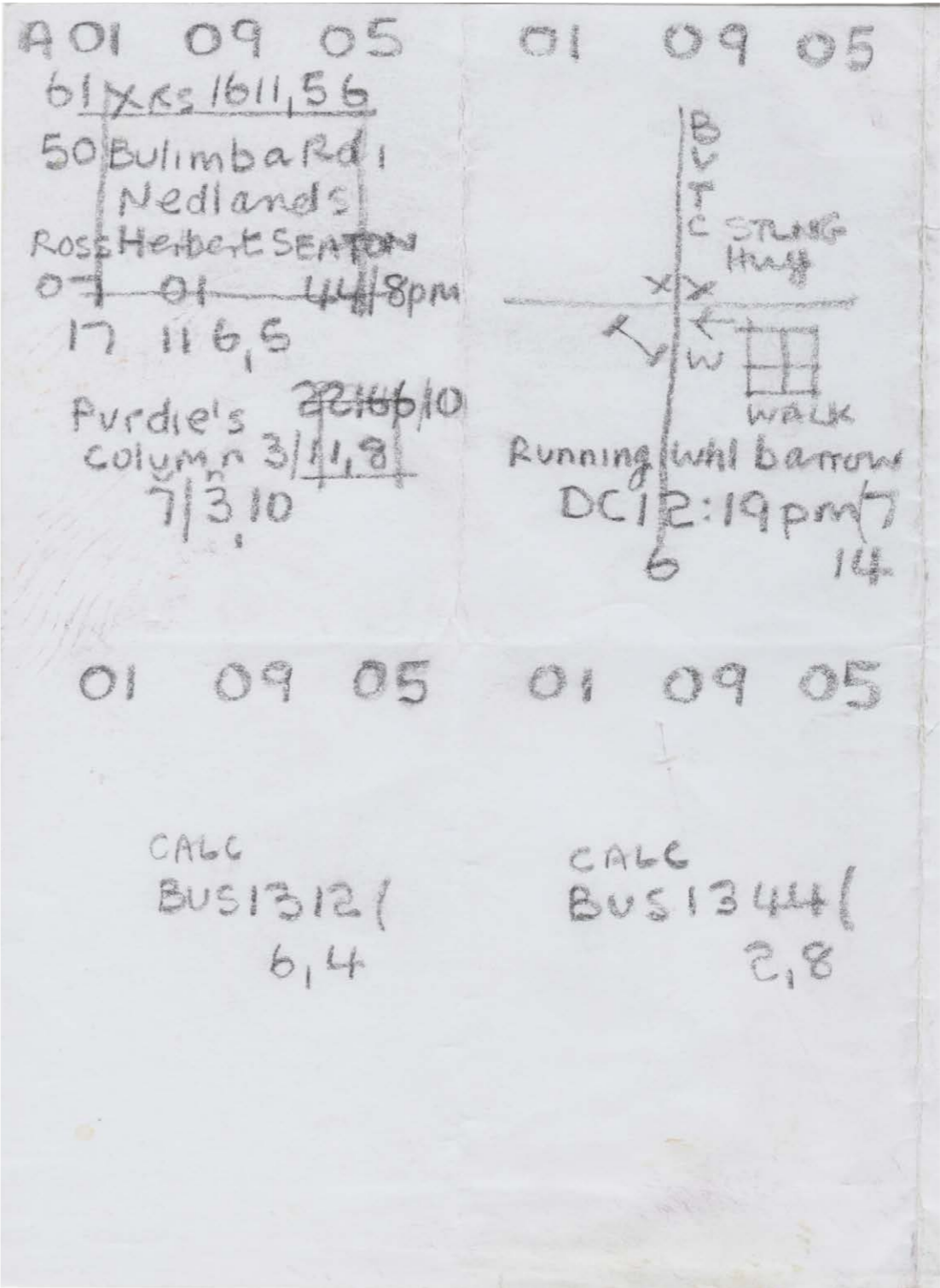


fig.30. Walking diaries (2005)



Purdie, c.1980, pen and pencil drawing on paper

Because of his obsessive behaviour, his hoarding, his sense of being on a mission each day and his fascination with numerology and mathematics, it is tempting to link these observations into a psychological diagnosis of an obsessive-compulsive disorder or perhaps Asperger syndrome or autism. How these elements of his character might align or fuse together is ultimately irrelevant. Ross was a complex character. These were the pursuits and passions that drove him, that gave shape and purpose to his life and it is why we find him such an intriguing and inspirational figure.

His health was an issue. Why was he so bent, what was wrong with his legs, was he terminally ill? All the years he walked up and down Stirling Highway, people had the same questions. It was one of his ongoing conditions that caused him to drop in to the Mosman Park surgery of Dr Jamie Prendiville in February 2000. Dr Prendiville made the following notes on his new patient:

Long hair and beard, very brown skin from sun exposure, multiple skin cancers. Painting clothes were shorts – half his artwork was on his clothes. Large shoes. Quiet personality, reluctant to interact unless he had confidence in the person.

Reminiscing about his patient, Dr Prendiville provided the following memoir:

Ross first presented at my medical practice in February 2000. I can't remember why he asked to become a patient at my practice — maybe because we were a small practice and he could deal with only one doctor and not a lot of people asking him a lot of questions. He was quite protective of his identity and didn't like people prying into his thoughts. I remember him intimating that he tried not to say too much because people misinterpreted what he was saying. Over the course of the last 20 years we spent a number of hours together whilst I dealt surgically with his various skin lesions. I tend not to talk a lot when doing procedures, which gave Ross quite a good opening to throw in his twopence worth in a non-threatening, non-questioning environment.

He would tell me of his love for the beach and he tended to gravitate there as much as he could. There was something in the words his mother had told him as a child about the disinfectant properties of salt water that created an obsession in him. He enjoyed the water and used to dunk himself on a regular basis around the Cottesloe area. He painted and drew pictures of the beachfront. He was disappointed at the continued comments that 'young people –

fig.31 & 32. *Painted bricks*, c.2015-2020, acrylic on house bricks



teenagers' used to make about him 'hey, look at that guy...'; and this eventually stopped him from doing his beach front art.

He had multiple skin lesions relating to long-term exposure to the sun. These needed to be dealt with by surgical excision. He would book into the surgery on a regular basis, mainly in the months of February, March and April (the warmer months), to have his excisions. He had no transport and would only use transport in the direst of situations. He walked from his house in Nedlands to my surgery in Mosman Park to have his excisions and then walk home after the surgery. He never complained. It was part of his normal life. I remember one time he was needing a hernia repair and we booked him in to have it repaired in Bentley Hospital. I found out later that he walked from his home in Nedlands to Bentley to have the operation. He left at four in the morning and by the time he got to Bentley his heart had gone into atrial fibrillation. The anaesthetist forced him to go in an ambulance to Royal Perth Hospital. All that way for nothing!

On a regular basis he disappeared out of our system for a number of months (mainly the winter months), unless he had a particular worrying skin lesion. These worrying lesions were normally ones that were bleeding and the bleeding couldn't be stopped by

conservative means. Ross hated hospitals and would do whatever it took to stay out of them. To be trapped in hospital was his worst torture — he had no freedom and was surrounded by prying, disrespectful people, who were totally unreasonable about the amount of time he should remain admitted. Hence, he was very keen that if he needed surgery, it should be done in a small non-threatening place like my surgery. Some of his lesions were very large and under normal circumstances would require a general anaesthetic. So, Ross, rather than face his worst enemy (the hospital system) preferred to get his lesions removed with only partial anaesthesia (there is a limit to the amount of local anaesthetic that can be administered at one time) and some areas of his body weren't numb when the excision was performed. He twitched a little, but never complained. He was tough as nails.

The only thing that caused him enough pain to take Panadeine Forte was a huge BCC (basal cell carcinoma), which surrounded his ankle and which became infected on a regular basis. He generally managed his own leg problems with intermittent help from Silver Chain. They did a tremendous job in the treatment of a very difficult condition.

Ross was always dressed for work. He wore his blue shorts, blue tee-shirt and paint covered, oversized, shoes (which covered his bandages and dressings).



Photograph by Brendan Hutchens (2020)

time for his walk, focus on making art, pottering in the garden and in one or more of the numerous workstations he established around the property, preparing his meagre rations and then consuming them. Nothing was allowed to interrupt this pattern of life. The dole and then the pension provided the financial wherewithal to sustain him and fund his shopping trips to the local IGA supermarket. Bunnings in Claremont was the supplier for those art materials he couldn't find or scavenge.

When his mother died Ross and his father shared the house, though sharing does suggest a certain reciprocity and from his brother's account Ross did not interact with his father to any degree. When he finally moved to a nursing home in Applecross in 2012, Ross did make several visits, walking from Bulimba Road, along Stirling Highway to the Narrows Bridge and then on to sit by his father's bed without exchanging more than a greeting. When he departed it was another arduous walk back to Nedlands.

On his father's death Ross finally had the entire house to himself and gradually began to fill the rooms with those ubiquitous green plastic bags, until many rooms were unusable and basic facilities were compromised. He continued to walk, to paint and draw and maintain his strenuous regime of walking and working. However, his health deteriorated and it became increasingly difficult, and painful, to continue and his long walks were replaced with shorter excursions for essential shopping. The scale and ambition of his creative practice only increased however, and from 2014 he began to paint on a massive scale (up to six metres long and three metres wide) on plastic sheeting. Completed outside in the front yard of Bulimba Road, Ross made layer upon layer of these extraordinary paintings, building them up on top of each other until an edit became necessary and some were rolled up and stored in the back sheds to make room for more.

Along with the large paintings, Ross also began to paint the discarded house bricks that littered the front and back of his property. Based on a simple boab tree design, these remarkable objects had a function, to secure down the plastic sheeting, but they also formed another avenue for his creative transformation of his immediate environment. (fig.31-32)

As the front yard began to fill with paintings, objects and stacks of cardboard, the local authorities sent in inspectors to request, and then order, clean up and removal of materials, particularly when they spread out onto the footpath. This was a frustration to Ross, and to Kevin, who had to keep them at bay and ensure a more strident response in the face of continuing 'bad practice', from their point of view. At was during this time that Marilyn Rivkin (Seaton) returned to Perth on a visit in April 2018, and suggested to her sister Isobel that they drive past 50 Bulimba Road, where she had spent the first night of her married life.

I turned into Bulimba Road and realized as soon as I got to #50 that Ross was living there – the empty cans of paint and the paintings on bits of wood and sheets of plastic made that obvious. A neighbour walked by and I asked him if he knew the people who lived there. He said it was just one person now, an older, very ill man and went on to tell me of the neighbours' horror at the state of the house and yard, and their attempts to have him ousted. He spoke disparagingly of his 'art'. Although he had told me the man was mentally and physically ill, and could often be seen wheeling a pram around the streets, I was horribly shocked when Ross came out. I couldn't see his face as he was bent over, but I knew it was him. He didn't see me.¹⁸

Eventually, Ross's health impacted on his ability to maintain the lifestyle he had established over the past four decades. Despite visits from Silver Chain nurses he required hospitalisation and in March 2020

Part of his dress was his cart, which he wheeled along and which contained various items of scrap paper, various art items, plastic bags and bandages.

Over the 20 years that I knew him, he became progressively more stooped with a kyphosis relating to the arthritis of his spine. Eventually, he was unable to straighten his neck and his main view was of his feet. His inability to straighten his spine made surgery almost impossible in a supine position and most operations I had to do with him sitting up. Originally, he had a wheelbarrow for his belongings, but as his kyphosis progressed he needed a four wheeled walker and modified a pram to help his ambulation.

He survived on a vegetarian diet and the combination of this and his daily walking meant he had no subcutaneous fat.

He was a quiet personality until he got to know you. When that happened, he was outgoing and presented his views and opinions on things. Some of his ideas I would regard as outlandish but achievable. He had his numerical formula, which was supposed to be the answer – to what I am not sure.¹⁷

All those years from the 1980s and through the two decades he saw Dr Prendiville, Ross lived at 50 Bulimba Road. His daily regimen did not vary. With a great deal to accomplish he seems to have established a strict timetable of activity that allocated

Image opposite:
Froggie 26/07/19, 2019, paint on brown paper

Following page:
Abstract Painting IV, c.1983-90, oil on wallpaper
on frame, 102 x 76cm

he was taken to Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital for treatment of the ulcers on his legs. It was obvious to his consulting physicians that he was unable to return to Bulimba Road and from hospital he was moved to the Amana Living Transitional Care in Mosman Park on 21 April 2020 to undergo ‘12 weeks undergoing assessments and restorative care prior to permanent placement’. The thought that he would never return to Bulimba Road, never have the freedom he had fought all his life to preserve for himself must have been a crushing realisation every time the words ‘permanent placement’ were uttered or written down.

Although engaged in planning the exhibition at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, his condition quickly deteriorated and Ross died at Amana on 22 May 2020.

4. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Book 3 Theory of Planes and Laminas*.

5. A. Rand *The Fountainhead*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, a division of Macmillan, Inc., New York, 1943, p. 512, ebook accessed September 2020, <<https://ia802908.us.archive.org/28/items/TheFountainhead/The-Fountainhead.pdf>>.

6. Email from Kevin Seaton, 31 October 2020

7. Conversation with Neil Argent, 29 July 2020.

8. Letter to Ted Snell from Marilyn (Seaton) Rivkin, 30 July 2020.

9. Rand, *The Fountainhead*, p. 512.

10. *ibid*.

11. Email to Ted Snell from Marilyn (Seaton) Rivkin, 5 September 2020.

12. Rand, *The Fountainhead*, p. 514.

13. *ibid*, p. 513.

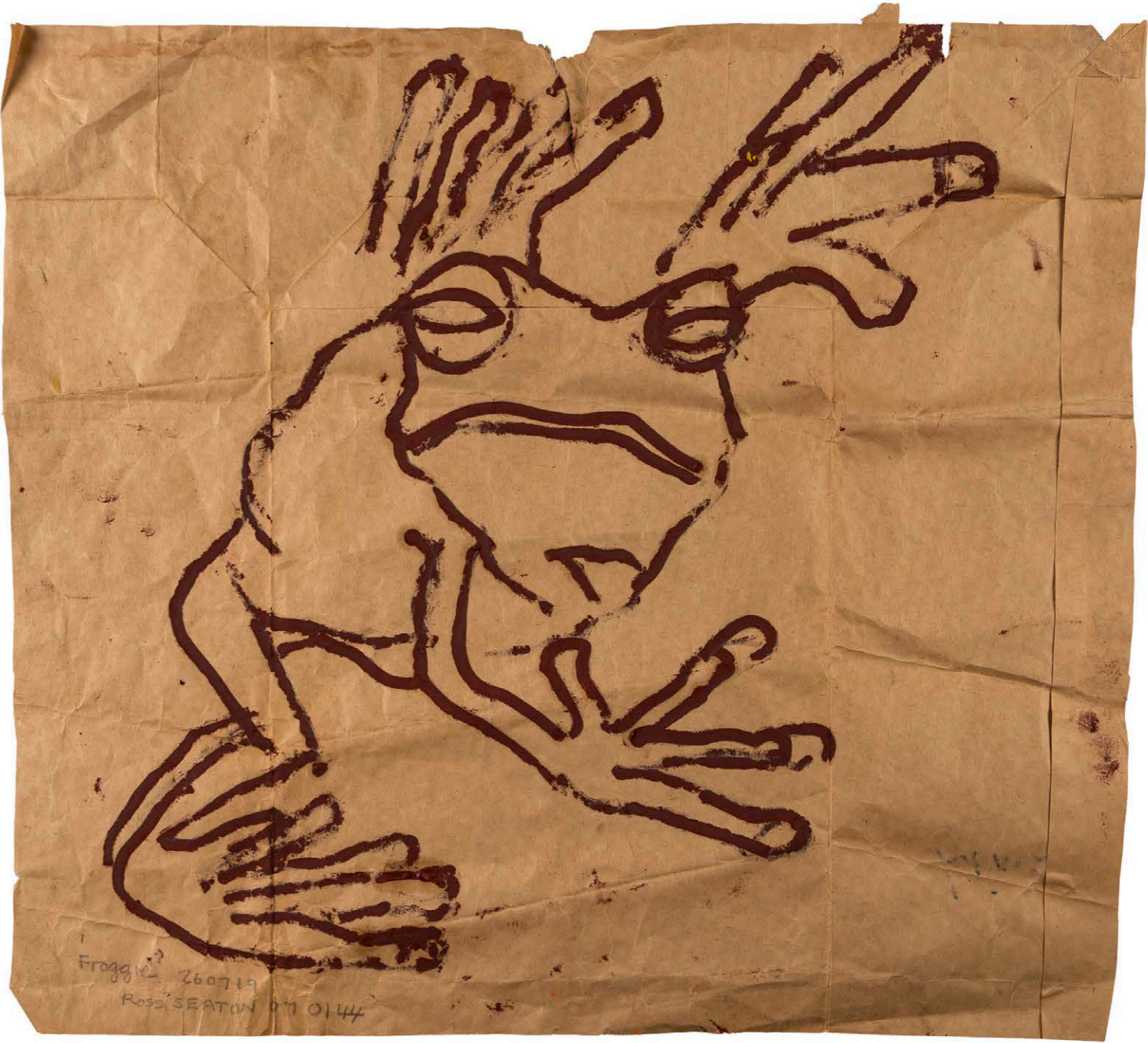
14. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Novel 1*, 1982.

15. Rand, *The Fountainhead*, p. 512.

16. Email from Kevin Seaton, 31 October 2020

17. Notes to Ted Snell from Dr Jamie Prendiville, August 2020.

18. Letter to Ted Snell from Marilyn (Seaton) Rivkin, 30 July 2020.







ARTIST SEEKER

*The purpose of the artist is to find the truth... the artist who is a physicist, architect and generally well-informed and who is able to sense Form in nature has a very much greater opportunity to make a substantial contribution.*¹⁹ – Ross Seaton

*No creator was prompted by a desire to serve his brothers, for his brothers rejected the gift he offered and that gift destroyed the slothful routine of their lives. His truth was his only motive. His own truth, and his own work to achieve it in his own way. A symphony, a book, an engine, a philosophy, an airplane or a building—that was his goal and his life... The creation, not its users. The creation, not the benefits others derived from it. The creation which gave form to his truth. He held his truth above all things and against all men.*²⁰ – Ayn Rand

Ross Seaton was an artist. He made that commitment early in his life and by the age of thirty he had devoted much of his time to giving his ideas a visual form. Whether in notebooks, on computer paper, old Holland blinds, canvas or on cardboard collected from the roadside, he compulsively made paintings and drawings to document his ideas and represent the world he encountered. It was the fulcrum of his life for the next forty-five years.

In that time, he created a vast number of artworks, covering a wide spectrum of media, styles and themes. (figs.33-35) Some drawings are inscribed with dates and in journals he wrote specifically about other artworks or groups of work, but many more are undated. In that sense the chronology of his work is a challenge; however, the trajectory of his practice is evident and while some projects or ideas are recurrent, and so potentially confusing, it is possible to plot an overarching map of his achievement.

