RODICK CARMICHAEL

THE AUSTRALIAN YEARS

GEELONG GALLERY

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FOREWORD

Geoffrey Edwards
Director

In line with the Geelong Gallery's longstanding commitment to exhibit and document the work of senior Australian artists whose practice is based in our wider region, this survey of paintings by Scottish-born, Rodick Carmichael, deals exclusively with his career subsequent to his arrival in Australia in 1974. This selection of over twenty paintings and supporting works on paper takes account of significant themes, stylistic developments and philosophical concerns that characterise Carmichael's studio output from the mid-seventies till now. ¶ Although Carmichael's career includes long periods devoted to teaching, writing and art criticism, he is first and foremost a painter whose work assimilates a wide range of sources and influences from French nineteenth-century painting to canonical modernism, from traditional Japanese costume to that most collectable type of ceramic, the broadly modelled and even more broadly painted Staffordshire 'flat-back' figure group. ¶ For his spirited and insightful catalogue essay on the art of Rodick Carmichael, we are greatly indebted to Jeffrey Makin – himself an artist, writer and critic of wide renown. We thank him as well for arranging the generous assistance with this publication that has been provided through the Port Jackson Press Australia, the celebrated fine art publishing house. ¶ Sincere thanks are due also to the Brougham Art School and Gallery in Geelong for assistance with the publication of this record of an exhibition with which the Geelong Gallery is proud to be associated. And, once again, the Gallery is indebted to Bernadette Uzelac and her company People@Work and the William Angliss (Victoria) Charitable Fund for gracious and generous support for the project. ¶ I am delighted to acknowledge the work of Damien Stanyer at GollingsPidgeon in regard to the design of this catalogue and, at the same time, I record our thanks to George Stawicki for his photography of the exhibits. ¶ Concurrent with *Rodick Carmichael – the Australian years*, the Brougham Art School and Gallery has mounted a separate exhibition devoted to Carmichael's works on paper and we acknowledge with thanks the cooperation we have received from Virginia Hodgkinson, curator of this parallel event. ¶ In terms of curatorial responsibility for this initiative, I must pay tribute to the Gallery's former curator, Brian Hubber, for his preliminary work in planning and developing the scope and content of the exhibition in close consultation with Rodick Carmichael, prior to handing over to Lisa Sullivan, his recently-appointed successor as curator here at Geelong. Lisa deserves great credit for ensuring at short notice that both the exhibition and catalogue have been delivered in the admirable form and shape in which, I trust, visitors to *Rodick Carmichael – the Australian years* will take great interest and delight. ¶ Finally, and most importantly of all, I wish to place on record here our appreciation of the unfailingly kind and enthusiastic cooperation we have received from the painter himself, and from Dr Heather Stewart who, as Rodick's partner and as co-director of the Brougham Art School and Gallery, has given much time and astute advice as well as practical assistance throughout all stages of the project.

LATE MODERNISM AT MORIAC: THE ART OF RODICK CARMICHAEL

Jeffrey Makin

For those of us whose artistic consciousness was formed at the height of the Modernist era, and continue to paint on during this time of what arguably could be described as Late Modernism, the very thought of Post-Modernism seems absurdly premature. When did Modernism end, did it die of natural causes, or was it assassinated, and if so, by whom? No one can produce an answer. And until a corpse or tomb is produced, one can only assume that we have a gang of usurpers on our hands. ¶ Post-Modernism's popularity amongst art theoreticians immediately makes one suspicious. You see (*sic*. one should say you *read* or *hear*), proficiency within a visual language system is not required. It is the word that matters. Such a reality seems like a replay of the events that led to the publication of *The painted word*, Tom Wolfe's famous 1975 debunking of Manhattan's cultural commissars. Wolfe's argument satirised the propensity of art historians, Marxist theorists and curatorial elites to dismiss art as unclean until they baptised it. Like Jesuits they saw themselves as the righteous guardians of the doorway into the Kingdom of Heaven. Salvation of course demanded absolution, you became a Christian only when they said you were ready. And art became art only when they said so ... or so it seemed until a Wolfe knocked on their door. ¶ Once exposed the game was up. Art lovers began to look elsewhere for explanations. Some actually began to look at the paintings. Others began to talk to artists: that discredited sect who rightly claimed authorship over the very art that false prophets had built a career on misinterpreting. For a short time peace reigned in the kingdom of art, and the artist was reinstated as the expert in the field. ¶ But thirty years have passed and it's all happening again. Wolfe was thought to have been critically crucified, yet his cause has now been convincingly resurrected by Roger Kimball (a Wolfe on steroids) in his hard-hitting exposé, *The rape of the Masters: how political correctness sabotages art*. ¶ Against this background it's no wonder that Rodick Carmichael has described Post-Modernism as 'the poisoned chalice from the palace.' ¶ To artists like Carmichael, Post-Modernism looks like an imposter: it lacks substance, evidence of drawing skills, and has little artistic or intellectual rigour and no originality. It seems as if the very function of

art has been turned upside down. The authenticity of genuine artistic production lies in the ritual, the body of knowledge and traditions of art making. With so-called Post-Modernism it lay in almost anything else: politics, gender studies, polymorphic infantile eroticism, self-mutilation, erectile dysfunction, cruising the cusp of one discipline or another, thus avoiding accountability (in terms of content and criteria) to any. ¶ When Carmichael arrived in Australia from Scotland in 1974, aged 43, his paintings were abstract in spite of a thorough education at the Edinburgh College of Arts from 1948 to 1953. This was consistent with the work of most thinking artists at that time. Art had been on a de-figuring trajectory since Cubism. But by the early 1970s many of the major players of the abstract 'isms' were finding the genre exhausted and began drawing the long road back to a figured painting, only this time armed with a knowledge much broader than any that had prefigured it in the pre-Cubist era. A clear illustration of this shift can be seen in the work of the notable American, Philip Guston, one of the architects of Abstract Expressionism. ¶ At the time I was working as Head of the Painting Department at the Prahran College of Advanced Education. Art schools were then much more important than they are now. This was primarily because the staff members were all practising and exhibiting artists (appointed for that reason). Hence the debates were real, not hypothetical, and being argued by actual participants not by theoreticians, 'wannabes' or academics. When Carmichael joined my staff he brought with him, as a survivor of the UK 'art wars', experiences that seemed strangely familiar even though some of the main players were as unfamiliar to us as Australian artists were to him. As a Rome Scholar (he was awarded an Abbey Scholarship to study at the British School at Rome in 1957) he had encountered his first Australian painter romanticising the view from the Pinzio Gardens, as a post-card collector might, as the prime probity of painting. He was later to meet Arthur Boyd (1920–1999), who along with Sidney Nolan (1917–1992), he described in *Orienteering: painting in the landscape. Carmichael, Makin, Wolseley*, as enigmas: 'Australian artists who lived abroad and painted Australia from memory.' ¶ Carmichael's first Australian studio was above Dan Murphy's wine shop in Chapel Street, Prahran. Paintings from that time were usually square: they had no top or bottom, near or far in the sense of Renaissance perspective, and stressed the flatness of the picture field [cat. no.1, plate no.1]. Because of the poured, let-run nature of acrylic

