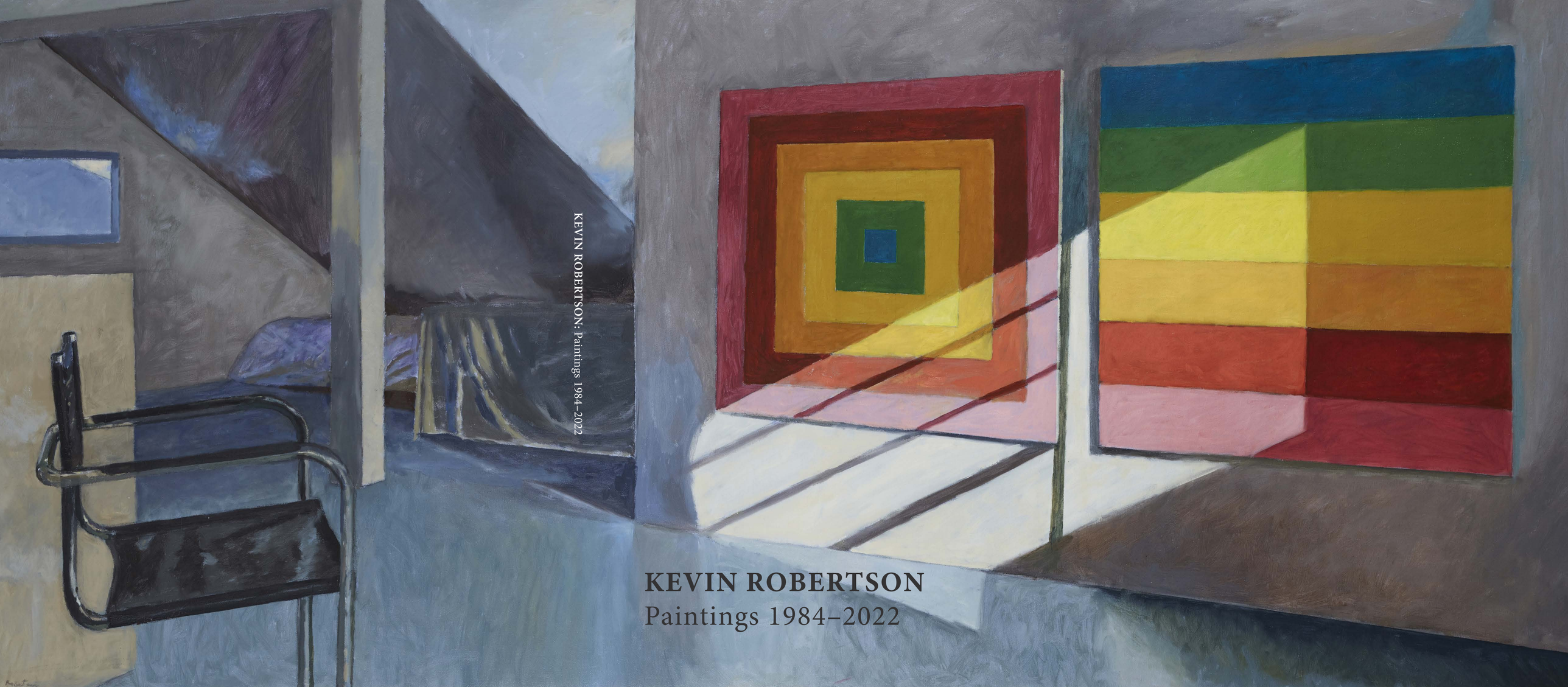

KEVIN ROBERTSON: Paintings 1984–2022

KEVIN ROBERTSON
Paintings 1984–2022

Introduction

Kevin Robertson was born in 1964 in Norseman, a town 725 kilometres east of Perth in the Goldfields region of Western Australia, on the traditional lands of the Ngadju people (fig. 1). Norseman is the last major Western Australian locality passed through by travellers on their journey to eastern Australia, across the world's largest limestone plateau, the Nullarbor Plain, or 'treeless plain'. Growing up in the 1970s Robertson recalls the town had one school (after the convent school closed in the early 1970s), and a handful of shops for essential items down the main street.[1]

The artist has vivid memories of this environment – they are of majestic salt-lakes with endless skies above, dramatic granite rock formations, pale red earth against dull green bushland, and the wildflowers that transform the arid landscape each spring. Living in this place fuelled Robertson's childhood imagination and instilled a sense of wonder at the world.