One thread that interlaces all his working life is ambition, both of scale and intent. Ross was not a 'Sunday painter' content to make small domestic scale artworks for the home. Indeed, his works were not made for a commercial market, nor for a domestic audience. Ross worked from an inner compulsion, part of a larger project, whose aim was to understand the world he inhabited. As a result, the works he created were the size they needed to be, and if that required a two-metre stretched canvas, then he fabricated one. If the work demanded a six by three-metre surface, he found a roll of black builder's plastic and unfurled it for use. When a project was worked in a series the number of works produced grew into the many hundreds. This was a rigorous process that did not accommodate compromise in any form. It is one of the characteristics of Ross's life and work that identify him as a serious and dedicated professional.

Another key factor in Ross's creative practice was the integration of his life and his work, to the degree that one and the other are intertwined, indeed enmeshed, to such an extent that all his activity is merged into a grander creative preoccupation. Each walk he took was a research trip, every object he encountered a trigger, each new project required an understanding of who had tackled this territory previously and what lessons could be learned. He was an autodidact, highly self-critical, determined to find answers, prepared to tackle any question from any and all perspectives. So, he sought assistance from others, but what was learned was amalgamated into a comprehensive view of the world he had fabricated. While there was much to be learned from others, for Ross the danger was to become seduced by ideology, to drink from the Kool-Aid, to lose his individuality and his unique vision, because this would undermine the prerequisite focus that Ayn Rand describes: 'His truth was his only motive. His own truth, and his own work to achieve it in his own way.'

Abstract Grid, c.2015, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 101.5cm



fig.38. Sculpture in the backyard at Bulimba Road (c.1971)

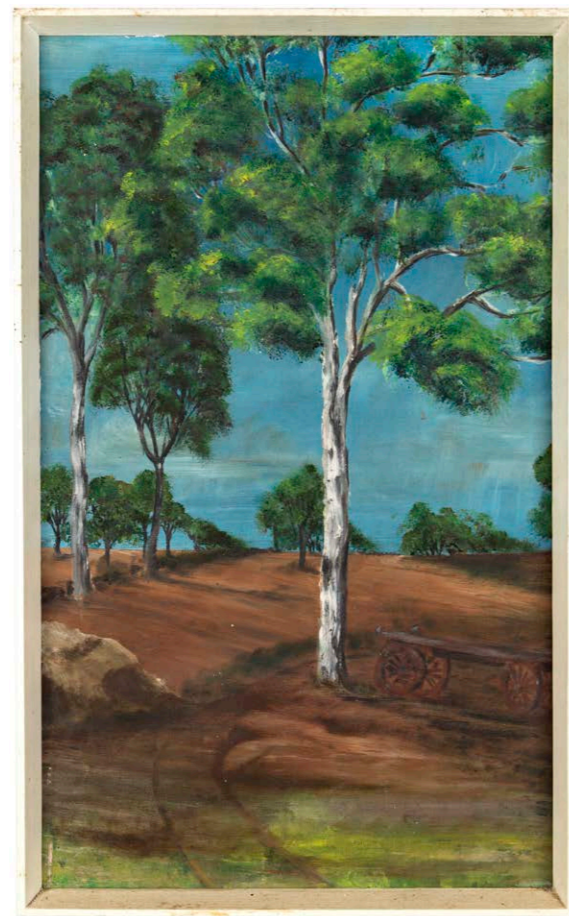
Following page: Photograph by Brendan Hutchens (2020)



Images above:
fig.33 & 34. Sculpture in the backyard at Bulimba Road (c.1971)



Image above:
fig.35. *Untitled landscape*, c.1971, pen on paper
Image below:
fig.36. *Untitled landscape*, c.1968, oil on board
Image right:
fig.37. *Untitled landscape*, c.1968, oil on board



Much of the research and thinking was done while Ross was walking, each day, every day, as he journeyed toward the ocean at Cottesloe or Fremantle. Walking was fundamental to living, it was an activity that took up a great deal of his energy and his time, so it needed to be productive. Each walk was documented in notes and the information was fed back into his paintings and drawings through various filters.

Numerology was one of those filters. Ross's education in Mathematics and Physics fuelled his passion for numbers and this became an obsession that directed a great deal of his activity and his thinking. On each walk he would note down bus numbers, street addresses, receipt numbers and other random numerical discoveries to develop into complex algorithms that he transcribed into his drawings and fed back into his worldview.

The process of making was complex and it demanded intense planning and a meticulous attention to detail. Although in part governed by chance — for example the choice of materials and colours — other aspects of the design and construction were worked out in page after page of small studies with appended notes, recorded in student exercise books, which he kept readily at hand. Ideas were woven together into elaborately complex theories that provided a focus and a way forward. The mechanics of making was a continuing fascination to Ross and the outcomes of his endeavours was often frustrating, sometimes achieved but mostly the result he was hoping for remained alluringly out of reach. His will to 'get it right' is the hallmark of any artist, that singularity of their motivation is a commitment that shapes and defines lives. It was this way for Ross. Over a period of five decades he worked each day on a mission he set for himself, to be an artist '...to find the truth'.

19. R. Seaton, journal entry, 30 January 1983.

20. A. Rand, *The Fountainhead*, p. 512.





Autodidact

*The difference between the university graduate and the autodidact lies not so much in the extent of knowledge as in the extent of vitality and self-confidence.*²¹ – Milan Kundera

*Every great artist creates as though he is not progressing along some line of development and stands beyond institutionalized learning.*²² – Ross Seaton

Ross Seaton was a self-taught artist, but his work was not unsophisticated. Indeed, his dedication and commitment to ‘getting it right’ ensured it was both rigorous and highly accomplished. Grounded in personal experience and initiated by a compulsion to find meaning in every aspect of his life, he responded to the world using the technical resources he had at hand. These were hard won and thought about, analysed and documented in his notebooks. He was not unfamiliar with the art world, in fact he was well informed about those aspects and particular artists who offered guidance in the direction he had taken, and he was not averse to finding solutions to his creative problems in their work.

The appeal of Ross’s work is immediate, because of its urgency, its compulsion to exist. He had a capacity to learn the craft of making images through a process of discovery rather than through any formal training, using whatever materials were at hand and an extremely high level of commitment and focus. Not surprisingly it is these qualities that make his work so immediately accessible. Ross’s paintings are accomplished works, presented with a natural sophistication that shows a deep understanding of the principles of orchestrating the visual elements within a picture and of making meaning through this process. Although often identified as living on the fringe of the community, there is no sense in which Ross Seaton, could even be characterised as ‘marginal’. Ross was a part

of his community, and although his participation was at his own discretion, and highly measured, he was engaged and connected to the degree that he decided was appropriate and necessary.

It was this assumed authority to work in a way that is outside the norms of official cultural practice that enabled him to generate a response to the world that, though not designed for an external audience, has immediate resonance. His spiritual and intellectual search for understanding, combined with a faith in mathematics and physics, generated an enormous number of artworks produced over decades of practice. Ross also wrote a commentary on his beliefs and his search for meaning, which is reflected in the paintings he made concurrently. The stream of consciousness writing in his notes for a book, *The Theory of Lamina and Planes*, was a point of escape and reflection as the world in which he operated became increasingly constrained by his self-imposed interactions and movements. (fig.39-40) Painting and writing fully occupied what other time he had after his daily rituals and walking regime.

A man of deep and abiding faith, the process of painting and writing was also a way to understand the universe and to reconcile his knowledge and understanding of the world as presented through what he believed God had created. As he explained:

... much as modern (20th century scientific, physics) theories are powerful, beautiful inventions, creations or exercises in logic, they are the proverbial grain of sand on the seashore (Newton) compared with God’s Universal Wisdom. Most of the great physicists are Christians — the modern scientific method (physics) was born from Christian faith, opposed or with disregard to Darwinian theories, atheistic theories; the world of those who live in their own conceit are essentially pessimistic and small minded. Malthus, an economist theory of natural selection

Portrait study (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn), c.1980, crayon on paper, 63 x 48cm

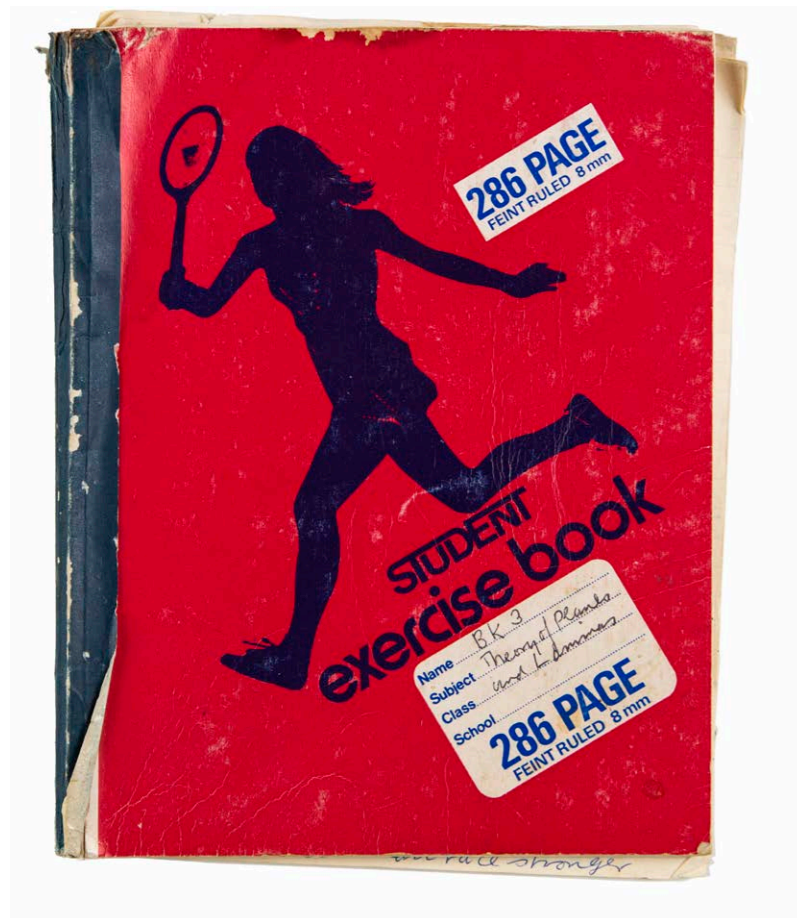
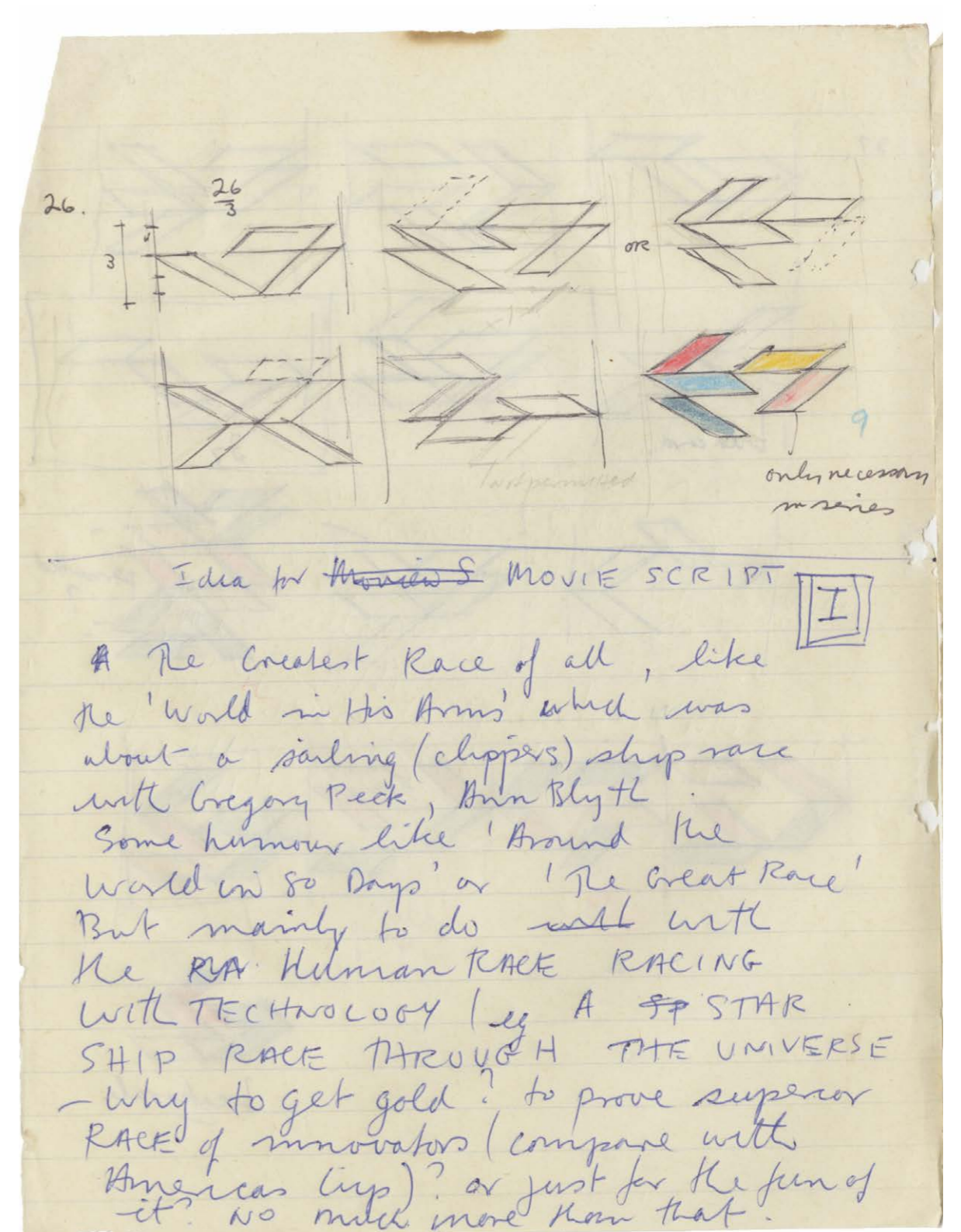


fig.39. Bk3 Theory of Planes and Laminas (1983)

fig.40. page from Bk3 Theory of Planes and Laminas (1983)



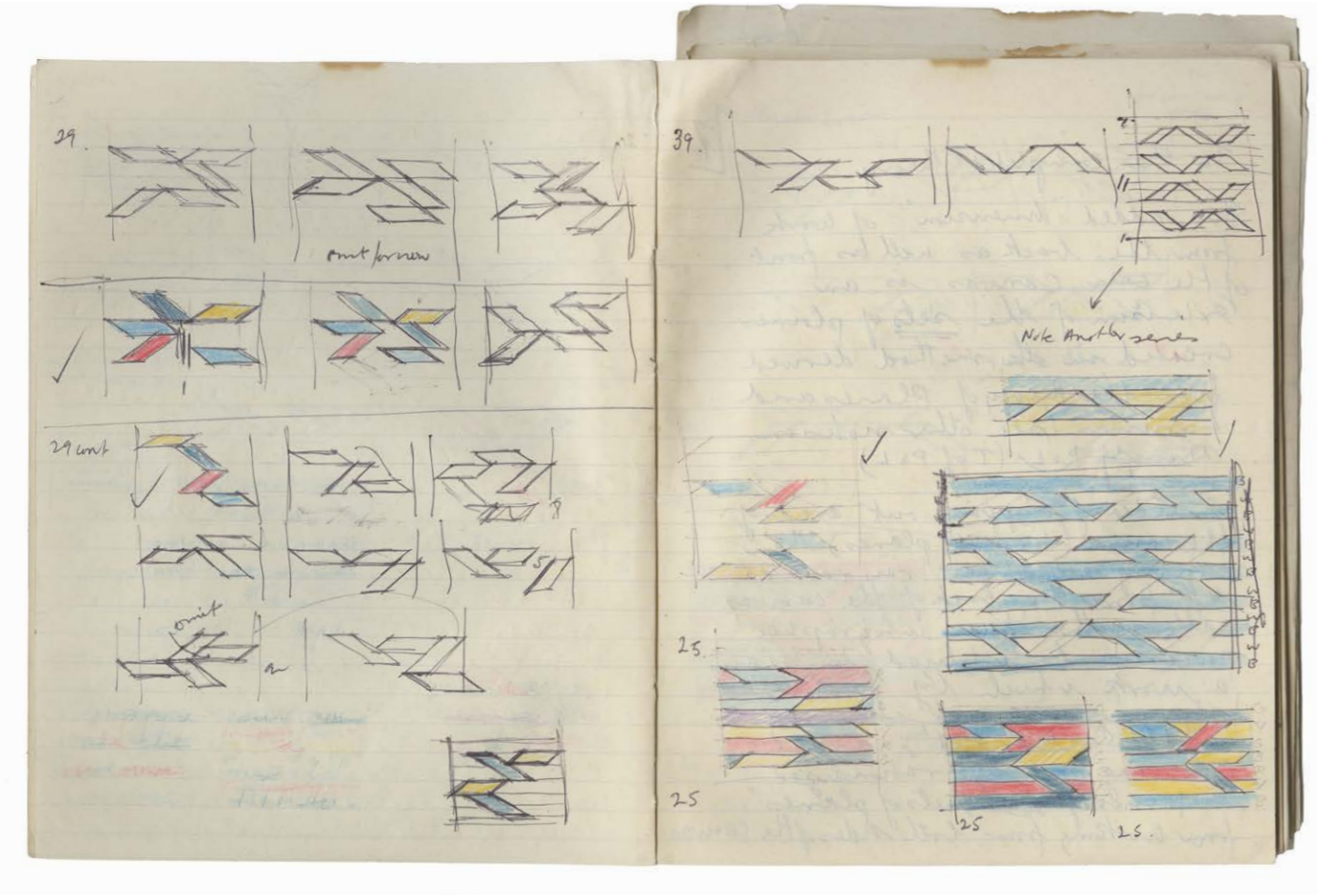
of the fittest is a precursor to Darwinism. All these theories are either isms, tions, ists or some other self-perpetuating narrow-minded dogma pretending to be scientific theory. Therefore 'they' cannot ever come to significant understanding that will lead 'them' to the light. Only the 'faithful' are given insight that is out of sight. God will lead us along the path of 'truth', understanding, wisdom, hope and peace if we (scientists, physicists) simply are prepared to ask Him in sincere humility.²³

To picture these ideas and to pose answers for the big questions in his life Ross was forced to invent a pictorial space that would facilitate his theological interrogations, his musings on the meaning of life and his belief in God. His fascination with pattern, with geometry and numbers was an outpouring of the need to reflect upon his situation and to ask the questions that were integral to his being. In this pursuit, he assigned significance and generated

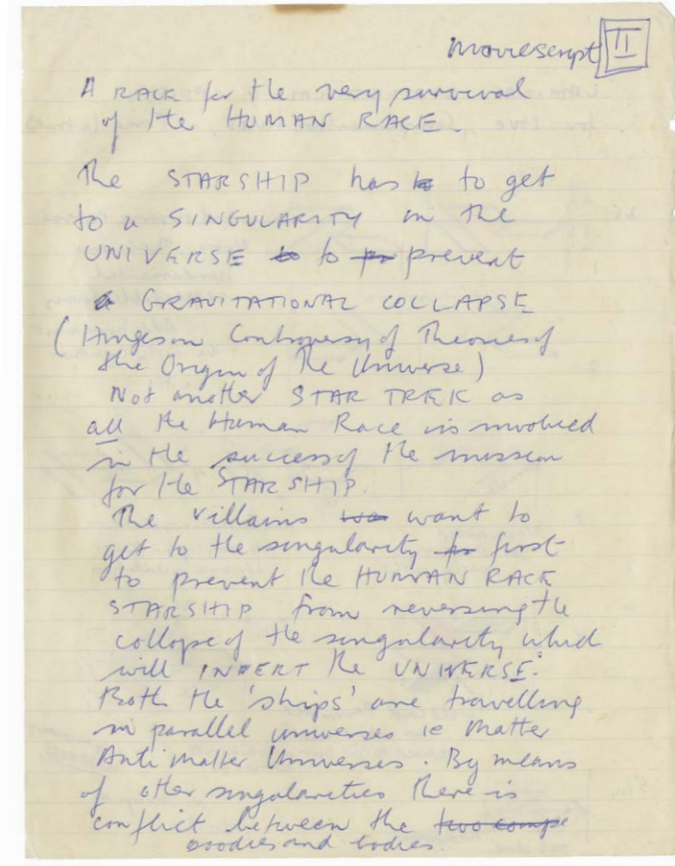
meaning from the data he collected on his walks and the materials he sourced along the way. All these devices and processes are a manifestation of a creative urge that once sparked in the early seventies, drove him on with increasing focus until he was finally removed from his studio/home and taken to Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital and later Amana Living nursing home.