paint, ribbons of colour formed into a warp and weft that some viewers wrongly described as tartans – an intellectually lazy conclusion cued by the simple fact of the painter's origin. I seem to recall that they actually had a lot more to do with weathered edges of the oft-painted Chapel Street facades. ¶ Carmichael's renewed interest in figurative imagery began to emerge when he moved to Geelong in 1975 to take up a post at the Gordon Institute, as Head of the School of Art & Design (and later, Principal Lecturer in Fine Art, School of Arts, Deakin University). Setting up studio at Moriac, twenty kilometres west of Geelong, Carmichael became totally immersed in the culture and history of his new home. The region is known for its sweeping volcanic plains, and a battle between rival indigenous clans witnessed by runaway convict, William Buckley, who in the early 19th century had lived with aboriginals nearby. Buckley is referred to in some of Carmichael's first Moriac paintings [cat. no. 3, plate no. 3]. The fact that Arthur Streeton (1867–1943) was born just up the road at Mt Duneed had also not escaped Carmichael. Nor had the presence of one of Frederick McCubbin's (1855–1917) best paintings, *A bush burial*, in the Geelong Gallery, that was to trigger one of Carmichael's first major series. ¶ Moriac has been described by fellow Scotsman, Peter Hill, in his catalogue interview to Carmichael's 1988 Edinburgh Festival bicentenary exhibition, *Rodick Carmichael. An Antipodean decade 1978–1988*, as 'Fife with sunshine.' In the same interview, reference to the layered complexity of Carmichael's canvases is hinted at as the artist free-ranged over ideas that inform works such as his *Bush burial* paintings: the implied doom and tragedy of the unmarked grave; the anthropomorphic dimension of the spades that turn into faces, and the perimeter of the grave cavity that turns into a trope for the shrieking black cockatoos so numerous around Moriac. For Carmichael (and early superstitious settlers) the cockatoo became the *Funeral bird* [cat. no. 8, plate no. 5] announcing imminent deaths. Such a layering of meanings was truly allegorical and foreshadowed what was to come. But what Carmichael had also locked onto was that when McCubbin's *A bush burial* was first exhibited at the Victorian Artists' Society in April 1890, it was applauded by *The Argus* art critic, Sidney Dickinson, as uniquely Australian and the beginning of a national school. And by so doing, Carmichael had begun his inquiry into the art of his adopted country. ¶ By the mid-1980s and following a stint as a Visiting Fellow at the Tokyo National University, Carmichael's emblematic icon of the black-cockatoo-turned-burial-hole mutated into a series of large canvases based on the Sumo wrestler's fighting belt. Called a 'Mawashi', this belt is primarily used by the opponent to grip and lift by,

but in Carmichael's hands it became a knotted Moriac landscape [cat. no. 9, plate no. 6]. By now, the main course of Australian art had been invited to dine at the Carmichael table. Not as a setting, in the accepted picturesque manner of a Boyd or Nolan, or the inescapable presence that he lived in the middle of, but as an intellectual construct, with which to examine aspects of post-Cubist doctrine. Titles such as *Me and You Yangs* [cat. no. 4] and *Lascivious rocks III* [cat. no. 5, plate no. 4] were used as clues for the viewer who in the best Richard Wollheim sense approached an understanding of the meaning of a painting through the limitations of their 'cognitive stock'. ¶ The proposition of whether major art could be based on landscape was hotly debated throughout the 1980s and direct contact with leading landscapists such as John Wolseley (born 1938), John Olsen (born 1928) and Fred Williams (1927–1982) brought Carmichael well and truly into the fray. This is clearly evidenced by *Orienteering: painting in the landscape. Carmichael, Makin, Wolseley*, published by Deakin University Press in 1982 while Carmichael was Chairman of Visual Arts at Deakin, wherein three distinctly different approaches to landscape by Carmichael, Wolseley and myself were examined as case studies. ¶ Carmichael once wrote that 'paintings are for looking at – and they do not surrender their secrets easily.' This point was elaborated upon by both Michael Spens, editor of *Studio international*, and William Wright, in the 1988 Edinburgh Festival catalogue. Spens, in reference to Carmichael's Chinese/Indian elephants [cat. no. 12, plate no. 9; cat. no. 13; cat. no. 14, plate no. 10] and the layered nature of these works wrote of 'the cathartic embroils of Highlanders around the Khyber and other passes', referring to the experiences of his own soldiering Scottish ancestors. Wright focused on the diaristic nature of these works and Carmichael's 'new and saturated openess, lambently exotic colouration' and the confrontation with place. The 'place' was of course the Khyber Pass at Mt Moriac. This compositional motif was based on a Chinese plaster-cast of an Indian elephant complete with a Rajah's howdah, now found in many Australian living rooms – even in Geelong – and could also be used as a pot stand, a flat-topped pedestal, thus prompting definition as furniture or still life. For Carmichael, who bought this modern polychrome cast at Sassafras in the Dandenong Ranges in 1986, it is all of the aforementioned. Or none. Or perhaps more accurately, it's a zoomorphic trope used to create a conceptually complex yet lusciously painted, visual paradox. ¶ There was a certain serendipity surrounding Carmichael's new circumstances at Moriac. Discovering, for example, the story of the *Loch Ard*, a ship commissioned in 1878 by an Irish doctor also named Carmichael to transport his family to Australia.