At the family's home in town, despite the dry heat, flowers and vegetables were easily grown, thanks to soil that was rich in minerals and a plentiful supply of water from the Kalgoorlie pipeline. Robertson's mother was a florist and the washhouse was always full of wet newspapers and flowers. His father would draw in the evenings after work, on a lined pad with a biro. From about the age of five, Robertson began to draw too – the land, the sky, houses, people and animals, things real and things imagined. The world around him seemed worthy of patient observation, in all its detail and all its incomprehensible vastness.

At Norseman Junior School, Robertson's teacher was impressed by the then eleven year old's gift for drawing, and encouraged his parents to consider sending their son to the Special Art Program at Applecross Senior High School in Perth. By good fortune, Robertson's aunt and uncle lived ten kilometres from the city of Perth, in the suburb of Booragoon, around a kilometre from the school. And so a few years later, aged thirteen, Robertson left Norseman to live in this new suburban household. A life in art had begun.

Though Robertson was keen to learn the craft of drawing and painting, even as a young artist it was clear to him that such technical aspects were only part of a more complex exploration of what pigment on canvas could be. Forms and colours arranged in certain ways might depict a specific object or event, but the medium was also capable of moving beyond mere description, creating new realities and capturing powerful feelings. Working in an imaginative representational style has remained central to Robertson's creative relationship to the world. Reflecting on his lifetime of painting in 2022, Robertson stated: 'I am lucky that through painting I found a meaningful way to process my experience, to think about the culture I am immersed in and to dream about the future.'[2]

Fig. 1. Kevin Robertson painting in Dunsborough, Western Australia, 1986
Photography by Megan Salmon

Graduating from Applecross Senior High School in 1981, and commencing study at art school the following year, Robertson continued in a figurative mode that also reflected the metaphysical realms of memory, emotion and fantasy. As will be described in Chapter One, such an orientation was right for the times: the 1980s saw an international revival of figuration and subjectivity in painting, as the late strains of Modernist orthodoxy (in Minimalism, Conceptual Art and the disappearance of the art object) passed into the variety, localism and fluidity of art after Modernism.

The first two chapters of this study concentrate on the central motif of Robertson's practice in the 1980s and 1990s, the figure in the domestic sphere. In these works homely settings frame psychologically charged, often mysterious, encounters between sitters. Interior spaces are also infused with expressive meanings of their own, and are sometimes sites for contemplation on the practice of painting itself. This is particularly evident in Robertson's depictions of his art studio, where arrangement and circumstance, meaningful and optical qualities, are investigated by the artist with a critical awareness of art history and a fascination with the nature of pictorial representation.

Chapters Three and Four present, and draw connections between, a number of thematic and technical aspects to describe Robertson's work from the late 1990s to the present. In this period the artist's approach to subject matter increased in breadth of view, becoming ever more complex and multidimensional in its observation and imagination, and in design and execution. Robertson began to explore multiple perspectives, movement and simultaneous senses of structure and transience, through a variety of painterly methods, and in subjects ranging from suburban scenes and cityscapes, to landscapes and cloudscapes; and from observation of the night sky, to recreation of its effects in the studio environment.

In 2022 Robertson is returning to depictions of the figure in domestic interiors, in images that are markedly different from the early works on this theme painted in the 1980s. It is too soon to tell all the directions these works might take, but the return to the figure is a reminder that a life lived observing, imagining and representing human experience through the painted image can develop its own momentum and forms, that change as the artist's perceptions change, and that also produce new perceptions of reality, made tangible in paint on canvas.

1. From the Return of the Image to the Psychology of Space: Painting in the Eighties

1. From the Return of the Image to the Psychology of Space: Painting in the Eighties

Between 1982 and 1984 Robertson completed a degree in Fine Arts majoring in Painting at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), later Curtin University (fig. 3). It was an exciting time to be a student of painting, especially one who wished to develop a figurative practice. In the early 1980s the Neo-Expressionist movement hailed the return of the figure in painting, offering a striking alternative to the Minimal, and Conceptual Art that had dominated in the 1970s.[1] The plural nature of this post-modern, post-conceptual style was described by Elizabeth Baker in a 1982 editorial in *Art in America*:

> Some of them [Neo-Expressionist artists] may qualify as 'hard core' Expressionists – their work conveys a direct emotionalism through an agitated 'personal' application of paint. Others, however, adopt an expressionist 'look' for ends that range from the conceptual to the satirical. [Young artists] have reclaimed a central position for vigorous painterly execution, coupled with something more overtly taboo in self-respecting modernist usage: literary subject matter. Whether religious, pop-cultural, mythological, psycho-sexual, or even political, the imagery of these artists is of a highly evocative nature, if not explicitly narrative.[2]

In the spirit of the post-modern Eighties, art history (as well as mass media imagery) was to be mined and transformed, Baker noting that, for most Neo-Expressionists: 'tradition is no longer a burden, but a newly discovered resource. [They seek] reentry into the realm of allegory, history and myth that the dominant styles of the modern period so decisively discarded'.[3] Paintings depicting the human figure, or imagery suggestive of objects in the real world, conveyed a range of human experiences – from private, psychological states to interaction with social, political and historical realities. This expressive, highly individual turn, stood in sharp contrast to a Minimalist or formalist conception of the work of art as an autonomous entity, coolly separate from the messy world.