According to the French artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) untrained / self-taught artists who worked outside the traditional art worlds, committed 'artistic heresies within the boundaries of our immediate culture'.²⁴

Those works created from solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses – where the worries of competition, acclaim and social promotion do not interfere – are, because of these very facts, more precious than the productions of professionals.²⁵



Page from *Bk3 Theory of Planes and Laminas* (1983)
Image left: Pages from *Bk3 Theory of Planes and Laminas* (1983)



Dubuffet saw in the work of self-taught artists a directness that was exciting, energised and uncooked (*l'Art Brut*) by cultural and artistic influences. Many of the artists he encountered were incarcerated in institutions, however, realising that there were a large number of original creators whose work was comparable in visual power and inventiveness to the artists within this category, yet were not living and working ‘outside’ their communities, he expanded his criteria to allow for a subset he named *Neuve Invention* (*Liminal Art*).²⁶ His classification of *Neuve Invention* is often based on the artist’s biography rather than of any particularly characteristic of their work. A good example is the American Henry Darger (1892-1973) who, although brought up in the Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Chicago, lived most of his long and uneventful life as a regularly employed citizen who attended church and occupied the same one-and-a-half room apartment for forty-two years. What makes him remarkable is the extraordinary collages and drawings and the massive tome he produced in that room, which he titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the*

Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinean War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion. This 15,145-page epic of a war on an imaginary planet was illustrated by massive panoramic collaged drawings with imagery borrowed from popular magazines, comics and children’s books. The paradoxical shifting boundaries between inside and outside, between being shaped and constrained by social expectations and having the courage and strength to resist and respond without compromise, also fits Ross Seaton’s *modus operandi*. Like Darger, his creative focus constrained his social engagements and provided the space in which to generate his work.

Yet while knowledge of *l'Art Brut* and *Neuve Invention* are helpful in providing a wider context for understanding the work of an artist such as Ross Seaton, the stringent criteria established by Dubuffet and the *Compagnie de l'Art Brut* are too restricting. Ross was well informed about *art culturelle*, as Dubuffet called it, and was painting and drawing for an audience, though not an immediate one. He did not live on the margins of society, but chose how and

when he would engage with his community and the depth of that engagement.

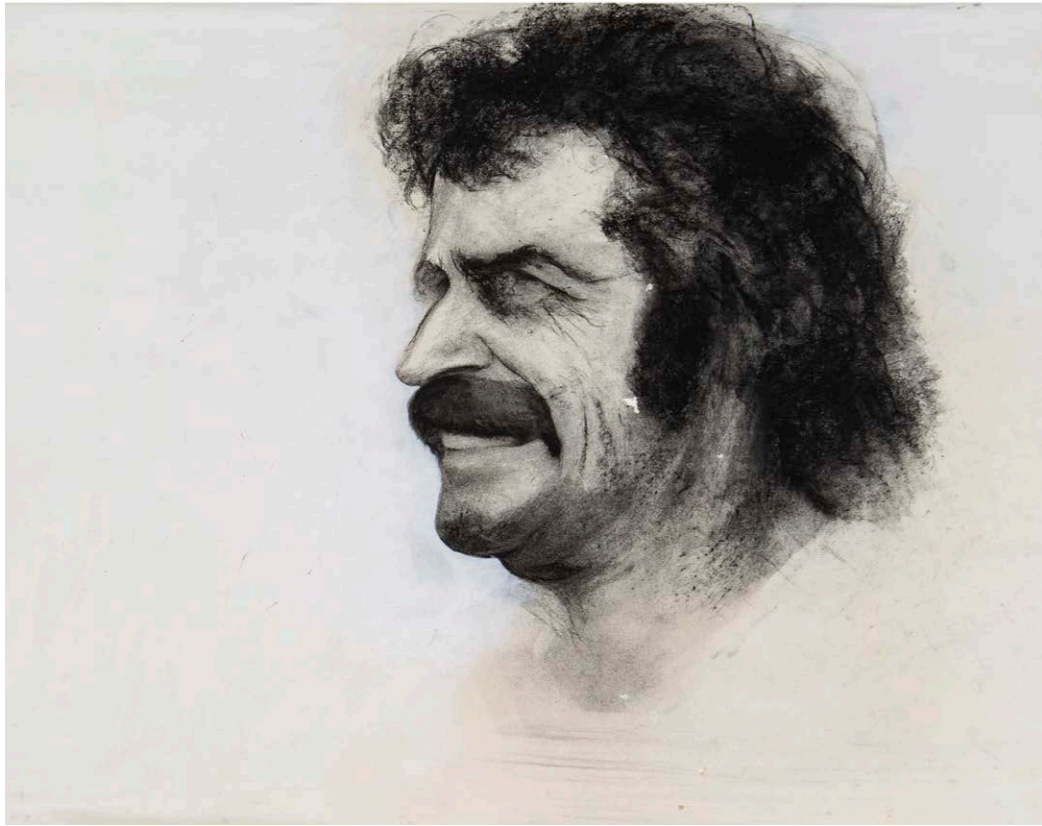
As a result, categorisation of Ross’s work is elusive. Nevertheless, there is a group of artists identified as ‘nontraditional, untrained’, who epitomise the notion of the ‘common man’, a person rooted in the values of their community but with a missionary zeal and a visionary aspiration, that is a useful guide when trying to understand Ross’ artistic practice. As Charles Russell explains:

In the United States a different type of nontraditional, untrained artist emerged, one who was also held to exemplify the sources of the creative impulse and to work independently of artistic conventions, but whose reception was shaped by significantly different aesthetic issues than those in Europe. The American self-taught artist was discussed neither in terms of psychopathology or untrammelled instinctual expression. The nontraditional, untrained artist may have emerged independently of the mainstream art world and what was seen as ‘high’ culture in the new

world, but this ‘outsider’ did not represent a challenge to American cultural values; rather he – occasionally she – was perceived as an authentic expression of the culture.²⁷

Artists like Howard Finster,²⁸ Leonard Knight²⁹ who created Salvation Mountain, even local Western Australian artist Stan Hopewell³⁰ seem to be better understood as nontraditional and self-taught artists when assessing their practice, their biography and their working methodologies.

However, all these writers posit the notion of the artist as an ‘outsider’ and hence potentially at risk of exclusion and always of marginalisation. According to Edward Collis, the epithet ‘outsider’ is an ‘... offensive, derogatory, repressive or exclusionist anthropological and normative psychiatric indictment’.³¹ When Roger Cardinal first coined the name in his book *Outsider Art*, in 1972, it was an act of revisionism to counter terms like ‘primitive’ and ‘naïve’; but as Collis in an act of revisionism states:



Portrait Study (Dennis Lillee), c.1980, charcoal on paper, 45 x 76cm

Following page: Geometric Abstraction, c.2010, gouache on paper, 52 x 102cm

The outsider had a romantic sovereignty in the last century as a rebellious alternative to traditional art and even as an anti-institutional foil to the modernist artist. The outsider artist was sometimes trained, sometimes mad or criminal or savage, sometimes naïve, usually eccentric and idiosyncratic or non-conformist, often demonic or visionary. Over the past couple of decades, however, the characterisation of the outsider artist as an alien, abnormal and disenfranchised has increasingly been cast as a neo-colonial phantasm of otherness. Adding to this disrepute, outsiders since the turn of the millennium have also been identified with the fringe-dwellers and extremists of political culture — social media trolls, conspiracy theorists, survivalists, nativists, social justice warriors, populists (many of whom traffic comfortably with media moguls, pop celebrities, influences and political autocrat). For all these taints, there's no doubt that the outsider lures us with the prospect of a view beyond our parochial horizon, beyond our humanness and our planetary heritage. Is the outside a realm of cultural exclusion, of hermitage and retreat, or of transit and alteration? The plea now

frequently heard is for so-called outsider art to be freed from its label and welcomed into, incorporated within, the diversity of contemporary art. Can we still use the tempting vista of the outside as an escape route, even — especially — from the globalised economy and inclusive habitat of contemporary art? Can we invoke the outside as more than a managed option of artistic market diversity and envisage it feral, unbound, even as an abyss?³²

Collis asks us, indeed implores us, to look at the work of artists like Ross Seaton and respond to it without falling back on the crutches of art history or its convenient categorisations. This is salutary and appropriate, yet Ross chose both to live at one remove from his community and to attempt to distil the important and necessary truths about our life on this planet. For example, his work was firmly within the canon of Christian art while rooted in a deep knowledge of and passion for science.

A philosophy of life based on current science or cultural climates is unsatisfactory since science might

at some future date lead to another conclusion. This is not negative but the nature of the scientific method. God has provided man with an exciting road of discovery and creation not for with an exciting road of discovery and creation, not for self-indulgence or the evolution of pseudo-perfection, instead for greater understanding and wisdom. Only this faith in God and his influence remains unchallenged throughout all time, all else is misplacement and deceit.³³

While there are resonances with these categorisations of artists working at the margins of the art world and at the margins of their communities, Ross's practice is more complex and his motivations, though no more sincere than theirs, they are uniquely his own. There is an urgency that drove him to create his paintings and

drawings and that engagement with making art was a vital and intrinsic part of his life. It required knowledge and the ability to critique existing orthodoxies, it demanded an intellectual rigour and meticulous research, and it required dedication to expanding his knowledge base from whatever sources were available. He was the quintessential autodidact, gathering all the information he needed with vitality and self-confidence, then filtering, distilling and reconfiguring all he had learned to reveal the truth he sought.

21. M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, quote accessed September 2020, <<https://www.parkerklein.com/notes/the-unbearable-lightness-of-being>>.

22. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Novel 1*, 1982.

23. R. Seaton, journal entry, 20 December 1982.

24. R. Cardinal, *Outsider Art*, Praeger, New York, 1972, p. 39.

25. J. Dubuffet, 'Place à l'incivisme (Make way for Incivism)', *Art and Text* no.27 (December 1987 - February 1988), p. 36, accessed September 2020, <<https://sites.google.com/site/artbrutmatscalcoen/jean-dubuffet>>.

26. Into this annex collection of the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, Dubuffet included artists such as Gaston Chaissac, Mario Chichorro, Rosemarie Koczy, Gerard Lattier, Albert Loudon, Frederick Schroder-Sonnenstern, Emery Blagdon, James Castle, Felipe Jesus Consalvos, Henry Darger, Charles Dellschau, Achilles G. Rizzoli, Martin Thompson, Willem van Genk, Jerry Wagner and George Widener. He also included entranced process artists like Hiroyuki Doi, Minnie Evans, William Fields and Melissa Polhamus.

27. C. Russell, *Groundwaters: A Century of Art by Self-Taught and Outsider Artists*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, London, New York, 2011, p. 14.

28. Howard Finster was an American artist and Baptist minister who claimed to be inspired by God to spread the gospel through the re-design of his home into Paradise Garden, a folk art sculpture garden.

29. Leonard Knight created *Salvation Mountain* in the lower desert of Southern California about a hour and a half from Palm Springs. It was Leonard's tribute to God and his gift to the world with its simple yet powerful message: 'God Is Love.'

30. Stan Hopewell was a Western Australian artist who created an extraordinary body of work created in partnership with his God, on the promise that his wife Joyce would remain alive as long as Hopewell continued to paint.

31. E. Collis, 'Outer Limits', *Art + Australia*, Issue Six: Outside, December 2019, pp. 9-15.

32. E. Collis, *Art + Australia*, Issue Six: Outside, December 2019, cover notes.

33. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Book 2*, 20 December 1982.





On Walking

*There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting.*³⁴ – Milan Kundera

*The foot is an excellent witness, perhaps the most reliable.*³⁵ – Frédéric Gros

*The basic need of the creator is independence.*³⁶ – Ayn Rand

Ross walked. He walked a lot. Sometimes pushing his wheelbarrow or pram, sometimes making it to the ocean, always gathering discarded treasures. Whether cardboard to paint on or numerological indicators of connectedness — a bus route, number plate or receipt — his walking was research. There was a purpose, an imperative in these excursions, it was all part of his life plan, that he outlined in a book of his handwritten private notes.³⁷

I must adopt another pragmatic approach to ‘work’, ‘exercise’, ‘diet’, and ‘relaxation’. It will require a different kind of discipline that I have not achieved yet and will need a stronger commitment to prayer and scripture. Only Jesus Christ can provide me with the strength for the much-needed human effort. Relaxation — cigarettes and C2H5OH (Alcohol) — will need to be substituted with other forms of recreation; more exercise and further reading, meditation. Also, I must double the effort to maintain diet. During an expedition a researcher/explorer tends to neglect his health for the sake of the search. It is necessary to push the spirit, mind and body in a special way if the search is to be worthwhile. In other words, risks must be taken. However, once the ‘treasures’ have been found there is no longer the need of risks and the searcher would be a fool to continue to take risks while reaping the harvest of his labours. Also, he would be foolish to not compete and consolidate his discoveries — a thesis must be clearly presented (in this case both in the visual and verbal form. The researcher must not be like Hamlet, who made the right decision all too late.

At this stage the researcher can neither continue to explore of rest on explorations so far made pragmatically, then this stage of the research requires a lateral approach if the expedition is to be worthwhile. There was a time for risks. It was necessary to live roughly, it is now necessary to live differently but not to take extended leave. There was a time when alcohol, cigarettes, lack of recreation and relaxation were necessary, whether I needed that or not so that the research was done. It is as important now to deliberately attend to the negation of all these risks as it was then, not to. There are those who take these ‘life’ risks for apparently no purpose except self-indulgence and those who pride themselves on not taking any risks, which is also self-indulgence of a different kind. What is important is to realize that man must not do what he ‘feels’ like. He should do what he knows is necessary. There was a time for example where I had to smoke, whether I wanted to or not for the sake of the search. There is a time now where I must not smoke as it no longer serves any purpose in the course of the expedition. To put it more simply, there is no longer the excuse to smoke, in fact the time demands that I do not smoke. This is not for health but more importantly a realization



fig.41. Ross Seaton on Stirling Highway. Photograph by Gareth Lindegger (c.2000)

Image opposite:
Ross drawing at Cottesloe Beach. Photograph by Alex Nikulinsky

of ‘I cannot afford to smoke’. These are reasons of efficiency. At this particular time greater wisdom is vital. I do not have the time for the luxury of discovery. Right now, every aspect of my life needs lifting. This seems difficult, as anyone who has spent five years on research has the natural inclination to take an extended holiday. A holiday is not possible but proper times of relaxation are essential to increase in the speed of intuitive creativity, structured on a solid logical thesis.³⁸

Ross’s daily walks were clearly both ‘exercise’ and research. Each morning Ross embarked on an ‘expedition’ as a ‘researcher/explorer’, gathering information that would be used in developing his ‘visual and verbal’ thesis. There was no time for relaxation, the task was so urgent, the outcomes so important, that no concession could be made. No more smoking or alcohol, it was time to focus, to bring all this information together into a coherent whole.

Clearly, the walking had health benefits. It was a widely held belief among the community that the ‘Walking Man’ had to continue walking or he would seize-up. While this was not confirmed by his doctor, he did agree that Ross’s physical condition was aided by his exercise regime. Walking was a necessary condition of Ross’s life, but whatever physical benefits that accrued from his daily exertions, the mental, spiritual and creative benefits were also significant. Walking is time captured, isolated and internalised. As Jean Jacques Rousseau explains in his *Confessions*:

I can find no manner so simple and effectual, to execute this purpose, as to keep a faithful register of my solitary walks, and the reveries which accompany them; when I find my mind entirely free, and suffer my ideas to follow their bent, without resistance or control These hours of solitude and meditation are the only ones in the day when I am entirely myself, and for myself, without diversion, or obstacle; and when I can truly say, I am what nature designed me.³⁹

These ‘reveries’, these moments of being ‘entirely himself’, were recorded in Ross’s ‘Wheelbarrow Walks’. (fig.42-45) Written on A4 sheets folded into eight to fit in the palm of his hand, they are chronicles that provide details of the dates and times directions and discoveries of each journey. There are thousands of them, all similar, yet each specific and focused. The journey was not different, each day he retraced the same or a similar path to the ocean, but each was unique and provided new data to be stored, analysed and re-calibrated. ‘The foot is an excellent witness’, says Frédéric Gros, ‘perhaps the most reliable.’ And for Ross Seaton his feet, moving inexorably up Stirling Highway, were engaged in that process of discovery every day. He walked streets he thought he knew and they constantly offered new treasures, either in the form of discarded cardboard, refuse or data. It was all grist to the mill of his ongoing project to interpret the reason for our existence on this planet and to communicate his thesis to the world.

