

Clarice
Beckett
Atmosphere

Large Print Labels

Clarice Beckett

Atmosphere

Clarice Beckett (1887–1935) is one of the most important Australian modernist painters of the 1920s and early 1930s, and her work is acclaimed and loved for its distinctive evocation of atmosphere and mood.

Beckett's work was lost to time and neglect from her death in 1935 to its rediscovery around 1970 and reintroduction to audiences, and its rightful repositioning in Australian art history.

Clarice Beckett—Atmosphere is the first major public gallery exhibition in Victoria of Beckett's painting since 1999 and it assembles 67 of Beckett's most thought-provoking and beautiful works dating from 1919 to the early 1930s. Numerous paintings borrowed from private collections have not been seen in public for decades. Serendipitously, this exhibition is occurring 100 years after Beckett's first solo exhibition at the Athenaeum Gallery, Melbourne, in 1923.

Our focus is on Beckett's extraordinary visual perception and her depiction of atmospheric effects and phenomena. Her works give painterly, material form to the ethereal and fleeting conditions of light and climate, and to moments in time as she saw and felt them on her local suburban streets, at the water's edge, and in the landscape. Beckett's special capacity to unite seeing with feeling resulted in mesmerising landscape images that reward considered, slow looking, and that trigger memory and recognition in ways that can be profoundly affecting.

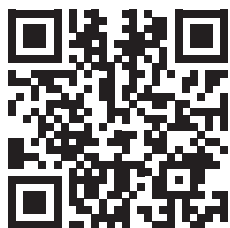
That Beckett was a Melbourne-based Victorian artist who also worked for periods in the Geelong region—on the Surf Coast and in the Western District—has been a compelling local context for Geelong Gallery's survey.

Beckett articulated her artistic aims in the catalogue accompanying the *6th Annual Exhibition* of the Twenty Melbourne Painters in 1924:

To give a sincere and truthful representation of a portion of the beauty of Nature, and to show the charm of light and shade, which I try to give forth in correct tones so as to give as nearly as possible an exact illusion of reality.

Repeated subjects like cars, telegraph poles, empty winding roads, and shimmering reflections bordering on pure abstraction were radical subjects for her time. Nature and her immediate environment were Beckett's inspirations, and she returned again and again to familiar locations to capture them at different times and conditions.

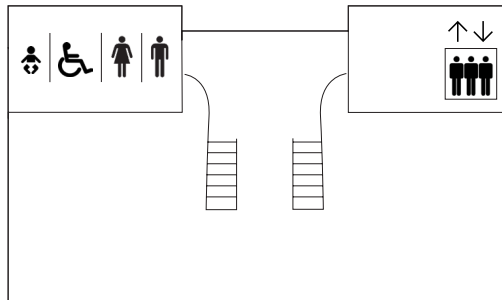
Beckett sometimes included up to 80 paintings in each of the solo exhibitions she presented from 1923 to 1933, and it was her tendency to install her paintings grouped by subject or theme. In this exhibition we balance a chronological journey through Beckett's career with arrangements that reveal her unending fascination with atmospheric effects and place.



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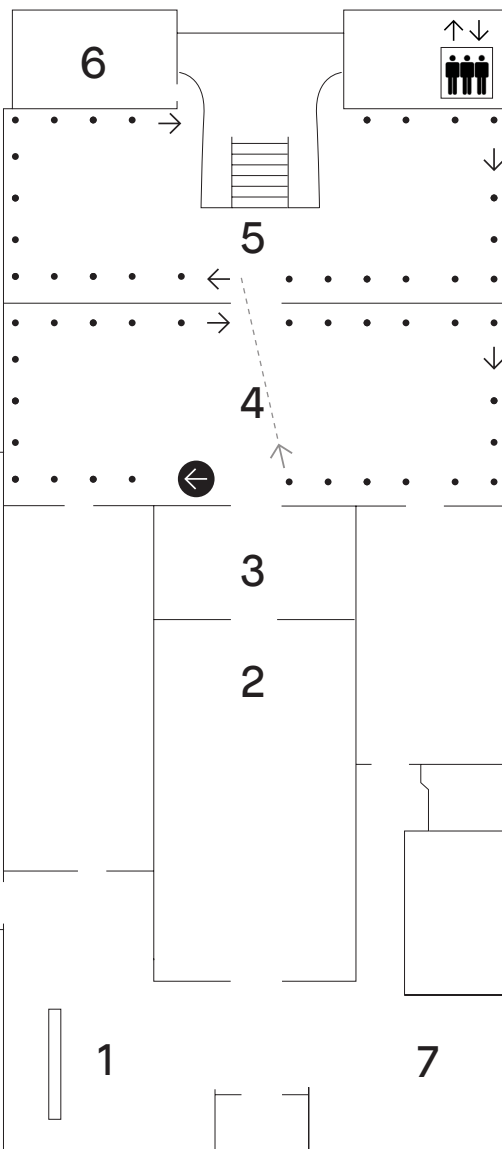
Navigating the Exhibition