At the same time in the United Kingdom, the revival of painting was conceived as an international movement (albeit British, European and American) in the exhibition *A New Spirit in Painting*, held at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1981, and curated by Christos M. Joachimides, Norman Rosenthal and Nicholas Serota. As Joachimides suggested, subjectivity was the defining feature of this 'new spirit':

Fig. 2. *Linda and Jamie, Norseman*, c. 1989, oil on board, 32 x 22.5 cm
Collection of Linda and Peter Robertson

> The subjective view, the creative imagination, has come back into its own and is evident in a new approach to painting. Artists, no longer satisfied with the deliberately objective view, are beginning to respond to their environment, allowing these reactions to be expressed in the form of images ... A reinterest in the significance of the private life shows signs of emerging everywhere and in art it takes the form of a conspicuous subjectiveness.[4]

This broad premise resulted in the display of an eclectic (and somewhat discordant) range of painting styles; representational, expressive/gestural, and even included some examples of Minimal painting.[5] Hence, while figuration was boldly present in many works, more generally, the exhibition's curators sought to bring together and promote individual expressive freedom, in a variety of painterly forms.[6]

Included in the exhibition were both established painters (including Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Balthus, Georg Baselitz, Lucian Freud, Pablo Picasso, Gerhard Richter, and Frank Stella), as well as a younger generation of artists, then in their early-to-mid-thirties (including Sandro Chia, Rainer Fettin, Mimmo Paladino, and Julian Schnabel). The selection could also be read along national lines, including artists of the German *Neue Wilden*, the Italian *Transavanguardia*, and American Neo-Expressionism. A year later, in 1982, the exhibition *Zeitgeist* at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, curated by Joachimides and Rosenthal, explored similar territory, though now included sculpture; and in Italy, Achille Bonito Oliva curated a series of exhibitions from 1979 onwards promoting the *Transavanguardia*. The return of painting and, moreover, painting which privileged representation, was not without its detractors, and vigorous debate ensued amongst artists, critics and theorists.[7]

In Australia during this period painting became a rich mode of expression of both personal and political subject matter, by artists such as Gordon Bennett, Juan Davila, Fiona Foley, Mandy Martin, Margaret Morgan, Trevor Nickolls, Susan Norrie, Imants Tillers and Jenny Watson, to name but a few. These and other artists were conscious of the critical discourses surrounding painting and the image, schooled in contemporary theories of post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and feminism. Terry Smith suggests that in the 1980s: '[younger artists] began from the assumption that painting was a problematic practice yet all the more challenging for that ... As a medium, painting has come [from the vantage point of 1991] to be regarded as an image-field contiguous with photography and film, as a surface to be imprinted with ideas'.[8]

Though the New York art scene still dominated in the 1980s, the concept of the 'centre' was rendered less powerful in terms of dictating an international style. In Australia, Smith notes that formerly provincial art centres such as Sydney and Melbourne 'became increasingly confident', evident in events such as the Sydney Biennale from 1979 onwards.[9] Moreover, emphasis on subjectivity in art meant that the place 'where you were' – its emotional, physical and intellectual

Fig. 3. Kevin Robertson (far left) posing with fellow students, Mario D'Alonzo, Chris Hopewell (his painting behind) and Peter Morse at WAIT, 1984. Photography by André Lipscombe

effects on the artist – assumed greater importance. This shift had positive implications for a city like Perth, that was in a double 'provincial' bind in relation to both Australian, and international, 'centres'.