Walking has been identified as a key component in the creative lives of many significant thinkers. Aristotle, Rousseau (of course), Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry David Thoreau, and more recently artists like Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Sophie Calle, who all employ the structured space of walking to concentrate their thoughts and bring a formal order to encounters in the landscape. The connection between the act of walking and consciousness is a theme taken up by Frederic Gros in his book *A Philosophy of Walking*.⁴⁰ For Gros, walking is a method for contemplation and he details the different types of walking (marching, rambling, strolling etc.), each of which impacts on the nature of the participants thought process. Ross’s walking was measured and determined, neither strolling or marching, and more accurately categorised as structured engagement. (fig.41)

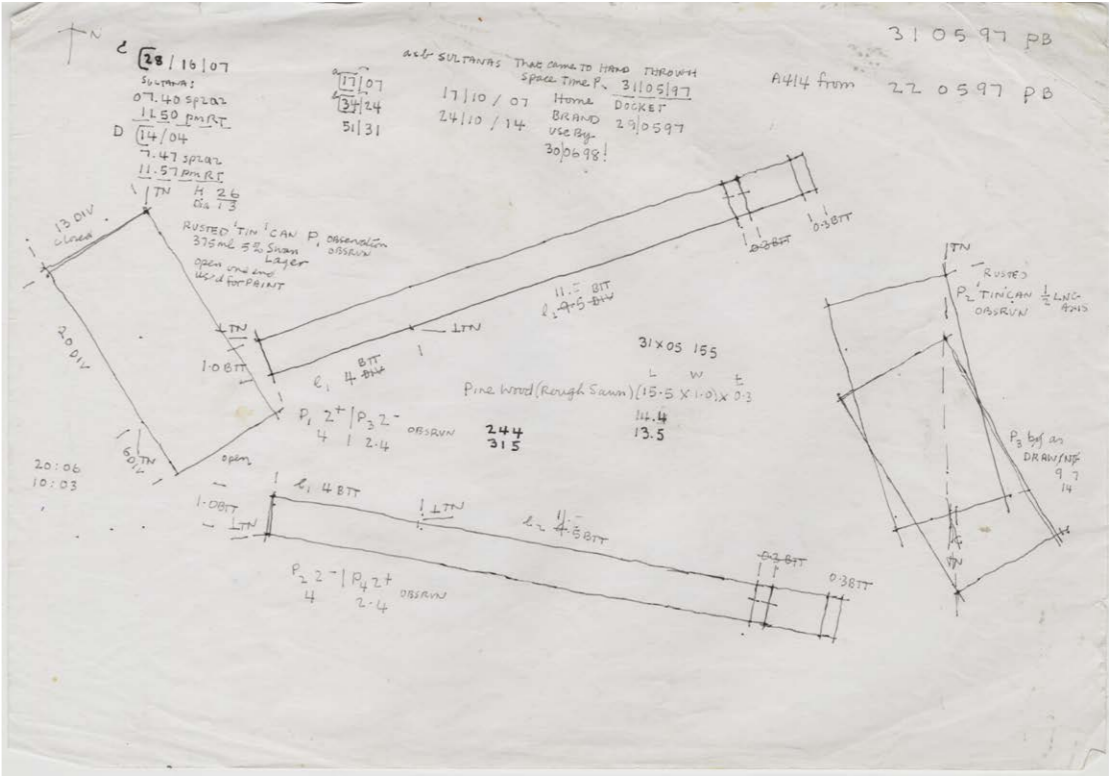


fig.42. Walking diaries (1997)

In the twentieth century walking is a decision to slow down, to absorb and to ‘take time’. What Milan Kundera describes as the ‘secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting’. Walking internalises, offering the opportunity for contemplation in a way that a car journey does not. Ross would only accept lifts from his brother in extreme situations and only very occasionally took buses. He chose to walk, to be at a human pace, self-determined and independent.

As Gros reminds us, the foot is an excellent witness to our deep and sustained engagement with the world. When we move through places and to head in new destinations with conscious and determined

purpose, we are sheltered from demanding deadlines and imperatives. Consciousness and awareness are the motivating factors that elevate everyday walking experiences, from necessary travail to a heightened engagement through sensory acuity. For Ross, walking was a way of being in the world that had physical and intellectual consequences because of its capacity to prompt memory, to seek information and to ruminate. Though our sensual acuity we are more in touch with our environment, more attuned to what we encounter and more able to see connections and draw conclusions. It was certainly that way for Ross and the data he acquired through walking acquired significance through this daily ritual.

34. M. Kundera, *Slowness: A Novel*, Harper Perennial, 1995, accessed September 2020, <<https://memorylandscape.tumblr.com/post/179127498413/there-is-a-secret-bond-between-slowness-and>>.

35. F. Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, Verso, London, 2014.

36. Rand, *The Fountainhead*, p. 513.

37. R. Seaton, private notes, 1 January 1983.

38. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Book 2 Theory of Planes and Laminas*.

39. J. J. Rousseau, *The Confessions of J. J. Rousseau, Vol II*, 1796, ebook accessed September 2020, <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks19/1900981h.html>>.

40. F.Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, Verso, London, 2014.

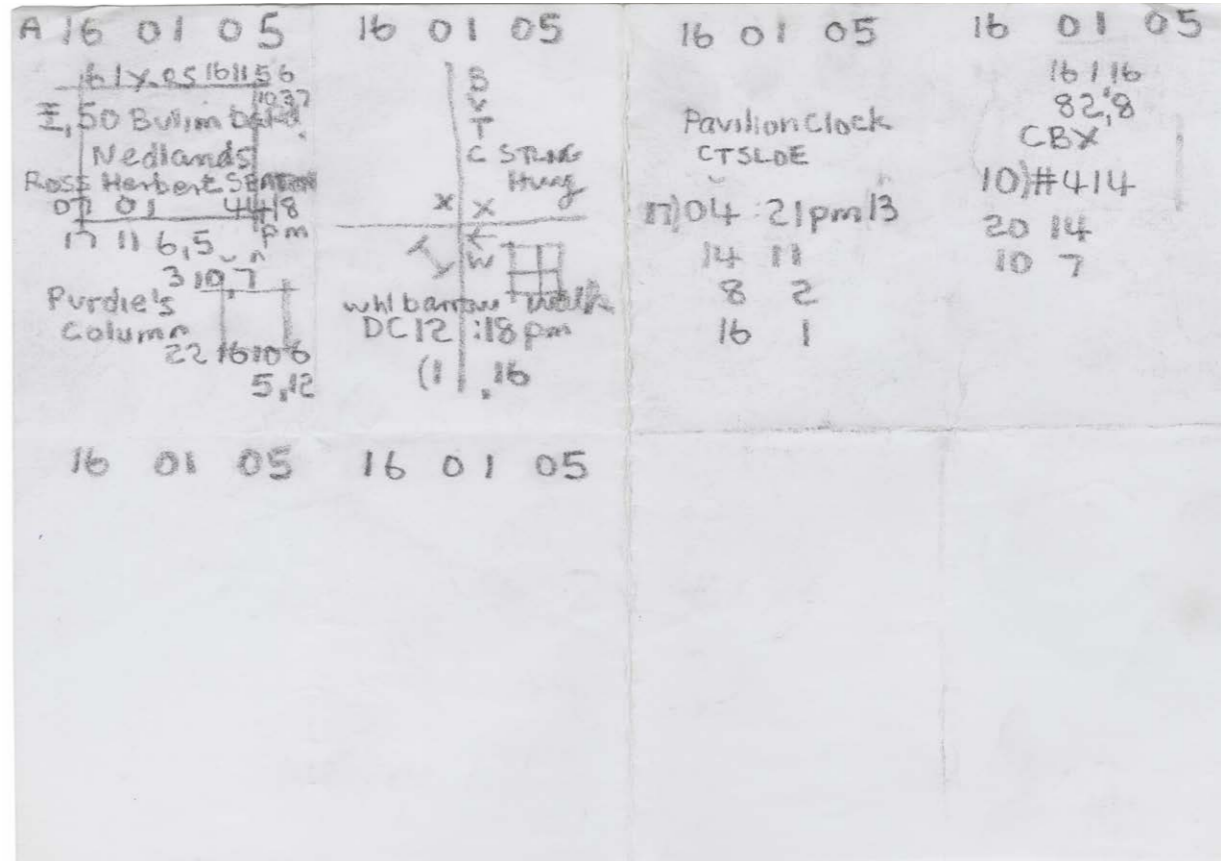
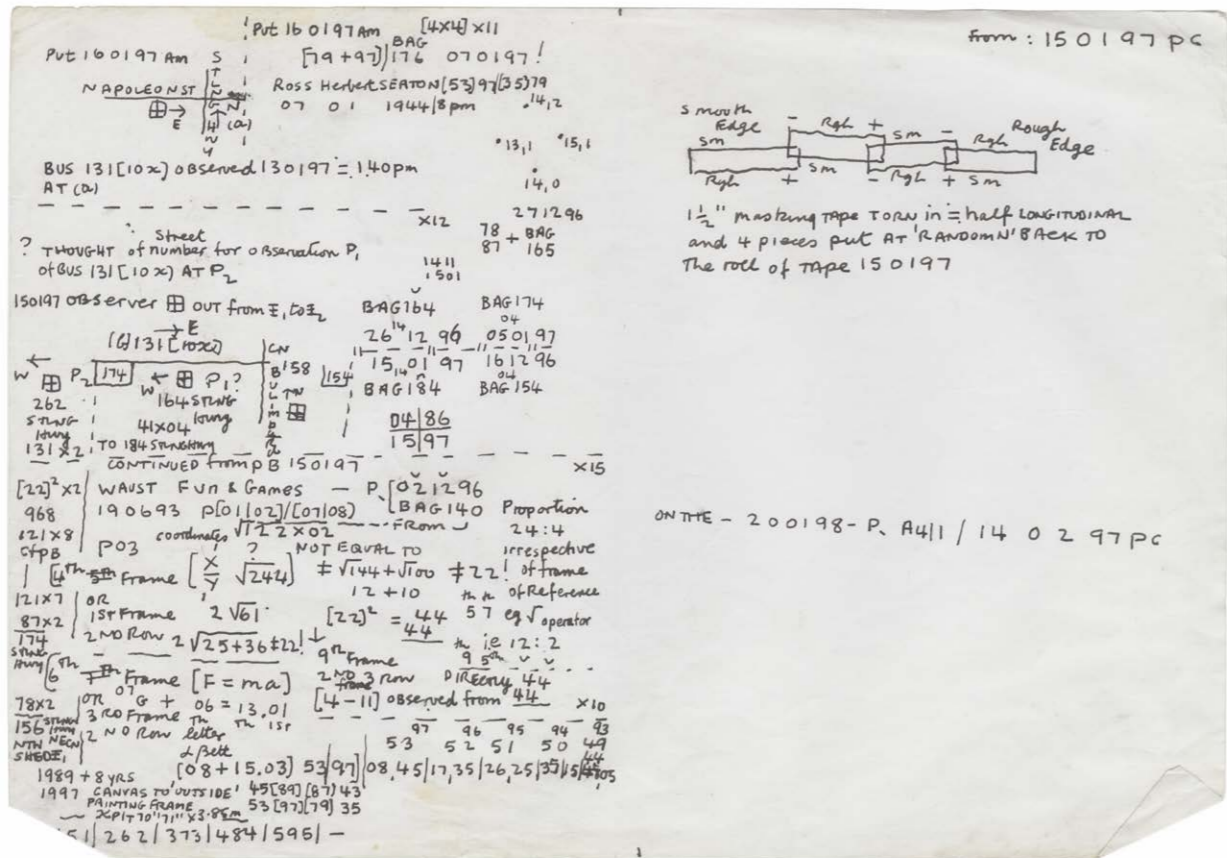
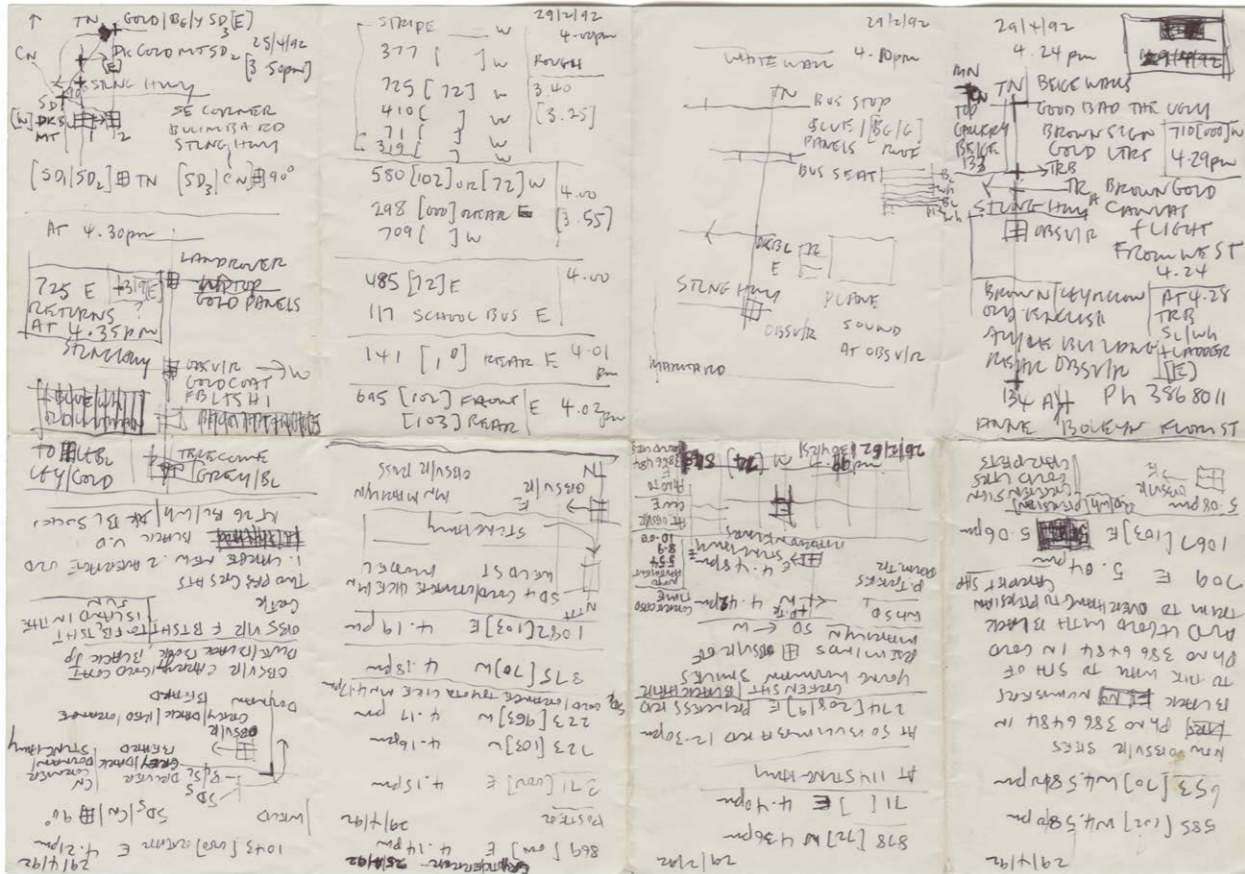


fig.43, 44 & 45. Walking diaries (1992, 1997, 2005)

Following page:
fig.46. Dunnet, 2017-19, acrylic on plastic sheeting. Drone photograph by Brendan Hutchens (2020)



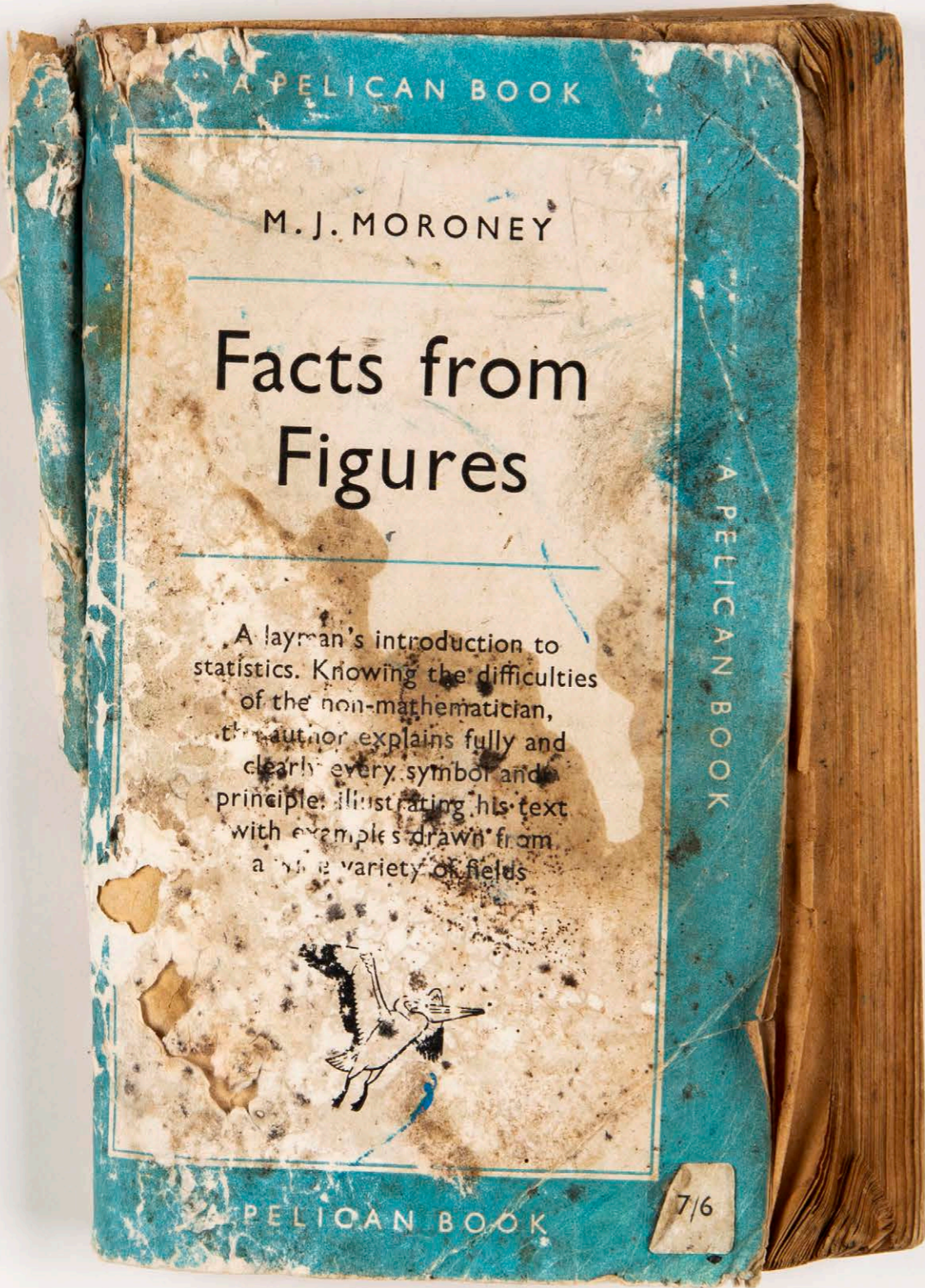


fig.47. *Facts from Figures*, M.J.Moroney, Penguin Books, Great Britain, reprinted 1958

Facts from Figures

*There is a pattern to be found if one looks long enough... There is some localized pattern in any random arrangement. Therefore, this is enough to create a work of art.*⁴¹ – Ross Seaton

Ross Seaton was always good with numbers. Mathematics fascinated him and from his early schooling through teacher training and then onto university, numbers provided a safe anchor in a sea of uncertainty. That steady, sure bedrock was increasingly important in his life as other components became less secure and trustworthy. ‘It’s the Force!’ he would explain when asked about the numbers meticulously embedded in his drawings, ‘the Force!’ but when asked to elaborate he simply reasserted their importance and delayed a response: ‘Important, very important, later, later.’ His brother Kevin tried to dig deeper, but he too was kept in the dark. (fig. 47)

The frequency of numerical annotations in his drawings and notebooks suggests an increasing importance as years passed and his walking diaries are full of numbers gleaned from many sources: from bus routes, cash receipts and house numbers, which he collected and recorded in those ‘Wheelbarrow Walks’. These random encounters with numbers clearly had significance, however, there is only that tantalising promise of an algorithm to provide answers, but nothing documented or fully enunciated. (figs.48-54)

Cheryl Praeger, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at the University of Western Australia, was intrigued by Ross’s drawings but couldn’t:

... find an understanding of the code which might be embedded in his work. I find the drawings interesting and peaceful. The numbers seem to be added very purposefully – but their meaning, I don’t know. These days in some online journals, papers are recorded P.06 for the sixth paper in a volume since pages numbers are meaningful only within a paper, but I cannot see why that might be what he may have

meant by his repeated use in the files 4,5,6. Maybe they just mean page numbers somewhere?

