



## OUT OF THE BLUE

SATURDAY 5TH JULY - SUNDAY 27TH JULY

David Aspden, Paul Connor, Bret Flugelman, John Firrth-Smith, Graham Kuo, Alun Leach-Jones, Sandra Leveson, Andrew Nott, John Olsen, Ann Thomson, Annie Hsiao-Wen Wang



## Out of the blue

*Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them. Leo Tolstoy*

*Artists continually glorify – they do nothing else... Friedrich Nietzsche*

*The whole world is a work of art; we are parts of that work of art. Virginia Woolf*

Virginia Woolf in *Moments of being* is correct to aver that art is everywhere you look and that we are part of that movement. From the billboards you see every day to the TV you view at night and the pictures you take with your smartphone or camera, art is present. It exists on every continent and in every country. A toothbrush, a sock or car is in part selected for its artistic merit. Works of art, however, take us to another plane: through artists' visions, creativity and abilities and through different forms we are transported to worlds of visual imagination and emotion. With *Out of the blue* as its opening exhibition, Spot81 is providing a taste of this diversity and wonder. The focus is on abstract art and on the colour blue as a curatorial device.

Like art, the primary colour blue is inescapable. It is in the wide sky above and on the oceans below; it fills rivers meandering through the landscape and is part of the detritus of the everyday. The word and colour also resonate with many meanings. In Australia a redhead is called blue, a biff is a blue, ideas come out of the blue, friends return from the blue, you swim in the blue, jazz music can be blue, blue grass is there too. Bathroom products are usually blue as are the medical ones. Blue washes your clothes bright, and depression makes you very blue. Blue is also associated with the fifth chakra, located at the throat. Someone who speaks the truth and is faithful in all ways is "true blue." Through the blue we are connected to communication and, when communication is lacking, we can talk to someone until we are "blue in the face." Blue is also



*Thunder on Mountain - Andrew Nott. Acrylic, pastel and colour pencil on Waterford paper, 142 x 330cm 2013*

a most holy colour with Pope Pius V reserving it for the Mother of Christ and, ironically, blue represents the pornography industry.

The colour is made from the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli (ultramarine) or the cheaper blue mineral, azurite. It is often said that the difference can be summed up in how artists employ the two blues: ultramarine to give height to the skies, and azure to give depth to the seas. Dark blue is associated with depth, expertise, and stability and represents knowledge, control, strength, integrity and seriousness. Bright blue is associated with health, healing, tranquillity, understanding, and softness. Blue can even represent the deadly sin, sloth.

In the hands of artists, blue has stirred our emotions, changed the ways we behave and even altered the course of history. When the effect of lapis lazuli, the exotic blue stone, like a piece of the sky itself, was discovered it changed how art looked. Colours previously were made from earth pigments, so art was rather brown. A most striking image occurs when a small bottle of the finished product is held up, a mesmerising ultramarine - intense, bright, pure and strong.

A quick voyage into art in search of blue posits the viewer in the Scrovegni Chapel looking at the Giotto frescoes - one of the most important rooms in the whole of western art. It is a hymn to the colour blue. Giotto used lapis lazuli blue on the ceiling vault to depict heaven. The colour thus becomes emblematic of the divine. Blue became the colour of Mary and began to be controlled by the Church. This maintained its high price and corralled its use. Two hundred years later, however, Titian defied

the convention, and Bacchus and Ariadne (in the National Gallery in London) became part of art history. Picasso via the Romantics and flowers dotted with blue appears afterwards on the journey: blue. Here we find him in his Blue Period. This can be traced to the death in 1904 of his friend Casagemus in Paris with the painting of La Celestina. Next it is Yves Klein in 1962, who invented his own colour (International Klein Blue) with the help of pigment specialist Edouard Adam. These creations were textural all over blue paintings in his very own colour and very blue. Very few abstract abstractionists who followed avoided blue, not Rothko nor Pollock nor even de Kooning who made the colour white his own.