Art School Years, 1982–1984

In 1983 Welsh artist John Beard was appointed Head of Fine Art at WAIT. Beard arrived following the completion of a Master of Arts at the Royal College of Art in London. He was familiar with the new painting emerging in Britain, and became a notable figure in the return to figuration in Australia.[10] The arrival of Beard was of significance for the training and early painterly orientations of Robertson, and fellow students, Mario D'Alonzo, Andrew Daly and Megan Salmon, all in their second year at art school in 1983, as well as Tom Alberts and André Lipscombe in the year above.[11]

Beard's imagery of the early 1980s, described by Smith in terms of suggestive 'head-outlines, floating before fugitive fields of random yet subtle colour', differed markedly from the more directly representational style of Robertson and his peers, and their interest in observational drawing and painting.[12] Despite this, they were inspired by their teacher, who concentrated on general principles of composition and the power of mark-marking to elicit meaning and mystery. Generally, Robertson found a tolerant, if not positive, attitude towards figurative art, encouraged by Beard, who also sought to broaden students' experience of contemporary figurative painting, bringing British artists, Tim Jones and John Bellany to WAIT as artists in residence in 1983.[13]

Another lecturer, Ted Snell, had recently returned from Italy and introduced students to contemporary Italian *Transavanguardia* painters, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, and Mimmo Paladino. Reading *Flash Art* and *Art in America*, Robertson also became aware of the New York scene, and was particularly struck by the work of Eric Fischl, a Neo-Expressionist whose subject matter was suburban life. In essence, students (many of whom would later form part of the Oddfellows group of figurative painters) were aware of painting's new international prominence, even if they could not view many famous examples in Perth. In 1984, however, the Art Gallery of Western Australia purchased Lucian Freud's *Naked Man with Rat*, 1977-1978, a work shown in *A New Spirit in Painting*, and this became an important reference for Robertson and his peers in their graduating year.

Also in 1984, Robertson, Mario D'Alonzo, and other third year students, took a bus to Sydney to see the Biennale. Curated by Leon Paroissien, *The Fifth Biennale of Sydney* was dominated by painting, much of it reflecting the new expressive and figurative turn. Of particular note for Robertson were works by Davida Allen, Annette Bezor, Peter Booth, Juan Davila and Mandy Martin. The artists selected by Paroissien '[shared] a broadly-based common concern: the structuring of a personal artistic language to express an interaction with society. That interaction ranges from engagement with a private or domestic situation that has wider social ramifications, to critiques of contemporary society and its dominant cultures'.[14] Robertson felt that such concerns were reflected in the evolution of his own pictorial language – emerging from his lived experience and interaction with the world.

Robertson was especially struck by the Biennale's satellite exhibition at the S.H. Irvin Gallery, *Aspects of Australian Figurative Painting 1942-1962*, curated by Christine Dixon and Terry Smith, designed to give historical context to works of contemporary art in the Biennale. The theme of the satellite exhibition was: 'alienation, both personal and social. The exhibition challenges the orthodox view of the 1950s that sees the period as comfortable, increasingly wealthy and secure'.[15] It was hoped that the examples of historical, expressive figuration on display might 'take on new meaning and in turn sharpen our perception of present art forms'.[16]

In 1984, shortly after returning from the Biennale, Robertson produced *South Beach Foundry* (fig. 4), an industrial landscape of a series of sheds set in coastal scrub. At the time Robertson was living

Fig. 4. *South Beach Foundry*, 1984, oil on card, 28.6 x 45.4 cm
Curtin University Art Collection, purchased 1984

at artist George Haynes' home and studio in Walker Street, Fremantle, a short walk from the foundry. He used a moody, low-key colour palette and expressive brushstrokes to evoke the atmosphere of the desolate scene. Here we see what Elizabeth Baker referred to as 'an agitated "personal" application of paint', as well as the influence of artists Robertson had seen at the Biennale, namely Mandy Martin, and the Social Realists, Noel Counihan and Danila Vassilieff from the satellite show.[17]

Painters of Robertson's generation sought to develop an individual artistic style by studying and adapting varied sources – from art history, contemporary art and popular culture. Already Robertson had a wide repertoire of art historical references which had begun to inform his work including: the nineteenth-century exponents of Realism, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Gustave Courbet; Post-Impressionist painters of domestic life, Pierre Bonnard, Walter Sickert and Édouard Vuillard; the evocative, everyday scenes of Edward Hopper; contemporary figurative artists from the School of London such as Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud; the strange, unsettling scenes of suburban life of Eric Fischl and Mark Tansey; artists, such as Avigdor Arikha and Richard Diebenkorn, who had worked in both abstract and representational modes; and painters who imbued figures and objects in space with a spiritual or metaphysical dimension, such as Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, Giorgio de Chirico, and Giorgio Morandi.[18] Of Australian historical art, together

with the aforementioned Social Realists, it was Sidney Nolan's 'Wimmera' series, 1942-44, that particularly struck a chord; and in the contemporary realm, the work of Davida Allen and Mandy Martin. By the time he graduated in 1984, Robertson had developed a wide variety of interests, both historical and contemporary, which would inform his work.