Professor Robyn Owens, former Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) at UWA, concurred: ‘... unfortunately I am unable to make any sense from these. I don’t recognise anything that I could lock onto that might be able to help you decode what he was trying to express in these works.’⁴²

However, Ross’s brother Kevin was able to identify a pattern to his figuring in one series of numbers, inscribed in one of the drawings Professor Praeger inspected. According to Kevin, Ross was seeking to find a process that would return to the original number after undertaking numerous computations.

1. 1413
2. 0726 Half the first number (14), double the second (13)
3. 1412 Double the (7), take the doubled number (14) from the second number (26)
4. 84 Add the numbers together 1, 4, 1, 2 (8) then halve (4)
5. 162 Double that number (162)
6. 126 Rearrange the number (126)
7. 63 Halve that number (63)
8. 1613 Add one in front of each number (16) (13)
9. 2603 Double the first one and subtract second one (26) (03)
10. 136 Halve the first number (13) double the second (06)
11. 163 Rearrange the number (163)
12. 86 Half the first number (8) double the second (6)
13. 1413 Add both numbers (14), subtract one (13)

Professor Praeger’s response was:

It’s quite bizarre. There are several ‘rules’ invoked, for example

- divide/halve – the whole number or parts of it
- rearrange digits

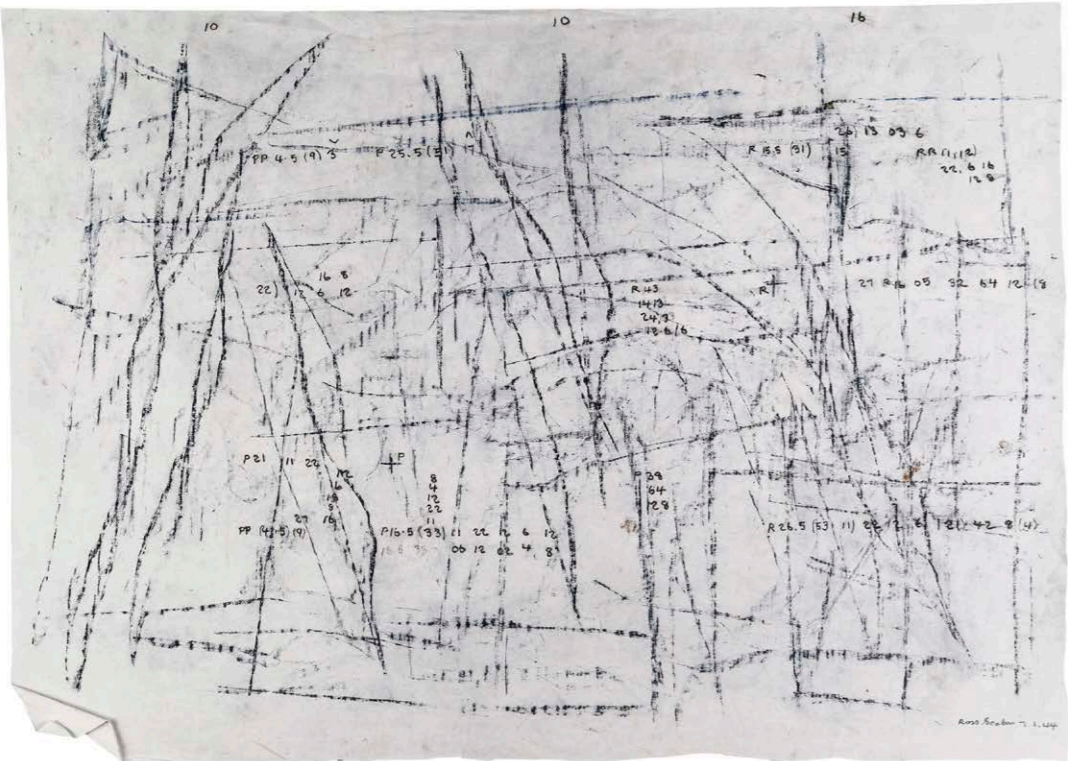


Image above:
fig.48. *Untitled Drawing 10/10/16*, 2016, pencil and pastel on paper, 42 x 58cm
Image below:
fig.49. *Untitled Drawing 19/09/16*, 2016, pencil and pastel on paper, 42 x 58cm

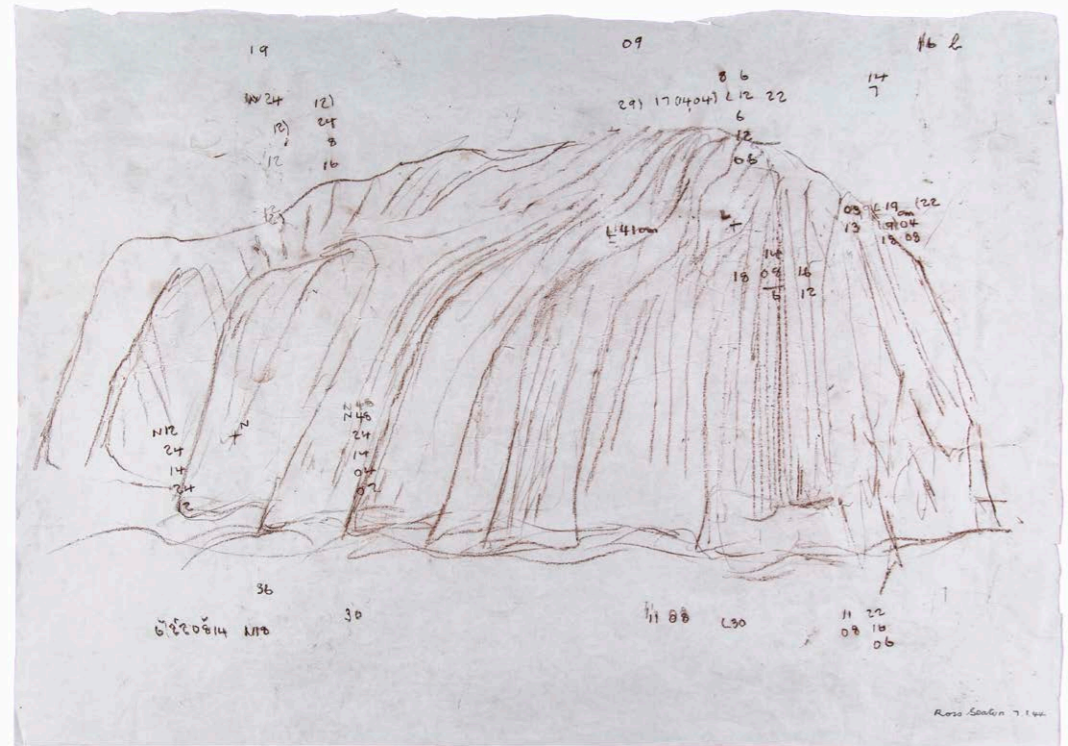
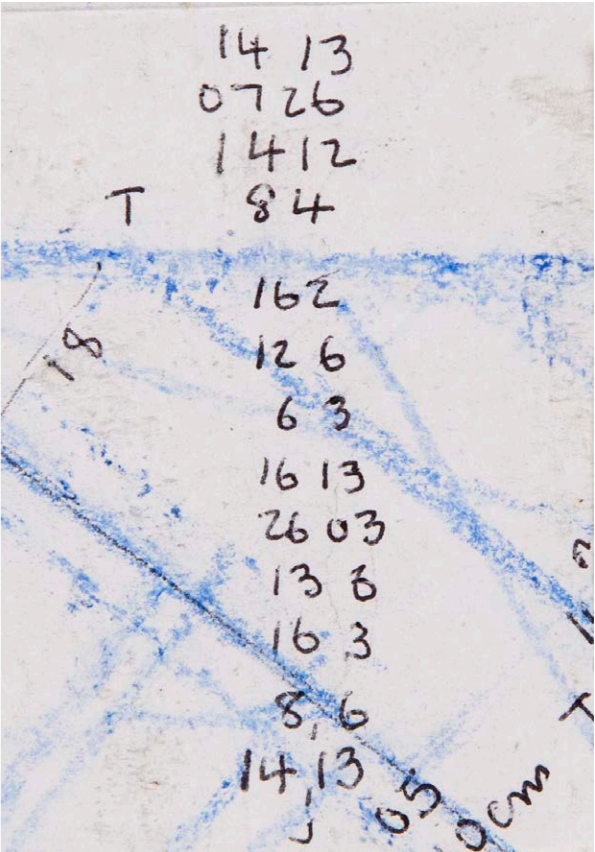


fig.50. *Untitled Drawing 21/06/15* (detail), 2015, pencil and pastel on paper, 33 x 49cm

Following page:
fig.51. *Untitled Drawing 21/06/15*, 2015, pencil and pastel on paper, 33 x 49cm



- insert new digits – specify how and where and when
- add digits and concatenate with half the answer etc.

You could not call this a mathematical algorithm or procedure unless there were a defined way to prescribe ahead of time which rule would be applied at each stage. Oh dear. How strange!
Best wishes

Cheryl
19 August 2020 ⁴³

For Ross, everything had a rationale – ‘There is a pattern to be found if one looks long enough’ – and that was a catalyst to create new work. Whether these numbers were part of a sophisticated algorithm that would decode the drawings and provide answers to the profound questions of life, is unsure. It seems likely though, that his interest had more to do with numerology than mathematics. His habit of writing down random numbers discovered on his walks, the play with numbers outlined above and his willful connection of one set of numbers with another randomly encountered, does suggest a less orthodox structural integrity.

Numerology is a belief in the universal language of numbers, predicated on the notion that the universe

is a system whose basic element is numbers and these numbers are the key to a better understanding of the world and, of course, ourselves. The basic principle is that the cosmos and each individual is affected by their birth date, their birth name and other factors, which are used to forecast each life journey, identify personality traits and characteristics and elucidate personal destinies. It seems Ross was increasingly interested in these ‘revelations’.

Following a typical numerological methodology, Ross made a meticulous study of the numbers that he discovered in his life. His birthdate is inscribed on many drawings (7/1/1944) and it becomes the trigger for many other numerological calculations by adding numbers together until you end up with a single digit number to find your life path number. For e.g. (7+1 = 8, 9+1=10 / 1+0 =1, 4+4 = 8, 8+1+8 = 17, 1+7 = 8) indicates that Ross’s life path number was 8, which according to Numerology.com:

Of all the numbers in Numerology, the number 8 is the achiever and measures life by the goals it reaches. It has good business sense, a powerful presence, and a strong drive for success. The 8 is also a symbol of balance – you can see it in its symmetrical shape.

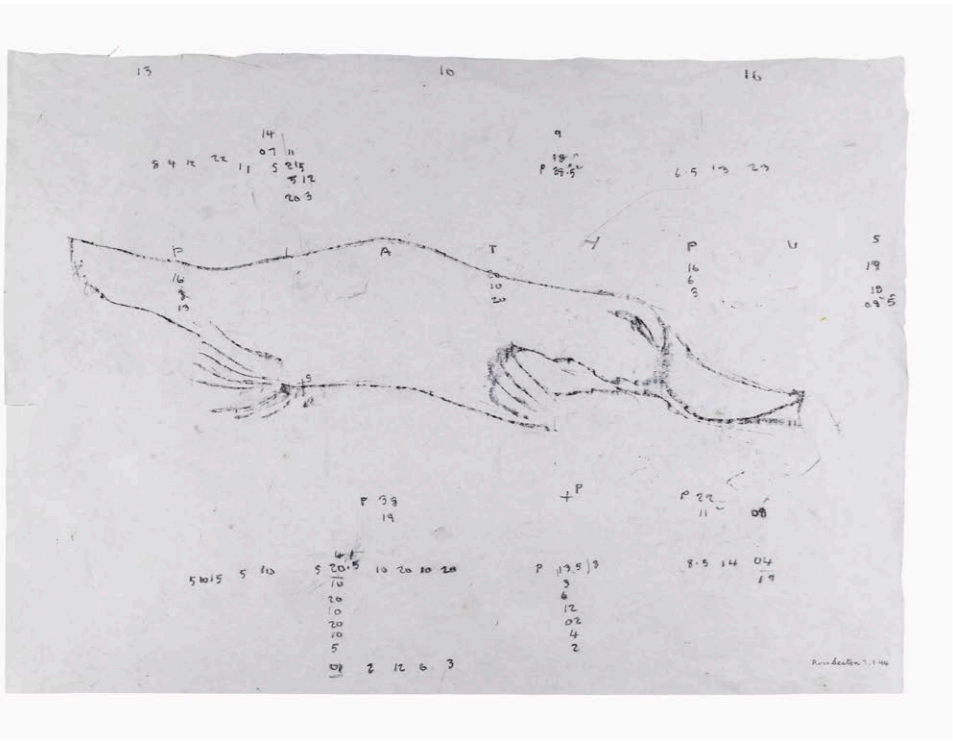
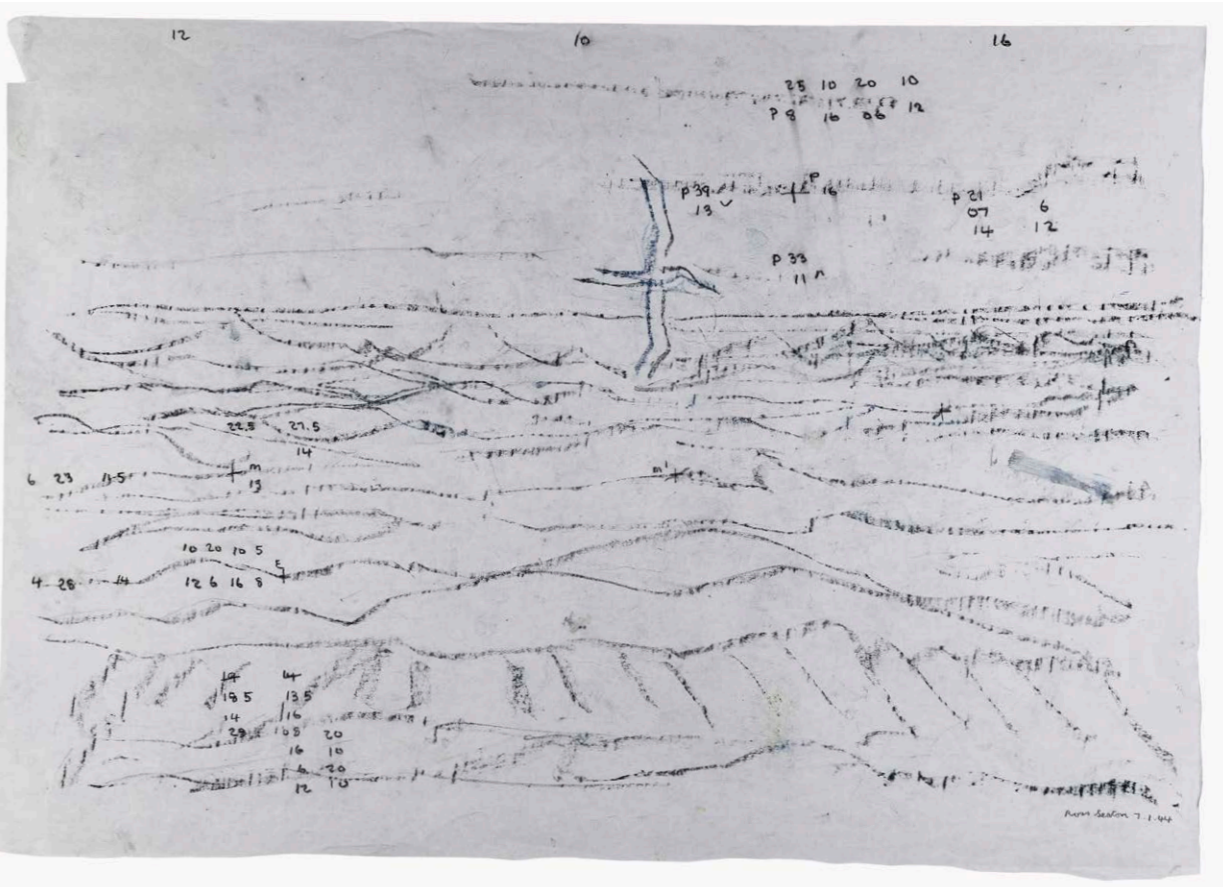
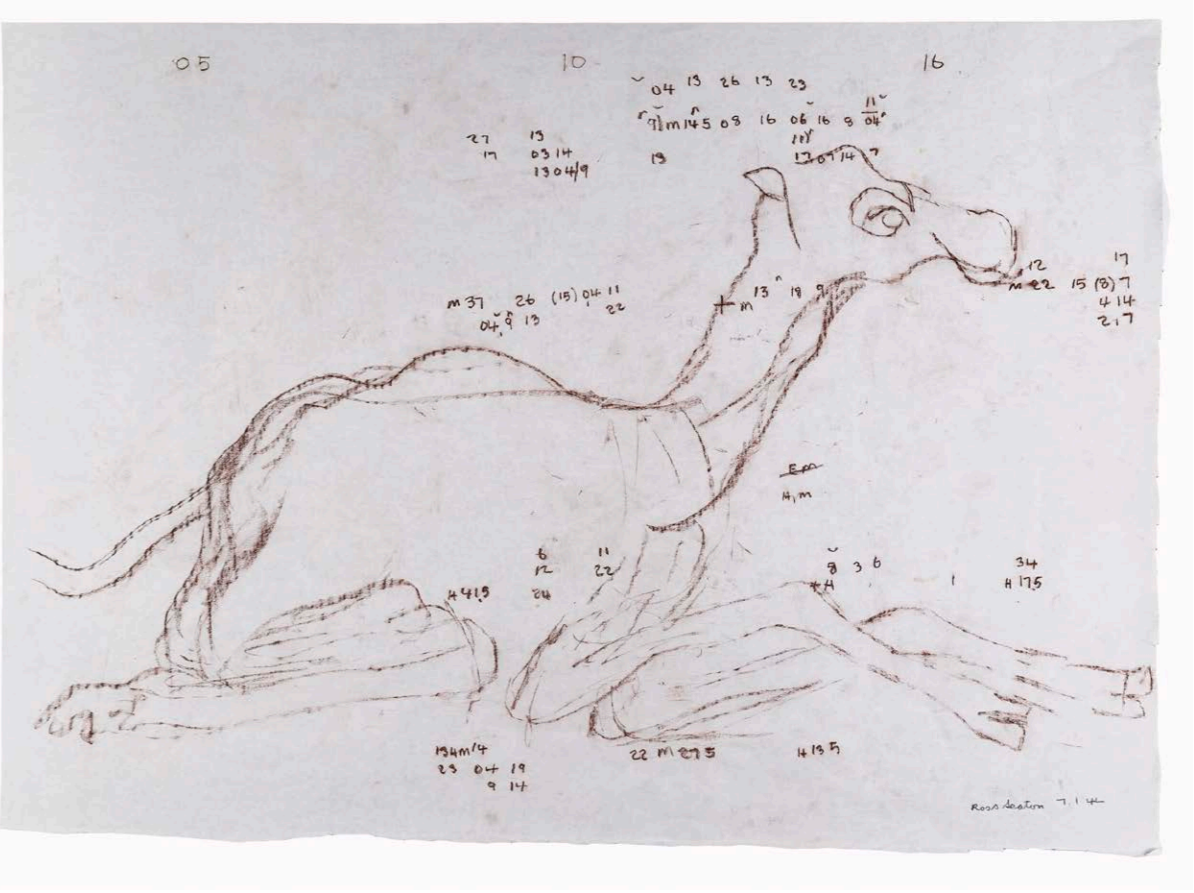


Image left:
fig.52. Untitled Drawing 13/10/16, 2016, pencil and
pastel on paper, 42 x 58cm

Image top right:
fig.53. Untitled Drawing 05/10/16, 2016, pencil and
pastel on paper, 42 x 58cm

Image below right:
fig.54. Untitled Drawing 12/10/16, 2016, pencil and
pastel on paper, 42 x 58cm

Following page:
Abstract Grid, c2015, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 101.5cm



For every blessing it receives, it puts one back out to the universe. When things are balanced, they feel stable, controlled, and supported, which is the most productive environment for the 8 to work in.⁴⁴

Like all advocates of predictive systems, those who believe in numerology and or astrology have total faith in their veracity, and perhaps Ross did as well. If his calculations and annotations found throughout his notebooks and on his drawings are more numerological than mathematical, it is likely that ‘the Force’ was closely associated and had a similar divine or mystic interpretation. However, as with everything in Ross’s world, there are layers of complexity. As a student of Mathematics he was well informed of the orthodoxies of the discipline, but he was also intrigued by the interface between these two systems of dealing with numbers. One of his treasured volumes

was M.J. Moroney’s *Facts from Figures*⁴⁵, second edition 1953, the version Ross held dear. Moroney’s chapter headings link statistics, probability theory and variations with ‘The Laws of Chance’, ‘The Magic Lantern Technique’, ‘Times Series and Fortune Telling’ in ways that clearly enthralled and delighted Ross.