It ended in tragedy smashing into Mutton Bird Island, near Port Campbell, south of Moriac. There were eighteen passengers and thirty-six crew. All were killed except two 18-year-olds, Eva Carmichael and Tom Pierce. The boy had been washed ashore and swam out to rescue Eva who, clinging to wreckage, washed into what is now known as the Loch Ard Gorge. Just over one hundred years later, a different Carmichael created a series of paintings around this event. These are masterly works rich in narrative and metaphor. The identity of the site is clearly conveyed without having to lapse into topographical description. The images of the young Eva and the heroic Tom emerge like ghosts over a thorny thicket (that also grows into the *Parker River* works [cat. no. 17, plate no. 11]) while at the entrance to the gorge the violence of the event seems about to erupt. Carmichael's orchestration of oil paint and expressionistic colour echoes the tempo of the events. Ragged form and coagulated impasto rush around those crusty cliffs and somehow culminate in a balloon of text appropriately screaming, 'Save our Souls'. ¶ As these works unfold before your eyes it becomes clear that the artist's insight is much more than academic. This is personal. Carmichael's *Loch Ard* series becomes a metaphor for the great Irish and Scottish diaspora – the spectres of the great potato famine, Culloden and the Highland Clearances visit upon these paintings. ¶ This theme of migration, in which Carmichael is a participant, is picked up again in more recent paintings based upon the pre-Raphaelite tondo by Ford Madox Brown, *The last of England*, from 1855. Here again the present, the personal and the past collide in a powerful way. This circular oil painting on panel, by Brown, hangs in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, a city where Carmichael once worked as Head of Painting in its once famous art school. That it depicts a migrating couple, not just any emigrant couple but a pair departing for Geelong, is no accident. It gets better. The image of the husband is a self-portrait of Brown himself, the emigrant's wife is Brown's wife, Emma Hill, who reportedly posed out-of-doors in the snowy midland winters of 1852–53 for this portrait, to ensure a complexion thought similar to that brought on by travelling by sea on a dull day. But the depiction itself was inspired by fellow pre-Raphaelite sculptor, Thomas Woolner, who left for the Victorian goldfields in 1852.

As an aside, Woolner was so appalled by what he saw on the goldfields that he soon returned to sculpture in Melbourne, executing numerous bronze medallions of prominent citizens, including Governor La Trobe, and, in Sydney, a statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park, before returning to England in 1854. ¶ The expressionistic intensity of the Carmichael transcription of the Ford Madox Brown somehow seems more immediate. Again, perhaps this is the difference between merely reading about it and doing it – Brown didn't make the journey to relocate in another country on the other side of the planet, Carmichael did. Hence his brush is driven by an existential urgency and first-hand experience, whereas the other is academic. ¶ Similarly his 1997 investigation of the Dutch 17th-century masterpiece *The artist's studio* by Vermeer entitled *Spring in Delft – after Vermeer* [cat. no. 24, plate no. 14] is given a more contemporary feel by the immediacy of its execution. Here Carmichael has cropped Vermeer's studio, eliminated the theatrical curtain used by Vermeer to accentuate the illusion of space, and compressed the artist's rear view in the manner of a warped negative. In this, Carmichael uses the transcription process as a scientific researcher might, to test a proposition, albeit a visual one. ¶ Carmichael's many transcriptions are fascinating in their complexity. Like Picasso's late variations on themes by Velasquez, Courbet, Delacroix and others, they are empowered by earlier versions. For example, Carmichael's *Laocoon* is based on El Greco; El Greco and Michelangelo before him were inspired by the Greco-Roman marble of the Laocoon group dug up in Rome in 1506, and that in turn had been originally empowered by Virgil. Typically, Carmichael's version reiterates the message of the priest Laocoon, as told to his Trojan masters 'beware of Greeks bearing gifts.' Equally complex is his variation on *The wheat sifters* by Courbet, represented in the exhibition. It ignores the proposition argued by Professor Michael Fried in his recent book, *Courbet's Realism*, that the two kneeling females delineate the letters 'G' and 'C' (the painter's initials), supporting his claim that Courbet's prime interest was self-representation. Instead, Carmichael fuses the movement of sifting with the advent of Action Painting with the title, *Inventing Jackson Pollock – after Courbet* [cat. no. 23, plate no. 13]. That there is also a town near Moriac called Ceres (named after the Roman goddess of wheat) is yet another example of fusing a present-day reflection primed by a landscape lived in, with historical precedent. ¶ This is an exhibition filled with superb paintings by a maverick whose vision is driven by a formidable intellect. In this he reminds me of another Scottish-born Australian painter, Ian Fairweather (1891–1974). While some of Carmichael's themes now lack a specific address, others such as *Bush burial*, *Buckley's luck*, *Loch Ard*, *Parker River* and *The last of England*, do not. In these, Carmichael draws upon the stories of how this country was settled, particularly around south-western Victoria. And in this visualisation he imparts a participant's passion that embraces the very pith of Regionalism, that first prerequisite of great art – how appropriate that these works are being shown in the major gallery of his region, the Geelong Gallery.

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Wollheim, Richard, *Painting as an art*, Princeton University Press, USA, 1987