Free of the burden of formalist notions of art's need to take its place in a progression of styles, this generation did not feel obliged to 'innovate' in a proscribed manner. Rather, the post-modern era encouraged a multiplicity of styles, based on personal experiences, aesthetic inclinations and individual choice. As Eric Fischl said of the times:

> One thing was clear: There would be no style, no overarching aesthetic that would dominate art for the foreseeable future. What was being ushered in was the chaos of the non-hierarchical, democratic plurality of individualism. Everyone was on an identity quest.[19]

The Oddfellows

In Perth this 'identity quest' took various forms. For Robertson, and several other artists who studied at WAIT in the early-to-mid-1980s, individual styles were developed in the form of figurative painting set in recognisable urban and suburban contexts. 'Oddfellows' was a term first used by curator Sandra Murray to describe this group of painters which, with Robertson, included Tom Alberts, Christine Barker, Mario D'Alonzo, Andrew Daly, Indra Geidans, Fred Gilbert, Richard Gunning, Thomas Hoareau, André Lipscombe, Chris Malcolm, Megan Salmon and Yvette Watt.[20]

In general, the group did not embrace gestural mark-making, as was characteristic of much Neo-Expressionist art of the 1980s. And while figurative and representational, their works did not resemble academic painting, or the photorealism that came to prominence in Perth in the late 1970s.[21] Rather, what the Oddfellows showed was an interest in the expressive potential of the human figure and objects in the [physical] world, though rendered in various ways – from meticulous detail and painstaking brushwork to deliberate simplification of motifs. Much of their work was infused with fantastical or poetic elements; such as imagined spaces, mythological or art historical references, as was characteristic of the plural, post-modern art scene of the 1980s, invigorated by a rejection of modernist precepts. In 1987 Thomas Hoareau invoked the spirit of the times when describing the work of Tom Alberts in local art journal *Praxis M*: 'Choosing to start from scratch rather than continuing perhaps an exhausted modernist aesthetic of painting, Tom paints figures in a fairly naturalistic space, relying on the given situation and the gestures of the figures to communicate his intentions'.[22]

Hoareau, who had graduated from WAIT a few years before Robertson, developed the most socially engaged, though also personal, interpretation of local places. His painting recorded the obliteration of many inner city buildings during Perth's redevelopment in the 1980s, imagery that served as a metaphor for deeper impermanence and loss.[23] Such evocative depictions of local life and the city resonated with themes developing in other art forms in Perth at the time, namely in photography and music.[24] As Perth did not have a strong tradition of depicting urban or suburban life in painting, it is within this broader creative arts context that the work of the Oddfellows can be understood.[25]

The name Oddfellows was derived from the name of a building on St Georges Terrace in Perth's city centre, where a number of these artists lived and worked. Hoareau and Richard Gunning had moved to the Oddfellows Flats in late 1982, and other tenants in the early 1980s included Alberts and Fiona Gardner. Hoareau later moved to a block of flats across the road, named Bishop's Grove, as did Lipscombe.[26] Writing on this urban milieu, Allison Archer notes that cheap accommodation was still available in the central business district during this period, in many blocks of flats that dated from the 1930s, and that were demolished in the late 1980s.[27]

Life drawing classes at the Oddfellows Flats were established in 1983 and held weekly, with participants contributing to the cost of the model. These classes continued in various locations until 1988.[28] The Oddfellows activities were part of increasing local activity in the realms of painting, conceptual and performance art, and new media, with the opening of a number of artist-run spaces and galleries concentrated in the inner city. In addition to the Oddfellows studios and classes there was: Praxis (est. 1975), an exhibition space at the Murray Mews in the city centre, and from 1981 in Fremantle, which also published the *Praxis M* journal; Media-Space (est. 1981), an exhibition and studio space for multidisciplinary practices, with facilities including a photographic darkroom and print workshop; Artemis (est. 1985), a collective of women artists with studios at Entertainment House in West Perth, and later Artshouse in the Perth Cultural Centre; Beach Gallery (est. 1987), a space run by emerging artists in Beaufort Street, Northbridge; and studios at Gotham (est. 1987).[29] Praxis, which had begun to receive funding from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council in 1981, developed into the larger, formalised institution of the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) in 1988-89.[30]

A number of commercial galleries also came to prominence in the 1980s, including Galerie Düsseldorf (est. 1976), which represented Robertson from 1987. In terms of viewing contemporary painting, from 1985 the Art Gallery of Western Australia mounted a series of influential exhibitions which featured painting; and there was also a marked increase in publications and exhibitions on Western Australian painting, both historical and contemporary.[31] Though one should not overstate these developments in terms of opportunities for artists, there was a sense of post-modern freedom in the air – one could concentrate on the uniqueness of the 'place where you were', within the context of global trends and an increasingly invigorated local scene.[32]