The large print labels correspond to paintings beginning at the left-side of each Gallery and continue clockwise around the room.



1
Visitor Services Desk

2
Exhibition Entry



3, 4 & 5
Clarice Beckett
—Atmosphere

6
Atmospheric Lab

7
Geelong Gallery Store

Luna Park 1919

oil on board

Art Gallery of South Australia

Gift of Alastair Hunter OAM and the late Tom Hunter in memory of Elizabeth through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation, 2019

Beckett's singular ability to capture the fleeting effects of movement and atmosphere had critics like Percy Leason—one of her most ardently supportive—expressing disbelief 'that anyone could fail to respond to something that is so strong, so sensitive and refined. It should move even Miss Beckett's somewhat hostile critics to acknowledge, at least in part, her very remarkable talent and sincerity and the rare beauty of her pictures.' [*Table Talk*, 3 March 1932]

Beckett's technical brilliance was the combined result of an innate aptitude for art—recognised in her high-school years—and her mature age studies in academic drawing under Frederick McCubbin at the National Gallery School from 1914–16, and a brief tutelage under, but career-long association with, Max Meldrum in his independent school in 1917.

Beckett's grounding in drawing and her powers of observation mean that in two or three painterly marks she conveys the rush of a red-coated woman crossing the street outside Luna Park. This early work also reveals Beckett's idiosyncratic eye for composition, here as if capturing a scene from her peripheral vision.

Spring morning c. 1925

oil on canvas on composition board

Benalla Art Gallery

Ledger Gift, 1988

A house in the distance is bathed in morning light, while contrasts of light and shade are clear in the newly flowering wattles that anchor the middle ground of this picture. Atmospheric effects caused and conditioned by light were the defining and enduring characteristics of Beckett's imagery. Here, she celebrates spring light, its shifting movement throughout a day, and she hints at the changing intensity of light through the seasons.

Beckett's tonal approach is supported by a complex composition of interactive colour. The architecture of the pink-roofed house gives way to abstract patches in the foreground that define a path and gardens cast with shadows. Here Beckett introduces a degree of ambiguity to charge what she sees with a sense of mystery: while real and observed, her shadows allude to the unknown, to things that can and cannot be seen.

The empty seat c. 1925

oil on canvas board

Bendigo Art Gallery

Anonymous gift under the Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme, 1993

Beckett's quest was to give material form to the ethereal climate that enveloped her and the places through which she walked and stopped to paint. Beckett's paintings absorb us into their spatial and emotional realms. *The empty seat* is one work among many that reveals Beckett's fine modulation of colour, form, and mood—here a mood of serenity, or perhaps melancholy—to encapsulate what historians Mary Eagle and John Jones have described as an incomparable 'vision that made poetry of unregarded things.'

Mist c. 1923

oil on cardboard

Castlemaine Art Museum

Gift of Jane Desailly in memory of her mother Lesley M Desailly,
2013

The first sound c. 1924

oil on board

Private collection

Beaumaris seascape c. 1925

oil on cardboard

National Gallery of Australia

Purchased 1971

An intensified sense of place is striking in Beckett's work—a quality that is not simply about locality but feeling.

As a long-term resident of bayside Melbourne, Beckett's familiarity with locale sharpened her focus and informed her painting. The 'beautiful cliffs of Beaumaris', 'the native untouched beauty of the foreshore' (as described by Beckett in a letter to the Editor, *The Argus*, 7 June 1934), the suburb's streets, residences, and gardens, were the inspiration for many of her works painted in various light conditions.