Although we will never know if Ross did indeed develop a secret algorithm or if ‘the Force’ was numerological interpretation, the presence of these numbers throughout his work adds another layer of richness and intricacy.

41. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Book 3 Theory of Planes and Laminas*, 20 July 1983.

42. Email to Ted Snell, 25 June 2020.

43. Email to Ted Snell, 20 August 2020.

44. Numerology.com, accessed 10 October 2020, <<https://www.numerology.com/articles/about-numerology/single-digit-number-8-meaning/>>.

45. M.J. Moroney, *Facts from Figures*, Penguin Books, United Kingdom, 1958.





On Making

*For an artist, experimentation should lead to a theory, not a method, or a set of tricks that pass for theory.*⁴⁶
– Ross Seaton

*The very act of preparing the canvas with ground should be part of the artistic process, not a boring pre-requisite before a painting can be started.*⁴⁷ – Ross Seaton

*Do whatever it takes! Life should be tough, beyond ordinary endurance.*⁴⁸ – Ross Seaton

For an artist the work never ceases, whether it is the constant conceptualisation, the research, studio preparation or time spent fabricating the painting, object, print or drawing, it is a continuous process of intellectual and manual engagement. It is what is both addictive and exhausting about the life choices artists make. For Ross Seaton it was the activity that completely shaped his life, there was no compromise, no accommodation, he was an artist and it was a 24/7 year-long activity. It was tough and it was completely absorbing.

From the earliest objects he made – like the woven cane tray with an inscribed drawing of yachts on the Swan River (fig. 57) the process of making was integrated into his intellectual and creative life. The Finnish architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa suggests that creative work and knowledge of materials and their properties is an intellectual activity. He describes how making is a process of thinking with the hands that leads to innovation. The idea of the ‘thinking hand’ is one that would have resonated for Ross, who believed that the creative process was a dynamic, evolving and responsive activity. However, Pallasmaa also posits a wider view of the role of embodiment in human existential reactions, experiences and expressions as well as the processes of making and thinking. He explains:

The Thinking Hand is a metaphor for the characteristic independence and autonomous activity of all our senses as they constantly scan the physical world. Many of our most crucial skills are internalised as automatic reactions that we are not consciously aware of. Even in the case of learning skills, the sequence of movements in a task is internalised and embodied rather than understood and remembered intellectually. Prevailing educational philosophies continue to emphasise conceptual, intellectual and verbal knowledge over this tacit and non-conceptual wisdom of our embodied processes, which is so essential to our experience and understanding of the physical and the built.⁴⁹

This is a concept that Ross embraced in his working methodology and his own musings on the process of making. It began on his walks while he absorbed information and expanded into the manipulation of materials to create a surface to work on then continued through the fabrication and realisation into an artwork.

Several of the earliest works Ross completed are landscapes, painted while on his first teaching placement at Kulin and Wagin in the State’s wheatbelt. They are the products of a competent amateur coming to terms with the complexities of picture-making. His proud mother had them framed and they still hang in the family living room. Marilyn remembers another painting from this period very clearly as:

... an Impressionist depiction of Jesus, was created before I met Ross. He told me he woke up in the middle of the night at 50 Bulimba Road, where he was living with his parents, went out to the garage and painted Jesus on a piece of masonite board. The eyes, the only clearly distinguishable feature, were mesmerising.⁵⁰ (fig. 55)

Photograph by Brendan Hutchens (2020)



Many works from that period have not been found at Bulimba Road and there may be others from that period, but suffice to say they are the works of a journeyman developing his skills and honing his passion.

On his return to Perth in 1969 Ross began to experiment in earnest. According to his wife Marilyn he '... experimented with various media and styles – oils, acrylic, chalk, and dyes on fabric. (fig. 56) He wanted to see what could be expressed with just one colour, and the challenge of controlling dye on fabric presented an irresistible challenge, even though it was very expensive.⁵¹ This was an intense apprenticeship though, once again, little evidence of it remains. The entire house he painted in York Street, South Perth, before it was demolished, the experimental stain and dye paintings, his early figurative studies were either destroyed or buried in the ordered chaos of Bulimba Road. Nevertheless, his notes from the early 1980s do give us a sense of the program of activity he was likely undertaking at this time.

For some years now, I have had a meagre but sufficient supply of artist's materials — sufficient while developing a strong 'Theory'. Time is most important. However, the time is approaching when a more comprehensive supply is necessary... I am developing a theory that is based on creativity (innovation or insight) and existing notions. The theory will

Image top left:
fig.55. *Jesus (Wagin)*, c1968, oil on board, 43.5 x 58cm.

Image top right:
fig.56. *Sea Horse*, c1971, pigment on fabric

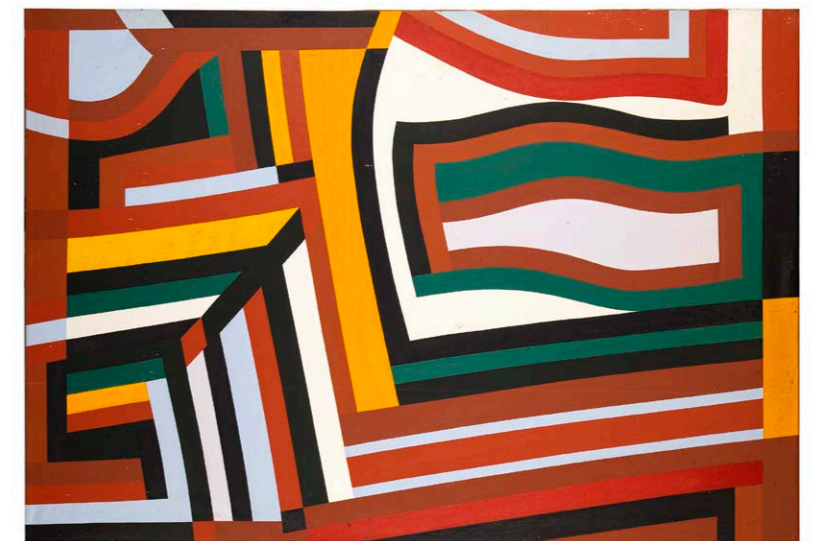
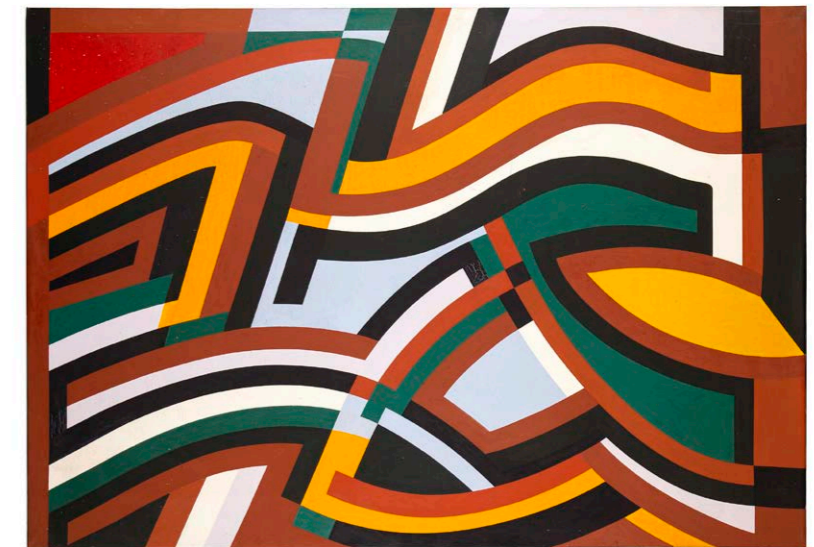
Image below:
fig.57. *Cane Basket*, c1950, ply, cane, pokerwork & enamel paint, 5 x 17 x 28cm

synthesize all the techniques of the visual arts (painting, drawing, printing (intaglio, relief, screen, monochrome, aquatint, lithography etc.) collage, sculpture (frottage) so that the visual arts is seen in terms of a Unified Field Theory of Aesthetics.⁵²

This was no idle activity, this was research and intent study leading to the development of a theory, 'not a method, or a set of tricks that pass for theory', that would provide him with the solid foundation on which to build his practice as a serious artist.

The first sophisticated works uncovered in Bulimba Road were made around the same time Ross was writing his notes on experimentation, quoted above. They were illustrated with pages upon pages of sketches and studies for complex, geometrical abstractions similar to the large canvases left stored in the large shed at the back of his house. (figs.58-60) Undated, untitled and with no information appended to the paintings or their storage crates, it is hard to provide a detailed provenance, but they are the work of a highly motivated, skilled and rigorous practitioner. The period of early experimentation, the study tour to Europe in the late 1970s, the rigorous conceptualisation of his practice had prepared Ross as an artist and the works he began producing in the early 1980s are the products of a sophisticated, motivated and focused artist.

Image top:
fig.58. *Abstract I, II & III in backyard* (c1983)
Image centre:
fig.59. *Abstract I*, c1983, oil on canvas, 118.8 x 172.3cm
Image below:
fig.60. *Abstract III*, c1983, oil on canvas, 118.8 x 172.3cm



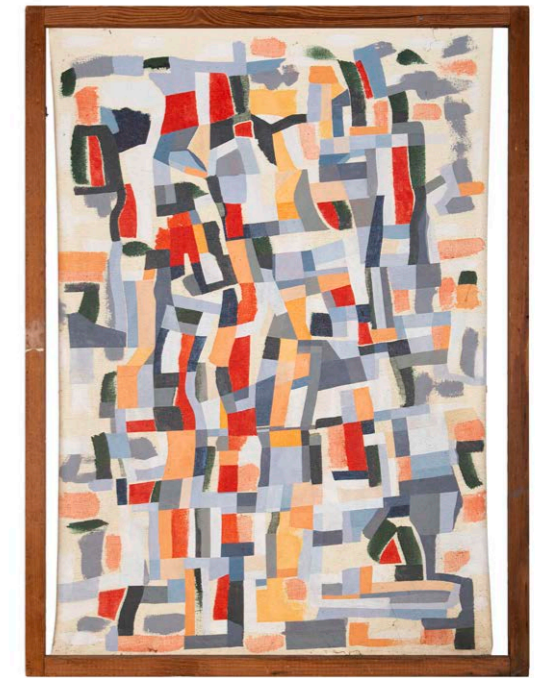
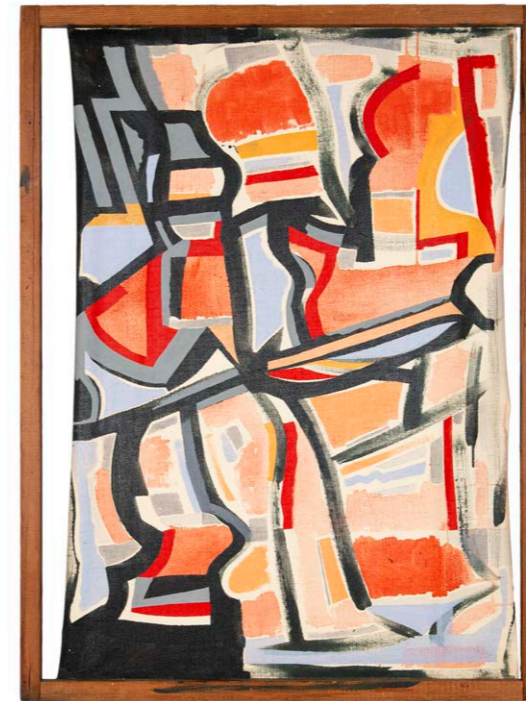


Image left:
fig.61. *Abstract Painting I* (detail), c.1983-90, oil on wallpaper on frame, 102 x 76cm
Image above left:
fig.62. *Abstract Painting II*, c.1983-90, oil on wallpaper on frame, 102 x 76cm
Image above right:
fig.63. *Abstract Painting III*, c.1983-90, oil on wallpaper on frame, 102 x 76cm

Whether these works were based on nature, which seems plausible, their authority as confident and mature artworks is immediately communicated. They are made with considerable craftsmanship, because it was a necessary condition of their existence. As Ross explained, 'The artist has his own special kind of accuracy and need only take care (neatness) from time to time.'⁵³ This was work that required that 'neatness' and it was dutifully undertaken. He explained their lack of names in another note left in one of his notebooks.

*Great Abstract art without figurative content should NOT be TITLED (in the statement sense) as the abstraction is such that the arrangement is immediately recognizable as a work of art.*⁵⁴

It is worth noting that these untitled paintings were made using the traditional medium of the professional artist, oil on canvas. Not only aligning with the Western tradition of art but also identifying

his paintings as 'works of art'. These large canvases were duly stored in plywood travelling crates, presumably to protect them in storage because there is no evidence of Ross submitting any of his works to competitions, prizes or for sale through a gallery.

Whether by design or in response to the difficulty of securing expensive canvas and paint, Ross gradually moved from oil on canvas, to making his paintings in acrylic and oil on card, wallpaper and blinds. Although a very different palette to the two large canvases, his painting on composite board begins with a loose application of paint to give an overall structure, which is refined and fixed with sharp defining edges as he gradually worked back into the surface to find its inherent structure. It is a remarkable work in many ways and a work of both sophistication and great technical finesse. The shimmering effect of jostling squares of yellow and blue creates a dynamism across the surface that is endlessly engaging.



Image opposite:
fig.64. *Abstract Composition*, c.1990, oil on cardboard,
151 x 154cm
Image right:
fig.65. *Abstract Face*, c.1990, oil on cardboard, 151 x 154cm



In a series of works painted around the same time, Ross used the textured backs of rolls of wallpaper (sourced from the street or dumpsters along Stirling Highway) that he attached to wooden strainers. (figs. 61-63) Then using thinned paint, he covered the surface with broad, sweeping gestural marks. In a similar way to the work described above, he worked back into this spontaneous flurry of brushstrokes to find pattern and to demarcate one area from another. This careful process of 'neatening' and refining led to a group of extraordinary works that encapsulate Ross's practice at this time. The imagery is part of a larger continuous field of activity, which is 'framed' by the artist, who merely captures a snapshot of this continuous flow. 'Art should run sideways and forward, or as a hyperspace on a tableau. Motif reaches beyond the boundary of the tableau, both as a surface and edge.'⁵⁵

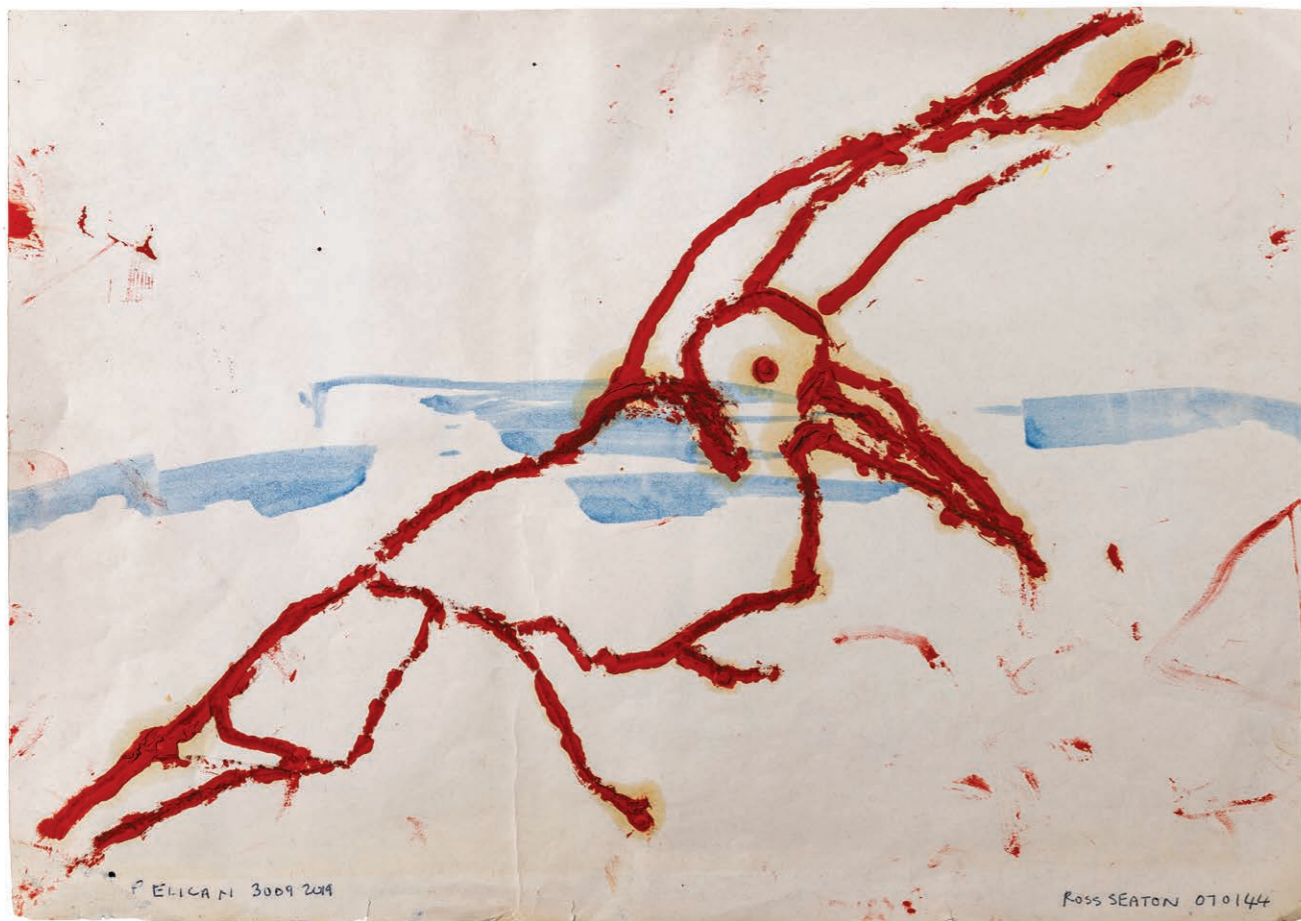
While these works are relatively small, roughly 100cm x 60cm, he soon embarked on larger works exploring pattern on the cusp of figuration on large sheets of cardboard. These thick, multi-layered surfaces are robust and have survived in the wretched conditions of the large workshop storage space at the back of Bulimba Road. More designed than the previous works, the geometry is pre-planned (often in notebooks) and then transcribed onto the surfaces and carefully painted in a range of soft blues, mauves, grey and orange. They are singularly impressive and, on mass, a very powerful statement of the artist's confidence as a practitioner in charge of his medium and with something profound to impart. (figs.64-65)

All the while Ross was drawing, constantly, expansively, often in series, using whatever materials were at hand. These series of drawings had a focus that occupied him for weeks or even months at a time. (fig. 66-67) One group of drawings from 2016

that depicts birds, Australian animals, landscapes and tools, was produced from September to November in a continuous stream of well-wrought, sophisticated images, all emblazoned with numbers. Across the top but separated to right, middle and left was the date (09 10 16), most are signed on the bottom right (Ross Seaton 7/1/44) and all have other numbers or calculations embedded in the page (for e.g. P254, 11/83, P166, 812, 2,3, pl 54cm, E 20cm etc.) According to Professor Praeger and Professor Owens there is no clear mathematical rationale for these numbers, nor does there seem to be an obvious numerological explanation, but their ubiquity in Ross's work reinforces their importance within the artist's methodology. In tandem with his desire to improve his rendering skills, and the obvious categorisation of various types of birds and animals, there is also no clear logic that explains this group of works.