plate no. 1

Anti-gravity I 1975
acrylic on canvas
172.0 x 172.0 cm
cat. no. 1

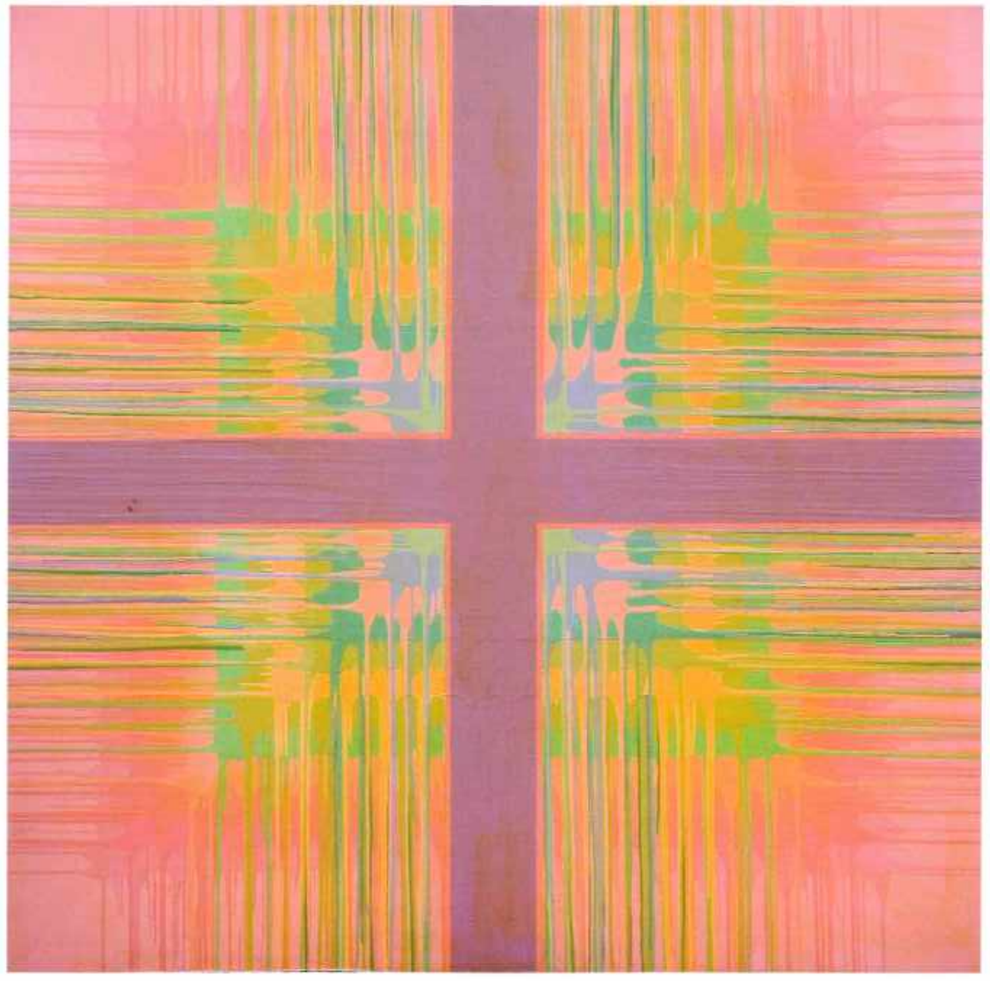


plate no. 2

Cube 1979
pencil and watercolour on paper
41.0 x 36.0 cm (sheet)
cat. no. 2

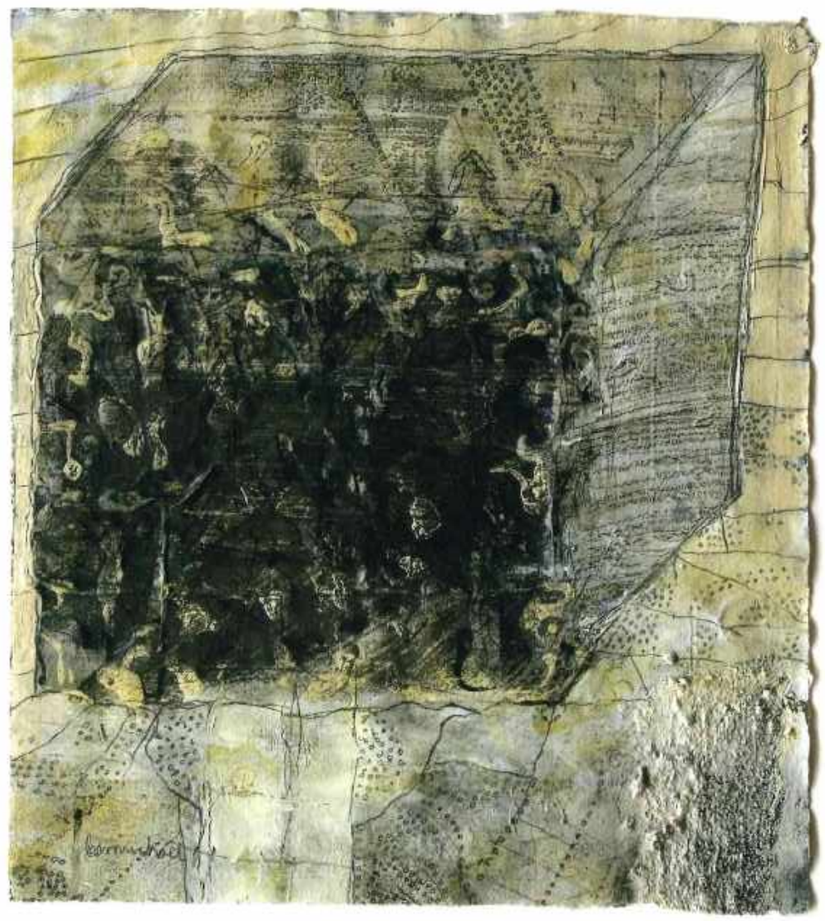


plate no. 3

Buckley's luck 1979
oil on canvas
172.0 x 172.0 cm
cat. no. 3

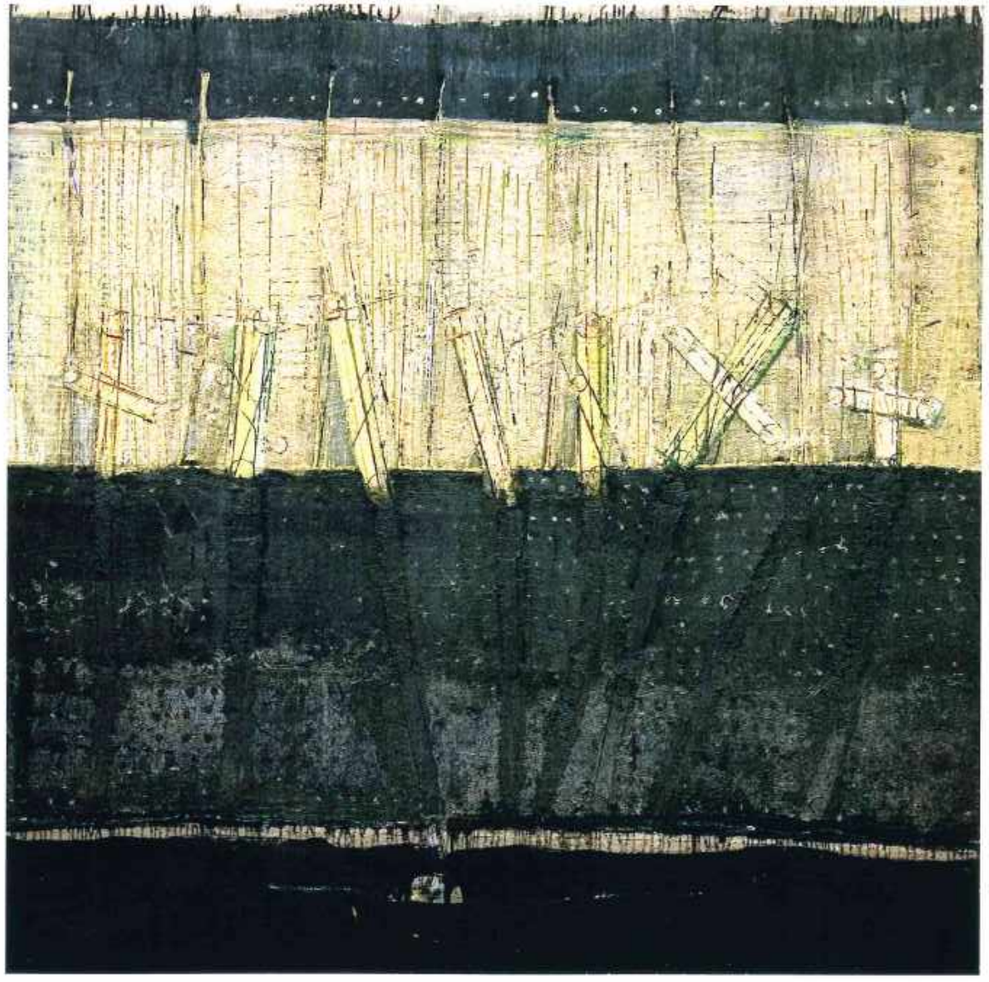


plate no. 4

Lascivious rocks III 1982
oil on canvas
182.0 x 152.0 cm
cat. no. 5