Fig. 5. *Head Study*, 1988, oil on board, 17.7 x 15 cm
Donated by Dr. Michael McCall 2001, Murdoch University Art Collection

Fremantle Years, 1985–1990

Despite being related to the Oddfellows group in terms of figurative style, and having the shared educational experience of WAIT in the early 1980s, Robertson only recalls attending one of the Oddfellows drawing classes during his student years. Several of the Oddfellows artists were older, if only by a few years, and this meant that they were not in the same year at art school. Also, during his studies, Robertson lived in Fremantle, away from the inner city where the group was concentrated. In addition, he was absent from the scene over every summer break, working at the Caiguna roadhouse, one thousand kilometres south-east of Perth, beyond Robertson's birthplace at the town of Norseman.

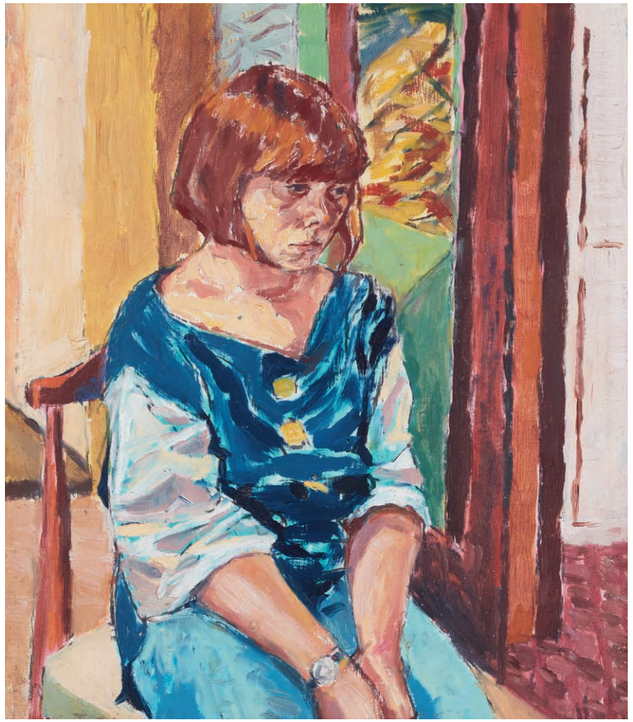

Fig. 6. *Girl Watching TV*, 1985, oil on board, 31 x 27 cm
Collection of Megan Salmon

After graduating in 1985, Robertson moved to a cottage in South Fremantle, with fellow WAIT graduate Megan Salmon. Salmon set up a studio in a large spare bedroom, and Robertson took a space in the Princess Chambers building in the centre of Fremantle. Robertson and Salmon also initiated drawing classes at the house they shared. Participants included Andrew Daly, Mario D'Alonzo, Susan Flavell, Stuart Green and Linda Ullrich.[33] Rather than pay a model, as the Oddfellows had done, the artists took turns to model for the group.

In these years Salmon and Robertson worked closely together, exchanging knowledge and offering criticism of each other's work. They would model for one another, as in *Girl Watching TV*, 1985, a portrait of Salmon (fig. 6). Already in this early work Robertson reveals his interest in attaining a symbiosis between sitter and setting. The white back of a stretched canvas – a work of Salmon's – can be seen to the right of the picture plane. Described with light brushwork, it adds to a series of verticals which surround the sitter in ambiguous spatial planes of near and middle distance.

Fig. 7. *Petrol Station, Perth*, 1986, oil on cardboard, 22 x 25 cm
Collection of Tania Ferrier

The overall treatment of the subject, the formal integration of figure and ground, reflects what Robertson refers to as the 'patterning of space' in the intimate domestic interiors of Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard.[34] Always interested in problems of spatial organisation, Robertson was focussing here on the tension between attaining depth and volume versus representing surface effects and patterns – with the latter winning out in this period.

Important to both Robertson's and Salmon's development in these years were *plein air* painting excursions, taken together with André Lipscombe, to a variety of locations between Fremantle and central Perth. Lipscombe had been a year above Robertson at Applecross Senior High School where both had been in the Special Art Program, and he was also a link to the activities of the Oddfellows. *Petrol Station, Perth*, 1986 (fig. 7), was painted on one of these *plein air* outings. It depicts a Caltex Petrol Station at the Corner of Mill Street and Mounts Bay Road, close to the Oddfellows Flats and Bishop's Grove, where Lipscombe lived. On these outings, there was a determination to solve specific pictorial problems in a single session, intensified by the group's desire to finish paintings in situ. One of Robertson's aims in painting these urban scenes was to combine banal settings with exploratory pictorial approaches, creating visual interest through arrangement and pattern.