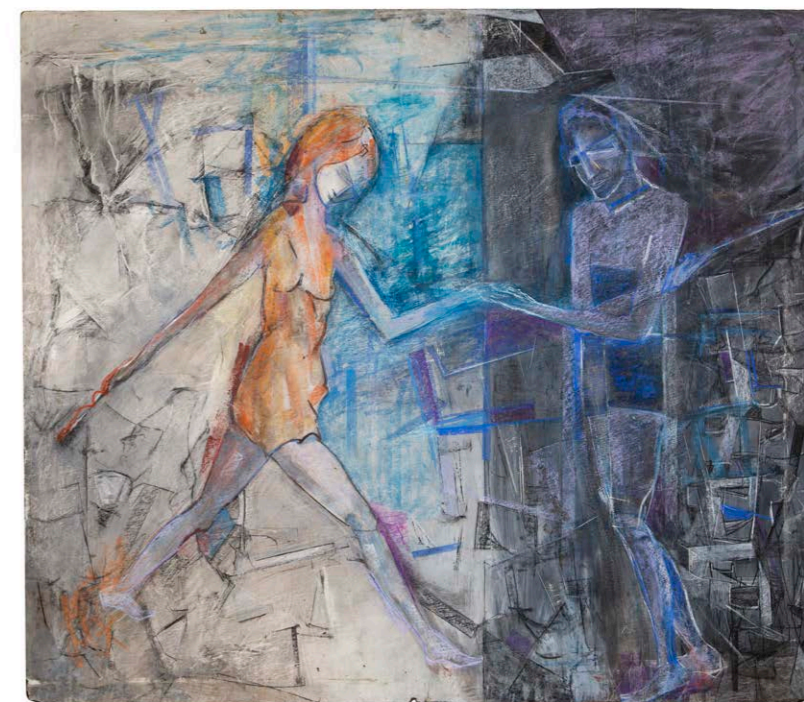
One other large body of drawings is more easily explained and situated within the artist's practice and his life experience. (figs. 69-81) They are a large and continuing series of drawings of a woman's face, specifically one woman's face, easily identified from photographs of his wife Marilyn during their time together. The face, surrounded by a mass of hair, is centralised and occupies the entire page of each drawing. Each is different but there are enough clues to ascertain it is the same subject throughout. They are portraits, but as Ross explained in one of his notebooks:

The idea of gathering a likeness is disastrous as it presupposes the neglect of the whole psyche of an individual ... The portrait deals with a complex human being and is not the production of some facsimile.⁵⁶



Opposite page:
Image top:
fig.66. *Pelican* 30/09/19, 2019, paint on paper, 29.5 x 42cm
Image below:
fig.67. *Ibis Straw-neck* 07/06/19, 2019, paint on paper, 42.3 x 30cm

Image right:
fig.68. *Ross & Marilyn*, c.1980, oil & crayon on board, 106 x 122.5cm



In these drawings he was hoping to capture the totality of his memories of Marilyn, not simply a likeness. As a result, it is a group of drawings that together are so much more informative and powerful than each individual unit that contains only part of the story, a pixel of a larger portrait.

An earlier work, also featuring Marilyn, and Ross as well, is an interesting counterpoint to the portrait drawings, which seem to have been made much later. This painting, which seems to have been painted in the very early 1980s, depicts Ross on the right-hand side of the painting extending his hand to Marilyn. He is leading her from the luminous field in which she strides, toward the darkness he inhabits. Marilyn is golden, the colour of life, Ross dark blue. He is static, slightly hunched, she is lithe and energetic. When Marilyn saw this a photograph of this painting for the first time, she was shocked and somewhat intimidated: It was 'like a message from beyond the grave. It is an amazing painting of me and Ross'. It is so evocative - the woman is eager, dynamic, moving irresistibly toward the man. The man is surrounded by a black background and although not rejecting her, he is hesitant, not moving towards her and is encased in what looks like a corset. (fig. 68)

This painting and the many, many portrait drawings reinforce the significance of Marilyn in Ross's life. Despite four decades apart, and with no communication between them, she remained a vivid presence at the centre of his creative landscape.

When the America's Cup came to Fremantle in 1987 it was a moment of great excitement for Ross, an avid sailor since childhood. Finally, the entire yachting community was focused here, bringing global attention to Western Australia and to the Indian Ocean. In the flurry of excitement Ross made several paintings, initially on large strainers, but to enable safer storage, he later unstretched and rolled them, carefully lodging them in the sleepout at the back of the house. (fig.70) In a letter written from Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in 2020, Ross stressed the importance of these works. 'In the side sleepout there are some large canvases in the ceiling above to 2 in particular 2 12 x 6 oil paintings of the American's Cup 1986.'⁵⁷ When unfurled they were indeed remarkable. Several were large geometric paintings in yellow and blue, on very large canvases that seemed like spinnakers when laid out in the backyard at Bulimba Road. The largest was an amalgam of triangle and trapezoid shapes that swirl into a phoenix-like form, rising up from a glaring white canvas. From his





fig.69. *America's Cup*, 1987, oil on canvas, 393 x 182.5cm

collection of America's Cup memorabilia, it appears that the colours of these shapes are borrowed from the competing yachts and rearranged to create a celebration of the event.

Working everyday was fundamental to Ross's life and every activity was woven into his creative practice. On his walks he would pick up any bricks he found, along with cardboard, paper or other potential art materials. The bricks were important as weights to hold down the plastic sheeting he painted on the front verge, but they too could be given a new character. For the past decade, but more seriously in the last five years, Ross has painted each brick as a three-dimensional object, adorned with a simplified 'boab' tree design. Individually they are beautiful objects, each one a small reductive fugue on a recurring motif. (fig 70) Together they are an amazing symphony of possibilities, in colour and complementary relationships. Referencing Picasso, Ross too believed that because '... it never comes out the way you think it will, it's always something different, so that keeps you going'. It was the mantra behind so much of his work, which might at first glance look repetitive. Instead each is unique, each tries to do the job in a nuanced way, to solve a problem, to contribute to a larger vision. So, Ross

never '... destroys the rejects, I put them aside and see what I can do with them because you get surprises ... sometimes, something that seems to be obscure and awful turns out to be better'.⁵⁸

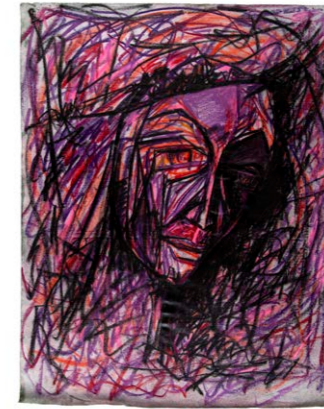
The focus of a great deal of Ross's energy toward the last years of his life were a series of massive paintings on builders plastic sheeting. Rolled out in his front yard, on top of previously completed works, this group of works is both extremely ambitious and extraordinarily powerful in its final resolution. Technically, they were difficult to pull off. (fig. 96) Firstly, the scale required Ross to have an image and translate it with an inherent sense of structure, despite being able to assess it visually. Seen in drone shots taken by Brendan Hutchens, their complex structure is breathtakingly coordinated across the metres of the surface, resulting in a tightly woven set of forms. The image of a dunnart (a marsupial mouse though in Ross's version it is more like a fire breathing dragon) is surprisingly coherent considering the scale at which he was working. (fig. 46)

Several of these large works on plastic sheeting seem like Runes, letters from an unknown alphabet, describing a truth we can only speculate. In white on black, yellow on black plastic and some in blue



fig.70. *Painted house bricks*, 2015-2020, acrylic on house brick, 7.6 x 23 x 11cm (each)

Images following pages:
figs.71-83. *Portraits of Marilyn*, c.2000, crayon & wash and chalk and pencil on paper, 78 x 52cm and 62 x 48cm



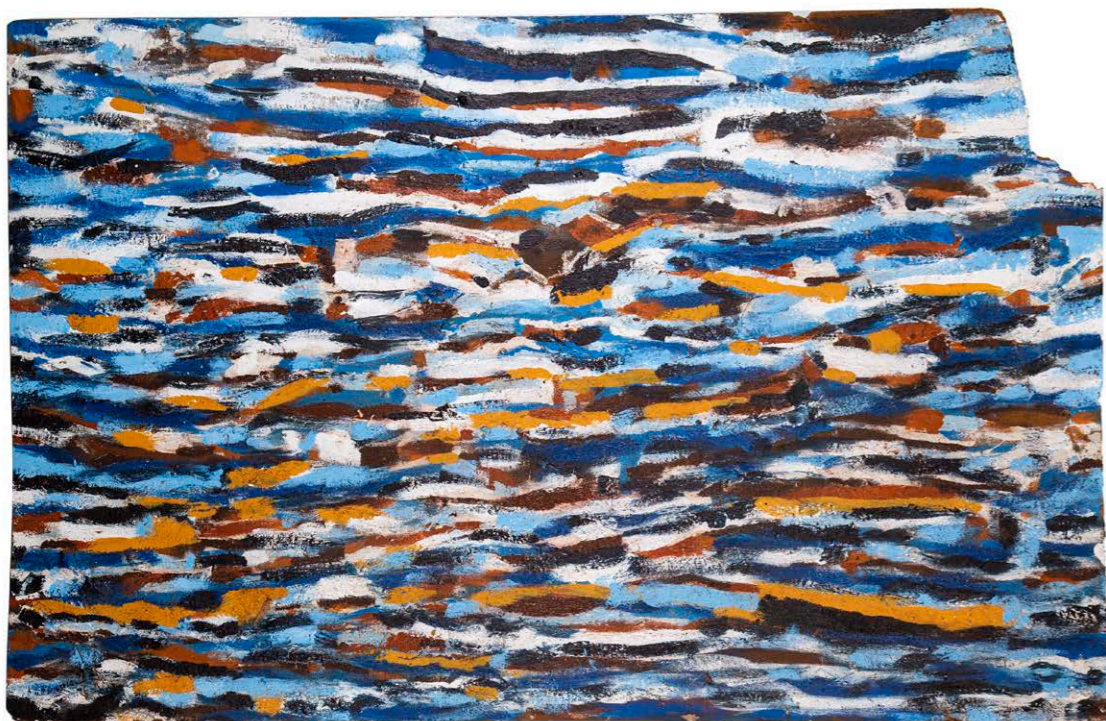


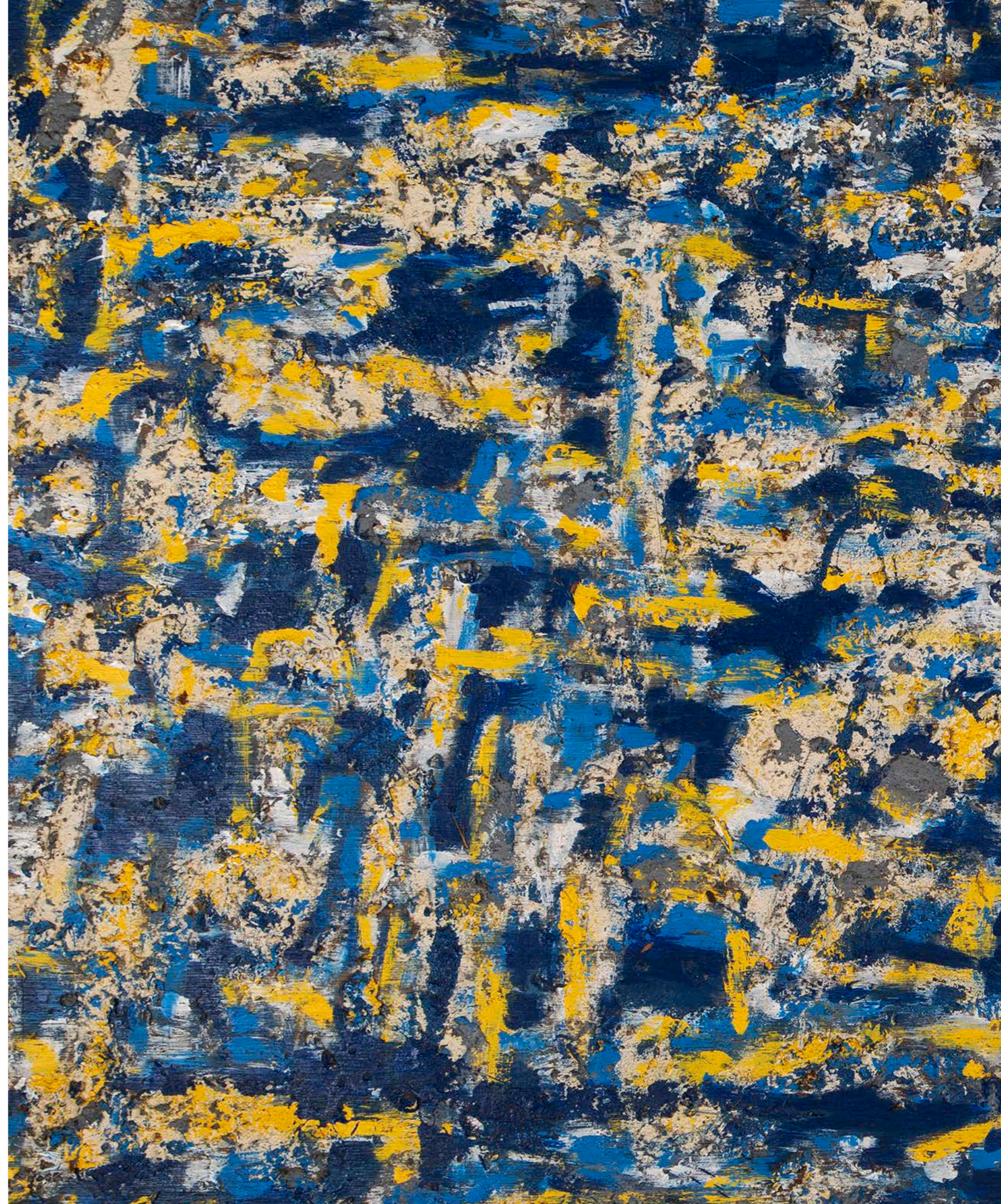
Image above:
fig.84. *Untitled Abstract I*, c.2016-20, oil on ply, 86.5 x 134cm
Image right:
fig.85. *Untitled Abstract II (detail)*, c.2016-20, oil on ply, 115 x 162cm
Following page:
fig.86. *Untitled Abstract III*, c.2016-20, oil on ply, 115 x 162cm

and red on clear plastic sheeting, the letter forms hover and shimmy across the surface, activated by the artist to draw our eye at varying speeds from one to the next. (fig. 95) One is a dense undergrowth of spiky forms creating an all-over pattern of dazzling inventiveness, while others are more like pages from a ritual text.

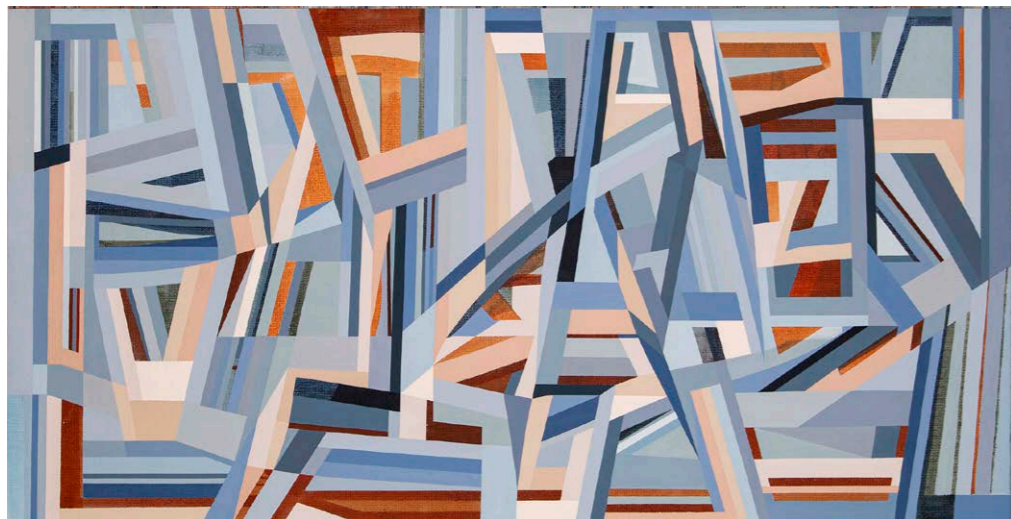
Another group of works Ross worked on for years were a series of large abstract paintings on plywood. (fig 84-86). As always with his work it is hard to date, though they seem to be works that were completed over a period of time through the slow and considered accretion of paint. It's possible that they were begun around 2014 or 2015 and layer upon layer of paint was added to create an arena in which energised micro-elements bounce off each other before visually coalescing into a unified field. Our eyes are given little respite until we settle into the painting's rhythms and allow us to see the patterns and attune ourselves to its

life force. 'It's the Force,' as Ross would say, 'the Force,' and it is contained within this remarkable works.