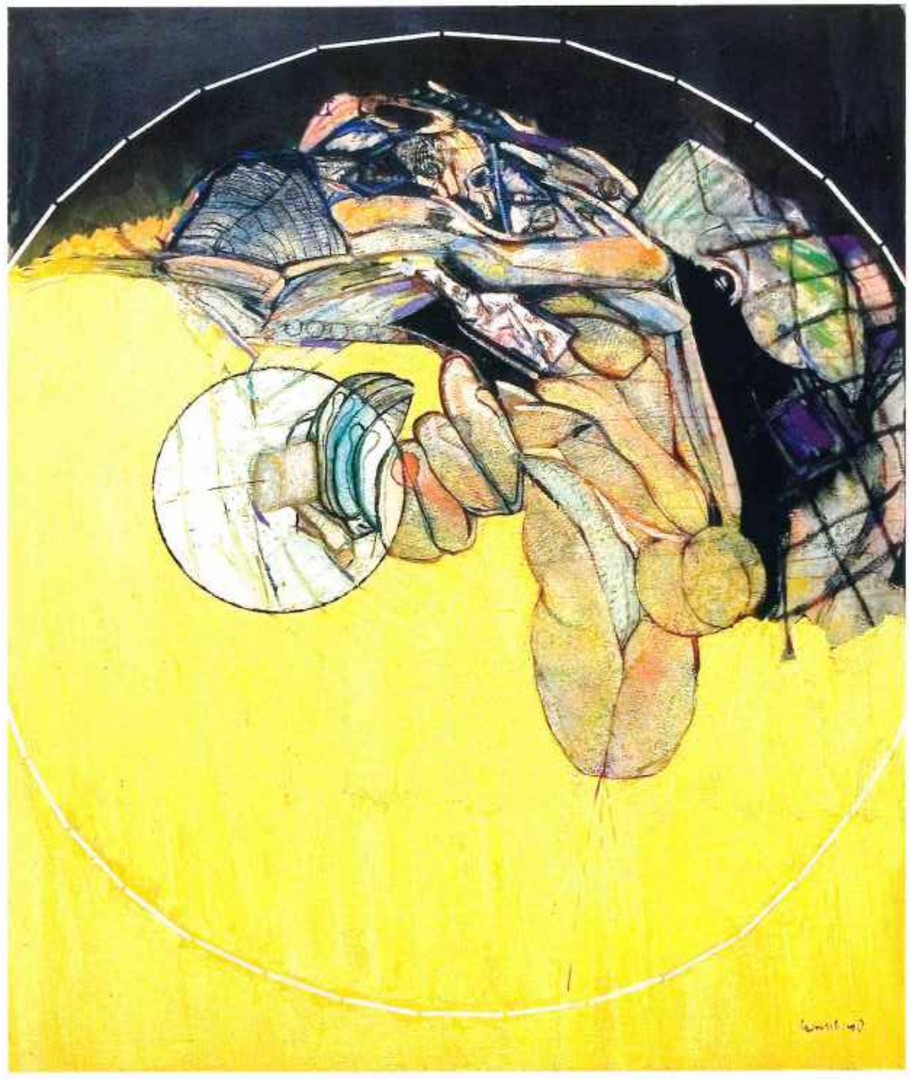


plate no. 5

Funeral bird 1985
oil on linen
158.0 x 124.0 cm
cat. no. 8

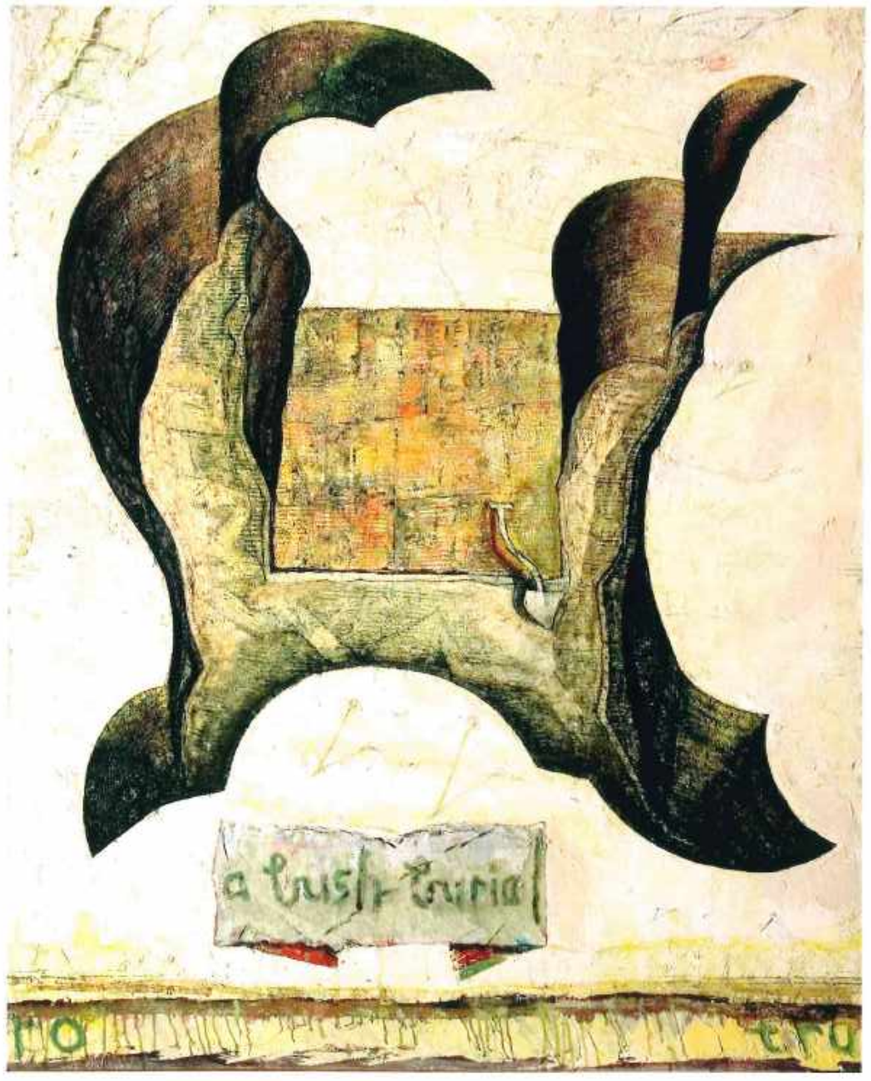


plate no. 6

Mawashi – tied 1986
oil on linen
153.0 x 122.0 cm
cat. no. 9

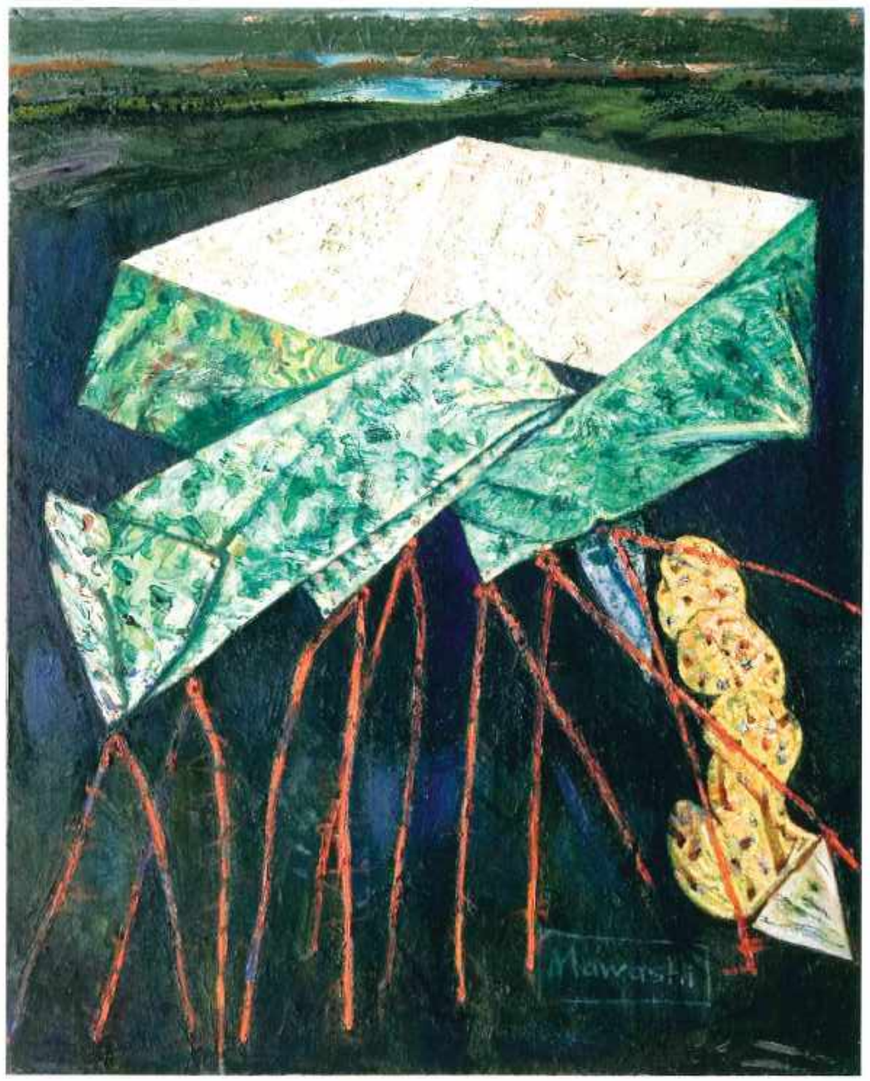


plate no. 7

Study for 'Headlands' c. 1987
oil on linen
81.0 x 55.5 cm
cat. no. 11

plate no. 8

Wrong sleeves II 1990
oil on linen
137.0 x 107.0 cm
cat. no. 16

plate no. 9