Out of the blue exhibits artists who are cognisant of the above story of blue and who employ blue and mostly abstraction as their own language to communicate with their audiences. William Buelo (can it be blue?) Gould the artist/liar/murderer and forger in Richard Flanagan's award winning novel, Gould's book of fish, responds to the question, 'Why do you paint?' with the answer 'because you must find beauty in the most adverse of worlds'. 2014 is a little cheerier than van Diemen's penal colony in the 1800s but blue remains as a form of expressing mood, shape and subject. Out of the blue, readily demonstrates this within the context of paint, print and sculpture.

Each artist in the exhibition plunges full speed ahead into the colour blue. Some, like Annie Hsiao-Wen Wang in Cinder and Andrew Nott in Thunder on mountain, immerse themselves into the hue, while others like John Olsen in Indian contemplation and Graham Kuo in I saw you standing alone, are less engulfed and employ it sparingly.

For Annie Hsiao-Wen Wang and Andrew Nott blue is all over and at one from edge to edge of the canvas. It demonstrates a vivid and profound delight for both of the artists. They smother their canvases in blue and the viewer is given the opportunity to dive in: blue is blue. There is no depression present; here we have hope. It is warm not cold. In their hands painting has shifted to become the dramatic record of the act of painting, an act whose traces are brushstrokes, impasto, noticeable outlines, distortions and most importantly sheer flatness of blue and more blue.

John Olsen and Graham Kuo, by contrast, use blue sparingly: it is essential but forms only part of the composition. For them, blue is instrumental to the shape and, more importantly, highlights the image in the picture plane in constructive crucial elements within each individual painterly story. They are both colourists and what they conceive and its meaning lies in its conception rather than what is realised. Thus the quality of the result is based on a personal effort that uses blue both astutely and intuitively. Both artists and their works of art, pay at their core, homage to Asia: one in subject matter, the other by place of birth. John Olsen has often employed Asian subjects in both prints and paintings and feels comfortable in the iconography of India, Japan and China. Calligraphy in particular allows him to dribble watercolour and paint easily and so readily that it affords his style of loosely placing colour on paper and canvas. Here the blue drips and drops assist the composition and the balance of base colour at the bottom of the image. Graham Kuo, on the other hand, wallows in his opportunity to splash blue in gay abandon but oh so thoughtfully: Kuo is colour erupting. The duo demonstrate how abstraction can, as Wassily Kandinsky said, comfort a troubled soul.

In Rising #2 John Firth-Smith reveals another aspect in blue. It is a painting that has been made with a will, with feeling, with passion and with love. His touch, while careful, is rarely hesitant and he does not push the paint around indecisively. He knows blue and its shades. He is aware of the value of each stroke or series of strokes before he commits himself. Consequently, his paint surface has a freshness and sparkle that a more laboured technique would not yield. Water seems to be at the core of this painting in spite of the abstraction that is served up: colour and pigment takes precedence over description. There is



*I Saw You Standing Alone - Graham Kuo,  
Oil & acrylic on canvas, 167 x 167cm, 2014*



*Oval #1 - Alun Leach-Jones,  
Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 52cm, 2014*

a sense of rapid and continuous movement which evokes an inventive, audacious and exciting art with passion for all things nautical although it is metaphorical not figurative.

If abstraction means anything it means painterliness, constructed by a constellation of qualities. Loose, rapid handling, or the look of it; masses that blotted and fused instead of shapes that stayed distinct; large and conspicuous rhythms; broken colour; uneven saturations or densities of paint and exhibited mark making. This and more is the blue of John Firth-Smith's *Rising #2*, with its broken and blurred outlines that evoke broken and blurred movements that yet further elicit depth and space more than any lines of perspective could. A dramatic mood is created and a rhythmic space that invites us into it or to follow it.