Ross experimented until he found the medium that suited each new body of work he began. The paintings just discussed have a thick, impasto surface, applied with a knife or trowel. It is what was required. For a group of geometric abstractions he chose another medium, gouache, an opaque watercolour that is more viscous and bound with gum arabic. It enables overpainting and facilitates the creation of consistent, flat and matt areas. It is perfect for the large group of over 100 small, square paintings he produced as an evolving set of works, some with ink over painting as well. He had previously use gouache for a some exquisite geometric abstractions, that began with a more open brushed delivery on the paper surface, which he gradually refined and sharpened as he discovered the internal structure he was seeking. (fig. 87-90) One of these works is photographed with







Images above: fig.87, 88 & 89. *Geometric Abstraction*, c.2010, gouache on paper, 52 x 102cm

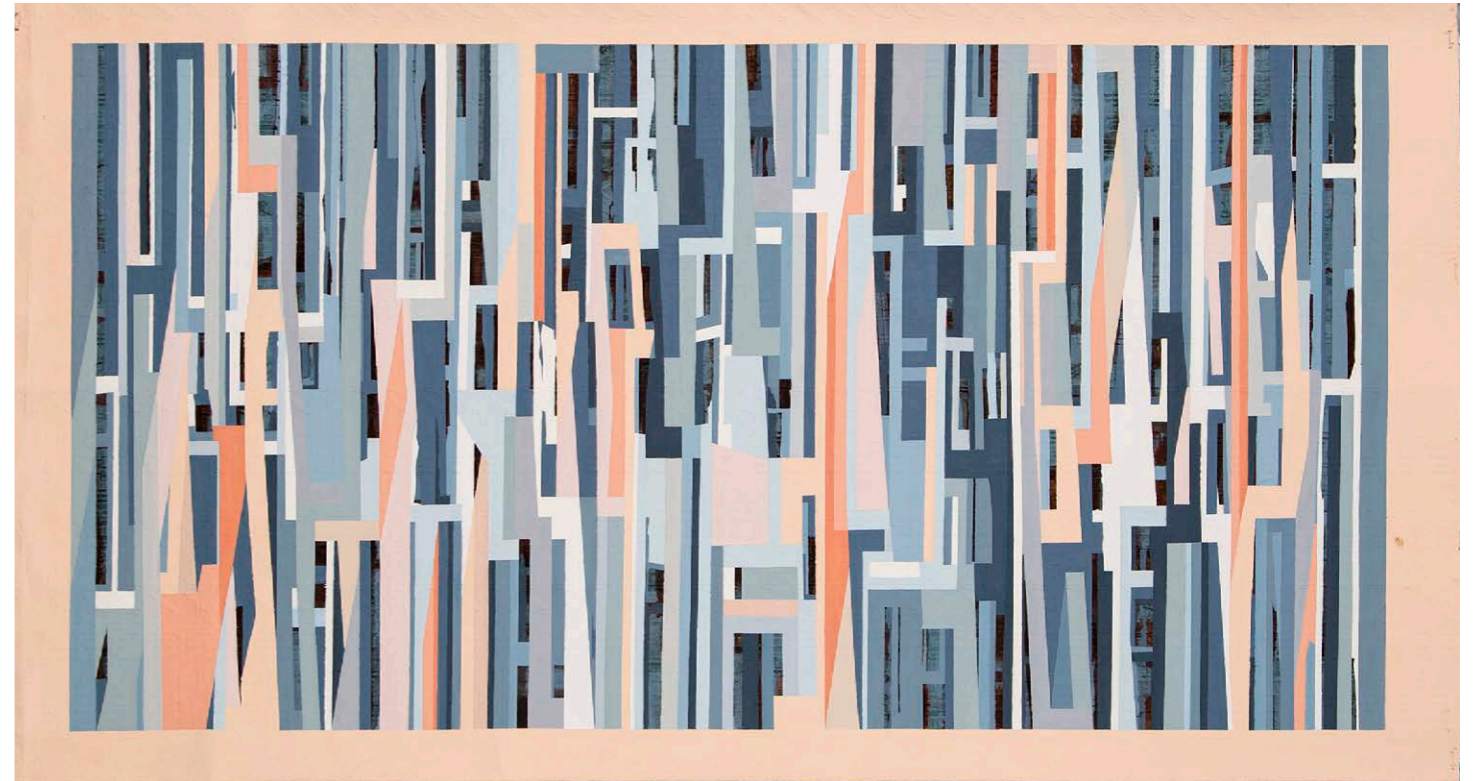


fig.90. *Geometric Abstraction*, c.2010, gouache on paper, 52 x 102cm

another body of works created in the early 1980s so it is likely it was made around the same time. Others have a similar rhythmic, geometric structure and the muted colouration that results from combining tones and shades of colour (mixed with white and black).

These gouache were either studies for larger works on board or perhaps the works on board were developed concurrently to explore similar ideas but in different media. The large panel on ply with a shifting mosaic of blue and yellow tiles in one of the most successful, creating a shimmering ‘all-over’ visual field that is totally absorbing. (fig. 91) The underpainting is a series of gestural brush marks that have been laid down with great brio and at speed. This field of possibilities gave Ross the direction he required to find a relationship with other forms in the painting, or linkages that could be emphasised with a sharpened edge, straightened to great an interconnecting geometry. Colours emphasised those relationships

and gradually the total surface became activated. The final effect is breathtaking and totally absorbing. It is a work that took time, it required great patience and diligence and it was clearly only resolved after many hours of contemplation and consideration.

The boxed set of 107 gouache drawings is different again and seems to have been painted several decades later. (fig. 92-94) They present fugue-like variations on a theme of landscape (perhaps) or possibly just a gestural response to applying colour to the surface. The mark making is similar to the earlier abstract works in their first iteration, before Ross found the internal geometric and sharpened some, eliminated others, to create a more formal structure. In this group of works the marks have their own integrity and are either left to stand or painted over by other swift applications of gouache or ink. Each new work seems to have a launching pad in the previous work — a direction of mark or brush loaded

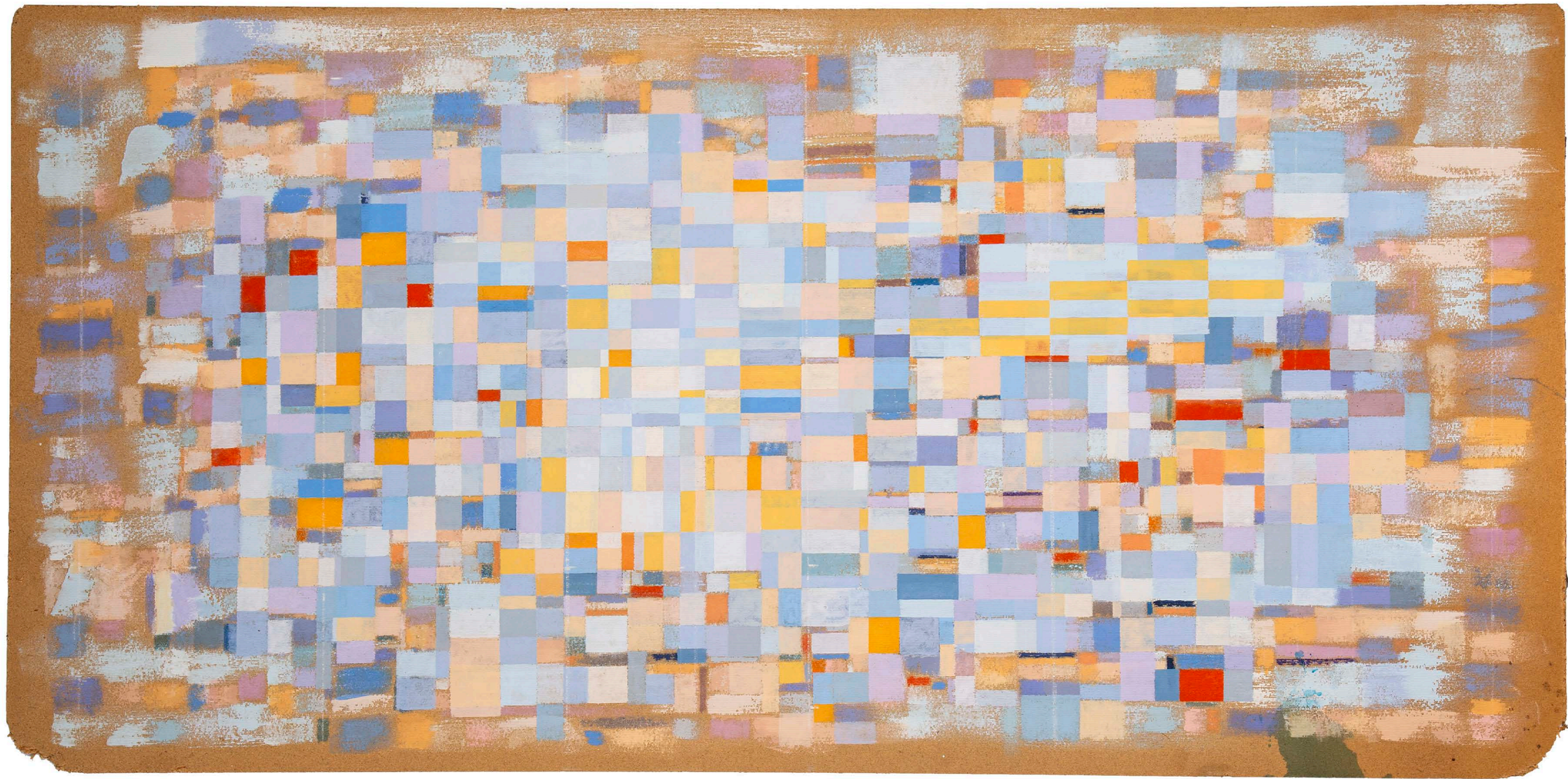


fig.91. *Geometric Abstraction III*, c.2010-15, oil on ply, 121.8 x 61.2cm



Image opposite:
fig.92. *Abstract Studies* (detail), c.2015, gouache & ink on paper, 22.5 x 24cm

Images above:
fig.93 & 94. *Abstract Studies*, c.2015, gouache & ink on paper, 22.5 x 24cm

with the same colour — but then they develop a life and character of their own as the artist thoughtfully constructs each as a unique work. However, they remain part of an extended family with some similar characteristics and some entirely original traits.

There are many other works Ross stored in his house or in the sheds in his backyard and in storage units he rented. Many thousands, indeed tens of thousands. Apart from the drawings, very few have any inscriptions to identify when he made them and as he returned to ideas and reworked themes over and over again it is difficult to position them chronologically. Medium is one possible dating method, because during periods of his practice he did favour oil paint over acrylic, gouache or ink. At times he worked on a relatively small scale and then he would begin working on a massive scale, though always drawing. Towards the end of his life he was growing increasingly confident in his ability to make a definitive mark and to allow that statement to breathe on the canvas, or plastic sheeting or page. These gestural abstractions seem to have been created in the last decade and a half of his creative practice.

However, ideas were always permeating through the membrane of current activity and forms found in works produced many years before found their way inevitably into new works.

When I embarked on this project I had no idea of the enormity of the task, nor of the diversity, scope and ability of Ross's practice. Initially, it was the large works on plastic sheeting produced in his front yard that I imagined would be the focus of my engagement with his work. In retrospect, I realise how naïve I was and what an exciting and unpredictable journey this has been. Every visit to Ross's home or to his storage units and delving into the myriad green plastic bags full of drawings discovered there, unearthed new treasures, surprising changes of direction or marvellous new works that seemed to trump previous discoveries. There is still more to discover I'm sure, and without Ross as my guide much of my understanding will be conjecture, guess work or supposition. The long conversations I imagined having about his work did not transpire. Revelations about intent, subject matter and theoretical underpinnings failed to occur due to his untimely



fig.95. *Red and Blue*, 2017-19, acrylic on plastic sheeting, 200 x 540cm

death. Whether he would have been as forthcoming as I hoped is another matter for conjecture. His brother and his wife were both surprised that he had reached out and indeed agreed to an exhibition, so possibly as the date drew nearer he may have had second thoughts. He was always secretive, keeping everyone at bay, holding back and providing just enough to keep interest and the desire to learn more. I can only hope Ross would approve of the interpretations I have made and the choice of works, the decisions and analysis I have offered in this volume.

Over five decades Ross Seaton dedicated himself to the task of finding truth in his lived experience and communicating that wisdom to others. Although not always welcoming scrutiny, I believe his ultimate goal was to share his work with a wider audience. This book and the exhibition at the Naval Store in

Fremantle in December 2020 are the fulfilment of my commitment to Ross to give a community that knew of him, but did not know him, the opportunity to see the world through his eyes and to gain deeper insights into how one individual can make a unique contribution to our understanding and enjoyment of the world we all share.

Creativity is a life process necessary for the existence of the Universe.⁵⁹ – Ross Seaton

46. R. Seaton , unpublished manuscript, *Novel 1*, 1982.
47. *ibid.*
48. *ibid.*
49. J. Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*, John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey, 2009.
50. Video conversation with Ted Snell and Marilyn (Seaton) Rivkin, 31 August 2020.
51. Video conversation with Ted Snell and Marilyn (Seaton) Rivkin, 31 August 2020.
52. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Novel 1*, 1982.
53. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Novel 1*, 1982.
54. *ibid.*
55. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Novel 1*, 1982.
56. *ibid.*
57. Letter to Ted Snell, March 2020.
58. R. Seaton, unpublished manuscript, *Novel 1*, 1982.
59. *ibid.*



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This is a book that had to be written. Meeting Ross Seaton, and discovering his extraordinary work was a gift, and the opportunity to share that gift with others was an obligation I happily embraced. Many others have been enthralled by Ross's story and their enthusiasm and generous assistance has made it possible to realise that commitment. I am extremely grateful to DADAA, to UWA Alumni, and the City of Fremantle for their crucial support.

There are so many individuals who made this project a reality. I would like to thank Kevin, Melanie and Stephen Seaton who have been very supportive from the outset. Marilyn Rivkin (Seaton/Lacy) generously volunteered her time and her assistance in plotting the events of Ross's days as a student and their time together as a couple in the 1970s was invaluable. I am also grateful to Isobel Lacy, for her good counsel and to Edward Lacy for giving permission to print his poem. It was wonderful to hear from Ross's students Neil Argent and Caroline O'Neil and from his doctor, Jamie Prendiville. Dr Max Kamien offered very helpful insights and I thank Matthew Flaherty for his assistance and his son Oliver Flaherty, who generously allowed me to reprint his poetic tribute to Ross.

The enthusiasm of Brendan Hutchens and Patti Brook was infectious and their enthusiasm for making Ross's story accessible through a documentary was the catalyst for realising the exhibition at the Naval Store in Fremantle. The venue is perfect for Ross's work and I am very grateful to Adam Jorlen at Enkel for his facilitation and ongoing enthusiasm for this project; I am extremely grateful to everyone who has provided assistance in bringing Ross's work to a wider audience.

Projects like this one take an enormous amount of expertise and energy and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, especially Anthony Kelly, Lyle Branson, Clare McFarlane and Kate Hamersley for their outstanding effort in solving the numerous issues that required their consideration. I also acknowledge the expertise and hard work of the extraordinary team at the Cultural Precinct: Pier Leach, Megan Hyde, Aimee Dodds, Sofie Nielsen and Connie Sze. Without the support of colleagues listed above and those across the University, such as Fiona Allan, Claire Lenyk, Liz Terracini, and of course Vice-Chancellor Amit Chakma, projects like this one would never happen.

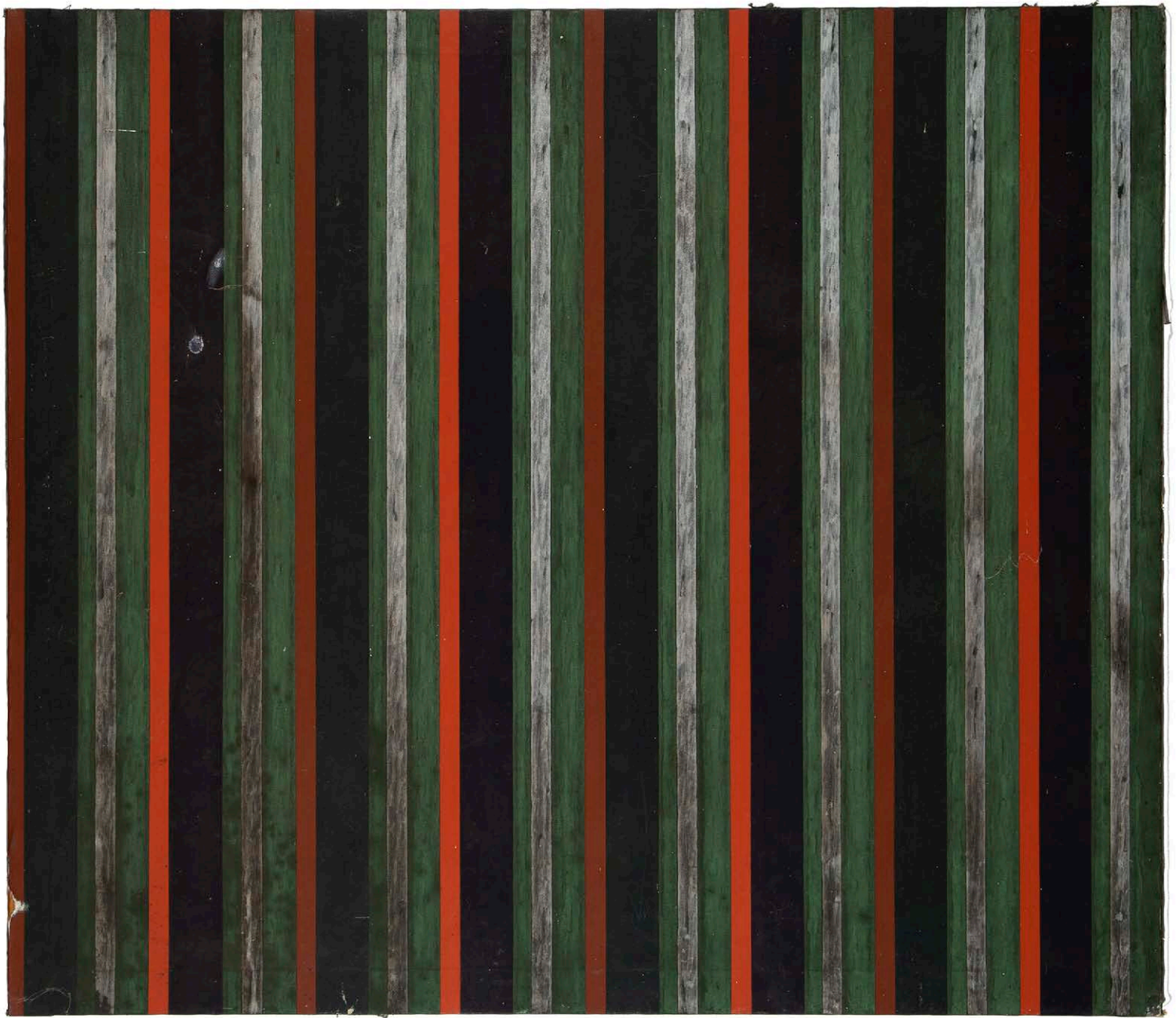
I would like to acknowledge all the donors who so generously gave to the alumni appeal to raise funds to support this project. In particular to Elizabeth Malone, Michael Snell and Vicki Stewart my everlasting gratitude for your generosity, your commitment to this project and your abiding friendship; which is so greatly appreciated. When it looked like this exhibition and book would be cancelled the patronage of so many of the local community kept it alive.

Finally, to Ross Seaton, without whom none of this would have been possible. He graciously allowed me into his life and shared with me his extraordinary treasure trove of work, documenting five decades of creative practice. Maybe this was and is 'the Force', he constantly alluded to, the creative power and vision that is intrinsic to every human being.

Thank you Ross!

Ted Snell

fig.96. *Yellow & Blue*, 2019, acrylic on plastic sheeting, 400 x 510cm



Abstraction – Stripes, c1985, oil on canvas, 122 x 106cm