Persistence of memory 1987–88
oil on linen
172.0 x 198.0 cm
cat. no. 12

plate no. 10

The first day 1989
oil on linen
199.0 x 244.0 cm
cat. no. 14

plate no. 11

The thicket c. 1992
oil on linen
152.0 x 121.0 cm
cat. no. 17

plate no. 12

Pin-up self-portrait c. 1995
oil on canvas
136.5 x 121.5 cm
cat. no. 22

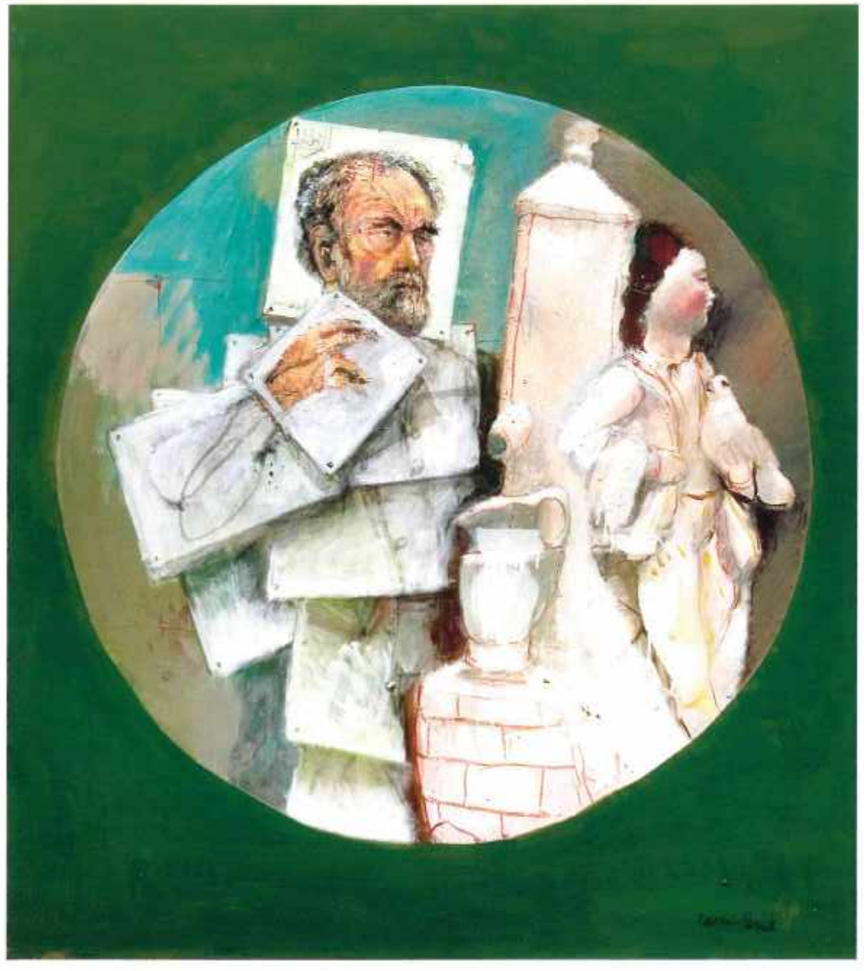


plate no. 13

Inventing Jackson Pollock – after Courbet 1995
oil on linen
182.0 x 213.0 cm
cat. no. 23