Fig. 8. *Coptic St, London*, 1987, oil on card, 18 x 28 cm
Collection of George Haynes and Jane Martin

During this time, Robertson, Salmon and another WAIT graduate, Chris Hopewell, were working towards an exhibition to be held at the Fremantle Arts Centre, which opened in March 1986. To mark the occasion, the Director of the Centre, Ian Templeman, interviewed the artists in the South Fremantle home (fig. 10). His commentary encapsulates the general mood of optimism:

> The past year has been one of transition from art student to practising artist. If I had imagined prior to the interview that I would be talking to three timid young artists, unsure of future direction and puzzled by the career path they had chosen, I would have needed to quickly revise the assumption. They were confident, highly professional in their attitude to their craft, resolute and positive about the immediate future.[35]

After the Fremantle show, seeking further inspiration, Robertson and Salmon embarked on a trip to Europe, from August 1986 to February 1987, sketching and painting as they went. They spent much of their time in London, Robertson producing a Sickert-inspired urban scene in central London (fig. 8). Memorable experiences for Robertson included a Frank Auerbach show at the Marlborough Gallery,

Fig. 9. *View of Florence from Piazzale Michelangelo*, 1987, oil on linen, 70.5 x 107 cm
Curtin University Art Collection, purchased 1988

drawing from objects at the British Museum, and seeing Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, 1533, and Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556-59, at The National Gallery. The couple spent around a month on the continent, imbibing as much art as possible, notably for Robertson, Vermeer's *The Art of Painting,* 1666-68, in Vienna; Van Gogh, Rembrandt and seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting in Amsterdam; portraits by Paula Modersohn-Becker and townscapes by Gerhard Richter in Munich.

In Italy, Robertson was struck by the vibrancy of Venetian colour in the works of Giorgione, Titian and Veronese – red and blue becoming key colours for the artist over the next decade. He also became enamoured of central Italian frescos and fresco cycles, in particular, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good and Bad Government,* c. 1337-40, in Siena and Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, c. 1305, which depicts stories of the life of the Virgin and Christ, and the Last Judgement. Robertson had copied a detail of an angel in the Scrovegni Chapel in second-year art school, and felt a strong connection to the work. He was captivated by the solidity and presence of the figures; how gesture could communicate such potent meaning; and the harmony between figure and ground in the paintings. He recalled the chapel 'feeling like a doll's house', an enveloping and intimate space, with frescos on all sides, and a painted canopy of deep blue sky and stars above.[36]

Fig. 10. Kevin Robertson (right) with Chris Hopewell and Megan Salmon (her paintings behind) in South Fremantle, 1986, photographed for the Fremantle Arts Review. Photography by Pat Barblett

On their return to Perth, Robertson and Salmon continued to develop their own milieu of critical exchange and practice which, beyond painting, included the mounting of Super 8 film festivals. They organised two film festivals (with Lipscombe), the first presented in the backyard of their new home in Fremantle in 1986; and the second at the West Leederville home of Stuart Green and Susan Flavell in 1987. For the latter festival, Robertson produced an animated film, *The Death of Actaeon*, 1987 (fig. 11), inspired by his recent study of Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* at the National Gallery. Based on a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Titian's painting captures the moment in which Diana (Goddess of the Hunt) is surprised by Actaeon while she is bathing.

In Robertson's film, gestural and expressive imagery combines with original music composed for the film by Kim Salmon. The music, described by Robertson as 'dark, minimalist punk', conveys the emotional intensity of the story.[37] In Ovid's text, when Actaeon encounters Diana he is splashed with water which turns him into a stag; he is then mauled to death by his own hounds, who fail to recognise their master. In the animated film, Robertson refers to these key moments in the narrative, but he also departs from Ovid's narration, making Diana more deliberate in her pursuit of Actaeon. Not only is Actaeon attacked by his dogs, but he is also pierced by Diana's arrow. Robertson also

Fig. 11. Stills from *The Death of Actaeon*, 1987, Super 8 film from paintings on glass, 1:58 minutes
Artwork by Kevin Robertson; Music by Kim Salmon

suggests a physical/sexual interaction between the two protagonists, which may explain Diana's mix of violent response and active pursuit.[38]

Returning to painting, Robertson continued to investigate figures in domestic spaces, reflecting his experience of a particular atmosphere and moment in time. *Two Women in an Interior*, 1988 (fig. 12), depicts Salmon and a friend, Jemma Dacre, a textile designer and fellow former WAIT student. Set in the kitchen of their Fremantle home, the work shows Robertson's progress in combining realistic depiction of everyday domestic space with all-over picture-plane patterning – from the coloured spots on Salmon's dress to the bright stripes of the curtains above her, to the perspectival horizontals of the dark blue hanging picture, to the flat oblong of the fridge it faces across the narrow room; and from the arabesques of the indoor plants that create spatial depth by being superimposed over the flat planes of fridge and floor, to the arabesques of the violin, hanging on the far wall, that creates spatial recession by means of scale contrasts against the figures in the foreground.