David Aspden and Alun Leach-Jones attack their canvases and blue in quite a similar and formalistic fashion and manner. Both have employed music to break the tension which is making art. Colour has been central to their art and both have always understood blue. David Aspden's *Out of the blue* and Alun Leach-Jones' *Oval #1* and *Oval #2* invoke assembly and a Mondrian like structure of the picture plane. All three paintings reference organisation and are formed by starts that are followed by chains of consequence that can foresee and visualize the finished completed painting. Each canvas demonstrates the seriousness of the artists. The canvases exhibit intellect, inspiration and practiced execution driven by confident imagination.

The formality in *Out of the blue* and in the *Ovals* exert abstraction at its best and manifest and validate this method of painting particularly as they exploit blue. Each creates an intently dramatic mood and a palpable space that invites us deep into it where a sense of motion in time is evoked. There is an expression of energy driven by a rhythmic harmony that resonates with the bright, bright blue. Aspden and Leach-Jones are aware and pay tribute to abstraction because it is dependent exclusively on form and colour and as an art style it strips down to painting's basic elements. As Clement Greenberg, the American art critic, said, *'They may be easy to copy but hard to conceive.'*

The sacred river lures the king, *Barges sing to Bastille* and *Buildings with eyes* are three small works by Paul Connor that sing in harmony but only employ abstraction as part of each painting. This is unlike the other artists in the exhibition who are driven and are one with this style. Paul Connor takes us on a voyage of discovery through which he is determined to realize the form, colour (blue) and texture of his subject matter with the greatest possible completeness. Forms are made full and continuous, and the colour is kept rich. So much is said in paint, in every little individual space.

*Rising #2 - John Firth-Smith,  
Oil on linen, 360 x 122cm, 2001*



Nina by Anne Thompson returns our eyes to abstraction and away from Paul Connor's walk in the landscape and does so in her usual strident style. She is determined to demonstrate the shape, mood and texture of her subject in bold swatches and Jackson Pollock drips of colour, not forgetting blue. Her forms are full and bold and the colour is rich and all absorbing. The blue is rapid, continuous and inventive, full of turbulent energy creating a picture that delights in directness, starkness and force. Nina demonstrates that and is consistent with the optical conventions that are integral to abstract painting. Most importantly it is a construction that shows a composition in a unique form and demonstrates that form, tone, colour and even composition are not simply ends in themselves.

Aura, by Sandra Leveson and Complementary arches by Bert Flugelman, although two quite separate forms of art and in different mediums, can be read together because of the spotted finish on the canvas and the small scoured circular markings on the stainless steel. Like small and slightly larger burnished pixilation lacquered onto the patina of the two surfaces, each attract the viewer's eye. One surface is in variegated light blue and flows like an ocean while the other reflects the surrounding blue from the surrounding spread of the rest of the exhibition and is very still.

The American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein was renowned for his all over dots and he said, 'I want my painting to look as if it has been programmed, I want to hide the record of my hand.' This is probably true of both Bert Flugelman and Sandra Leveson, particularly of the former who spent a lifetime polishing his symmetrical sculptures in search of perfection and allowing his art to reflect what is or was nearby. With this style and method Bert Flugelman, by employing mirror images, very often made abstracted landscapes shine and shimmer in the outdoors.

In tight, integrated and simple forms sculptured out of a hard material Flugelman, every time, is able to attract and hold our attention. Complementary arches is the sum of the void spaces and the rounded curved bodies that can find a home in a paddock or a garden. Here is success in contemporary order creating a pure form that seems to be devoid of the artist's hands and his intervention. Complementary arches, in the exhibition, Out of the blue stands proud, echoing and resonating hues of blue from all that surrounds it in blue and in abstraction hanging on the gallery walls.

Joe Eisenberg OAM  
Cultural Director  
Maitland Regional Art Gallery



The smaller gallery space at SPOT81 will feature applied and decorative arts by leading Australian and International artisans including Milly Dent, Tricia Harvey, Hoglund Glass, Keiko Matsui, An Morision, NANU, Keith Rowe, Jonathon Westacott



Michelle Perry  
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Gallery Hours  
Wednesday - Sunday 11am - 5pm