plate no. 14

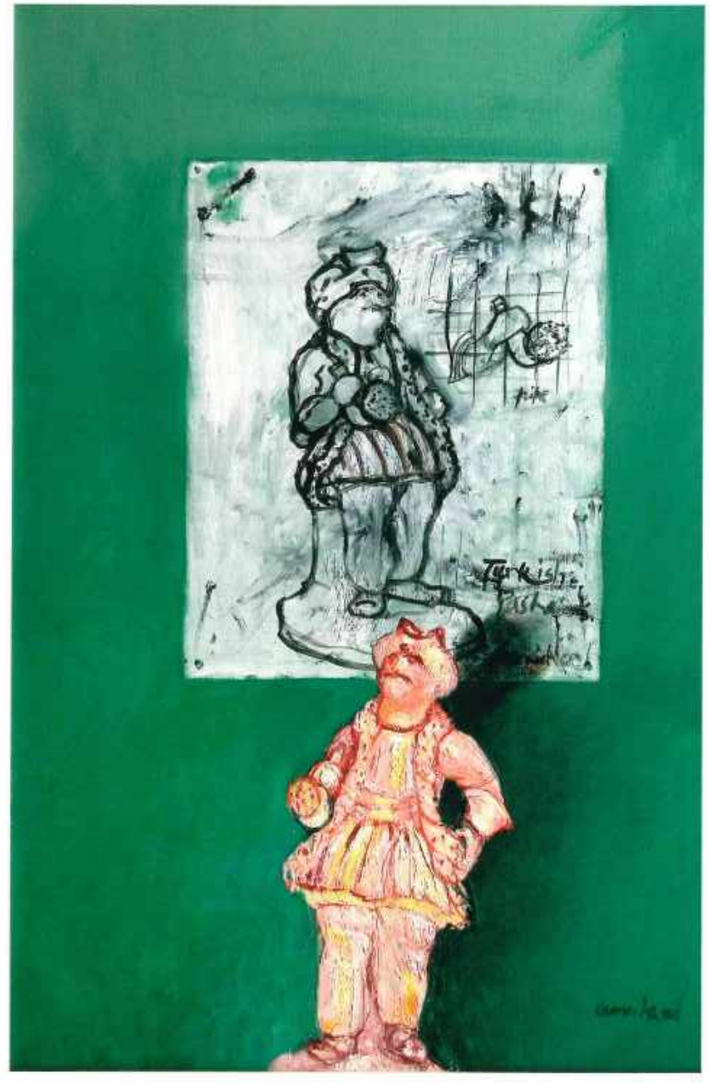
Spring in Delft – after Vermeer 1997
oil on canvas
167.0 x 137.0 cm
cat. no. 24

plate no. 15

Falstaff and Bardolf c. 2000
oil on board
92.0 x 62.0 cm
cat. no. 26

plate no. 16

Smoking Turk 2000
oil on board
92.0 x 62.0 cm
cat. no. 27



CATALOGUE

1
Anti-gravity I 1975
acrylic on canvas
172.0 x 172.0 cm
plate no. 1

2
Cube 1979
pencil and watercolour
on paper
41.0 x 36.0 cm (sheet)
plate no. 2

3
Buckley's luck 1979
oil on canvas
172.0 x 172.0 cm
plate no. 3

4
Me and You Yangs 1981
oil on linen
183.0 x 152.0 cm

5
Lascivious rocks III 1982
oil on canvas
182.0 x 152.0 cm
plate no. 4

6
Bonjour M. Gauguin 1983–88
oil on linen
152.2 x 122.0 cm

7
Untitled (Oriental box) 1984
pencil on paper
57.0 x 76.0 cm (sheet)

8
Funeral bird 1985
oil on linen
158.0 x 124.0 cm
plate no. 5

9
Mawashi – tied 1986
oil on linen
153.0 x 122.0 cm
plate no. 6

10
Patchenko 1986
oil on linen
152.0 x 122.0 cm

11
Study for 'Headlands'
c. 1987
oil on linen
81.0 x 55.5 cm
plate no. 7

12
Persistence of memory
1987–88
oil on linen
172.0 x 198.0 cm
plate no. 9

13
Ashore – the following day
1987–88
oil on linen
173.0 x 173.0 cm

14
The first day 1989
oil on linen
199.0 x 244.0 cm
plate no. 10

15
Headlands 1989
oil on linen
152.0 x 122.0 cm

16
Wrong sleeves II 1990
oil on linen
137.0 x 107.0 cm
plate no. 8

17
The thicket c. 1992
oil on linen
152.0 x 121.0 cm
plate no. 11

18
Gullible's travails I 1992
gouache on Arches paper
76.0 x 56.0 cm (sheet)

19
Gullible's travails II 1992
gouache on Arches paper
76.0 x 56.0 cm (sheet)

20
Head no. 1 1992–94
watercolour on Arches paper
76.0 x 56.0 cm (sheet)

21
Head no. 2 1992–94
watercolour on Arches paper
76.0 x 56.0 cm (sheet)

22
Pin-up self-portrait c. 1995
oil on canvas
136.5 x 121.5 cm
plate no. 12

23
Inventing Jackson Pollock – after Courbet 1995
oil on linen
182.0 x 213.0 cm
plate no. 13

24
Spring in Delft – after Vermeer 1997
oil on canvas
167.0 x 137.0 cm
plate no. 14

25
Goat's milk c. 2000
oil on board
92.0 x 62.0 cm

26
Falstaff and Bardolf c. 2000
oil on board
92.0 x 62.0 cm
plate no. 15

27
Smoking Turk 2000
oil on board
92.0 x 62.0 cm
plate no. 16

28
The hunters, the dairymaid and the harvesters 2000
oil on linen
92.0 x 92.0 cm

all measurements
height by width

all works from the
collection of the artist

all works reproduced
courtesy of the artist

BIOGRAPHY

Rodick Carmichael

1931
born Scotland

1948–53
Edinburgh College of Arts

1957
British School at Rome
(Abbey Scholarship)

1960
Fellow, Salzburg Seminar
in American Studies

1974
arrived Australia

1975–78
Head of the School of Art
& Design, Gordon Institute,
Geelong

1979–95
Principal Lecturer in Fine Art,
School of Arts, Deakin
University, Geelong

The artist has exhibited
in numerous solo and group
exhibitions in the United
Kingdom, United States
of America and Australia,
including a major survey
exhibition, *Rodick Carmichael.
An Antipodean decade 1978–
1988*, at the Edinburgh Festival
in 1988, and the *Geelong
survey exhibition no. 2*,
at Geelong Gallery in 1980.