The women focus on an image in a book – a sculpture by Aristide Maillol. The angle of the table, its corner pointing towards the viewer, draws attention toward the open book and the act of contemplation. The curvilinear forms of the sculpture seen in the art book form a visual triad with the arcs of the indoor plants in the middle ground and the curves of the violin further away – another indication of Robertson's developing sophistication in the arrangement of pictorial elements to show both perspectival recession and flat-patterned design. Capturing the female sitter deep in thought

was to become a major theme of Robertson's figurative practice. In *Two Women in an Interior*, where Salmon and Dacre are presented together looking through an art book, the atmosphere is an intriguing composite of genre (we are looking at an artwork that shows people looking at an artwork) and realism – with the slight awkwardness of extended posing that pertains to such real-time figurative painting, especially when it captures something as transient as turning over and flattening the pages of a book on a table. Such combination of stillness and orchestration may have been one of the qualities that had attracted Robertson to Lucian Freud's *Naked Man with Rat*, when it was acquired by the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

The same setting is used in *Interior with Red Tablecloth*, 1988 (fig. 13), though it is a view from the other side of the kitchen, and Salmon is sitting alone. An empty chair is pulled out from the table, suggesting the comings and goings of the household, an architecture which alludes to absence and presence. This sense of what has come before, and what is yet to come, gives the space a psychological texture, also reflected in the slouching interiority of the sitter. The suburban cottage appears like a stage-set, where players walk on and off, their interaction with each other and the space taking on both ordinary and intangible dimensions.

On returning briefly to Norseman in 1989, Robertson completed a portrait, *Linda and Jamie, Norseman,* c. 1989, of his sister-in-law, Linda, just returned from playing netball, and her child (fig. 2). The walls and furniture of the Norseman home were muted and pale, and Robertson did little to

Fig. 12. *Two Women in an Interior*, 1988, oil on canvas, 45.5 x 45.5 cm
Collection of Douglas and Magda Sheerer

Fig. 13. *Interior with Red Tablecloth*, 1988, oil on plywood, 29.2 x 34.2 cm
Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital Art Collection

alter them in the painting, seeing this as an opportunity to experiment with a different palette. With no Venetian red in sight, and no apparent staging, emphasis is upon the mother and child who watch television, captured in another arrangement of real-time.

Sunday Night, 1989-90, represents a turning point in relation to the representation of figures in the domestic interior (fig. 14). The painting shows two figures, a male in the foreground, close up against the picture plane, and a standing female in the bedroom behind. Robertson painted the work from a high viewpoint, setting himself up on top of the kitchen table. From this angle the interior space could be compressed, and figures and shapes designed to create an enlivened scene, with particular emphasis on linear elements – the edge of the table in the foreground, the door and doorframe, the various paintings, and a checkerboard floor which seems to be reflected in the exaggeratedly glossy open door. The shard-like prominence of this patterned door frames both the close and distant figures, and pulls the eye into the background bedroom where the busy checkerboard pattern and its skewed reflection contrast abruptly with the simplified shapes of bedspread, far wall and shadow cast on the floor. In what may or may not be an intentional art-historical reference, the visual feature made of this slightly oblique and reflective door recalls the bravura rendering of a slash of mirror glare in John Singer Sargent's *The Daughters of Edward Darley Bolt,* 1882.

Presenting the scene from a height allows for a clear view through the picture into the background space, and an opportunity to experiment with the way an angle or point of view can affect the narrative or the psychology of an image. Essentially, it is a viewpoint that allows for multiple episodes to occur together psychologically, but separately, in pictorial space – compositionally one on top of the other – but with relations between figures open to interpretation. It is no surprise that this bifurcation of space developed in Robertson's work after close study of Italian fresco paintings, a central problem of which was to try to convey different narrative moments on the one picture plane.[39] The mood is ambiguous but there is a sense of disconnection between these figures who inhabit the same house; a lack of communicative engagement, a separation. A sense of claustrophobia is created by the very restricted space that the sitters occupy, forced by the narrow oblong of the canvas, and accentuated by the receding oblongs of the open door frames. Robertson has moved into the realm of the psychology of space.

Fig. 14. *Sunday Night*, 1989-90, oil on canvas, 71 x 35.5 cm
Royal Perth Hospital Art Collection