Selected Australian solo exhibitions

1975
Bartoni International Gallery,
Melbourne

1982
University Gallery,
The University of Melbourne

1984
Festival of Perth, Undercroft
Gallery, The University
of Western Australia, Perth

1986
Realities, Melbourne

1989
Macquarie Galleries, Sydney

1990
Deakin University,
Institute of the Arts, Geelong

1993
Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne

1997
Brim Brim Gallery, Geelong

1998
Flinders Lane Gallery,
Melbourne

1999
Qdos, Lorne

2000
Brougham Art School and
Gallery, Geelong

Authored publications

1980
Common factors/Vulgar factions (with Jeff Nuttall),
Routledge and Kegan Paul,
London

1982
Orienteering: painting in the landscape. Carmichael, Makin, Wolseley, Deakin
University Press, Victoria

1982
The iconic language of painting, Deakin
University Press, Victoria

1984
Actuality and artifice,
Deakin University Press,
Victoria

1984
The art structures reader,
Deakin University Press,
Victoria

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people and organisations whose support and encouragement made this survey exhibition successful. Firstly, the director of the Geelong Gallery Geoffrey Edwards for his trust, past curator Brian Hubber and present curator Lisa Sullivan for their hard work, and Brougham Art School and Gallery for its support. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Makin for his insightful essay in the catalogue, and the Port Jackson Press for its contribution. And last but by no means least, I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to my wife Dr Heather Stewart, for her patient and professional assistance without which this show may not have eventuated.

Rodick Carmichael

Rodick Carmichael – the Australian years
6 August to 25 September 2005

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ISBN – 0-9757990-0-2

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Publisher:
Geelong Gallery
Catalogue design:
GollingsPidgeon
Production and printing:
Ease Productions and Bambra Press
Photography:
George Stawicki

To coincide with *Rodick Carmichael – the Australian years* at Geelong Gallery, Brougham Art School and Gallery presents:

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6 August to 2 September 2005

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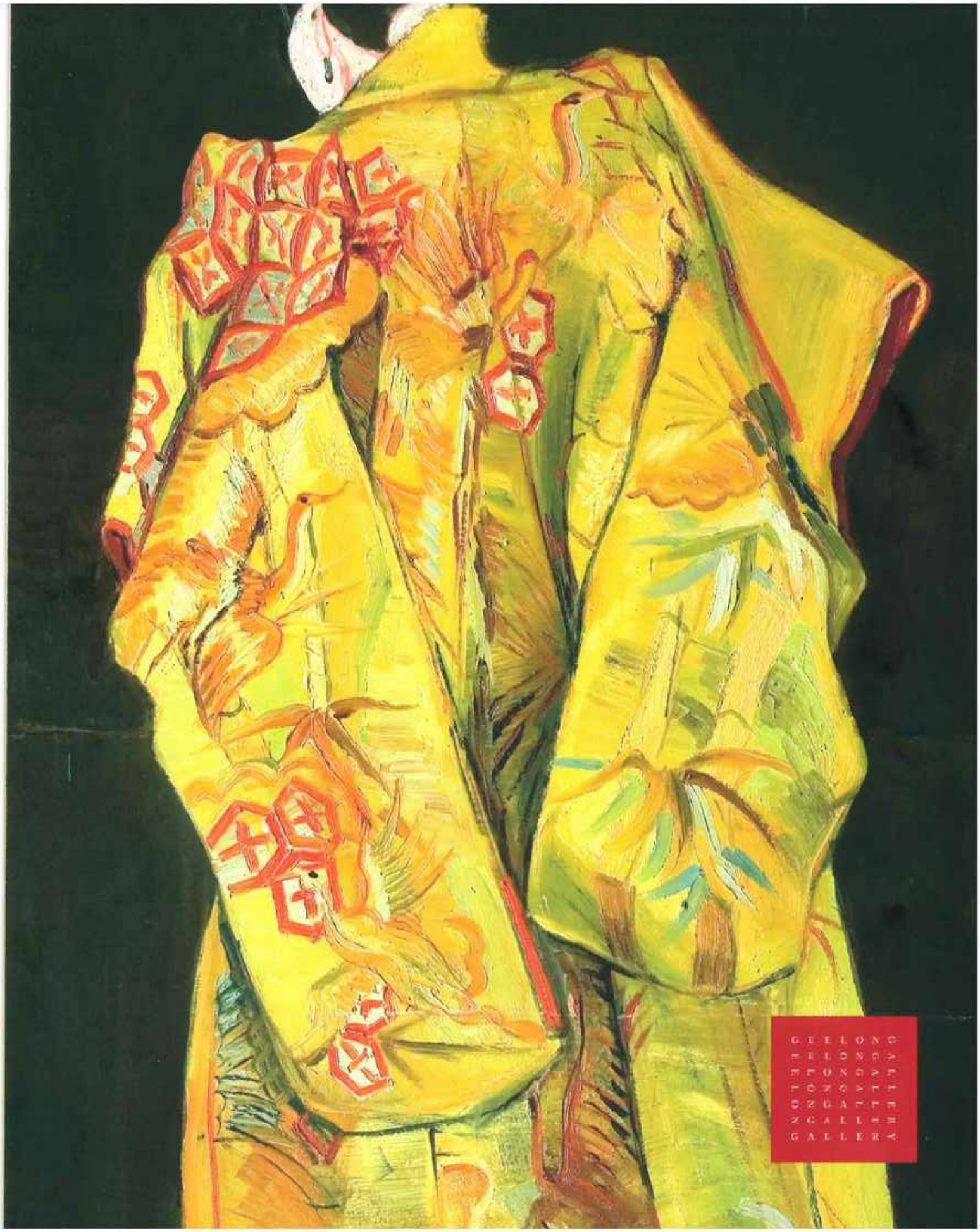
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