When asked about her interest in travelling abroad, as so many of her contemporaries did, Beckett responded: 'Why would I wish to go somewhere else strange. I've only just got the hang of painting Beaumaris.'

The presentation of this artwork from Australia's national collection has been made possible by the generous support of AWM Electrical and Data Suppliers through the National Gallery of Australia's Regional Initiatives Program.

Evening light, Beaumaris c. 1925

oil on canvas on cardboard

National Gallery of Victoria

Presented by the National Gallery Society of Victoria to mark the retirement of Paton Forster, General Secretary of the Society (1968–89), 1989

Evening landscape c. 1925

oil on cardboard

National Gallery of Australia

Purchased 1974

The presentation of this artwork from Australia's national collection has been made possible by the generous support of AWM Electrical and Data Suppliers through the National Gallery of Australia's Regional Initiatives Program.

Sunset 1925

oil on board

Private collection

Naringal

In 1926, Clarice Beckett produced a body of work that was radically different from the prevailing approach of Australian artists to the landscape. These works were painted at Naringal Station, a Western District property south-west of Ballarat, owned by William Rowe, the brother of Beckett's artist friend Maud Rowe. For approximately five months Beckett worked in a dedicated studio, located on the upper level of the property's shearing shed, with views across expansive pastoral fields.

The paintings produced at Naringal are infused with a sense of interiority and quietude: they conjure the reflective, solitary artist working in the near silence of the pastoral setting. Only nine Naringal paintings are known to exist from an estimated 80 to 100 Beckett is thought to have painted during this concentrated period: approximately thirty were acquired by the Rowe family and destroyed in the fire that engulfed the property in 1944.

In the few extant Naringal works that we can see today (five of which are exhibited here), Beckett infused the silence and solitude of the pastoral setting into a remarkable series that adds thought-provoking aesthetic and conceptual complexity to her oeuvre. Decades after they were painted, Geelong-born artist and critic Ian Burn stated (in 1990) that the Naringal works 'remain unique within Australian art', while art historian Terry Smith identified Beckett's layered tonal gradations as precursors to the 1950s–60s abstraction of American artist Mark Rothko.

Naringal landscape 1926

oil on board

Private collection

Naringal landscape 1926

oil on board

Private collection

The three trees 1926

oil on board

Private collection

Landscape 1926

oil on board

Private collection

Summer fields 1926

oil on board

Art Gallery of South Australia

Gift of Alastair Hunter OAM and the late Tom Hunter in memory of Elizabeth through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation, 2019

In *Summer fields*, a shimmering mirage activated by the setting sun across an open field is a complex register of subtle tonal shifts in a composition with an absorbing depth of field. A cluster of trees, perhaps fragments of the windbreaks that typically delineate Western District pastureland, leads the eye across vast blonde paddocks towards a vaporous horizon line and the vibrant arc of the setting sun, gently blending into the sky.

In 1971, forty-five years after it was painted, *Summer fields* was exhibited at Rosalind Humphries Galleries, Melbourne (in the first significant display of the artist's work since the 1936 memorial exhibition staged soon after her death). The artist Fred Williams—who himself later transformed the way we see the Australian landscape—visited the 1971 exhibition and wrote that day in his diary: 'She really was ahead of her time.'

Bay Road, Beaumaris c. 1927

oil on board

Private collection

Wet evening c. 1927

oil on cardboard

Castlemaine Art Museum

Maud Rowe Bequest, 1937

Sunsets and reflected lights

Clarice Beckett painted at various times of the day and worked in constantly changing climatic conditions. Invariably it was the visual and atmospheric effects of light, air, cloud, mist, and rain she sought to capture. Beckett had an exceptional eye and painted quickly, making small immediate sketches and studies, some of which would be translated upon her return home into larger finished compositions at the kitchen table where she worked.

The resplendent, saturated colours of early morning and early evening captivated Beckett, and as we see throughout this exhibition, her oeuvre is rich in depictions of spectacular sunrises, sunsets, and moonrises. They reflect Beckett's psyche, her emotions, and her profound connection to Nature and its cycles, and suggest 'a sense of the eternal', as Art Gallery of South Australia curator Tracey Lock has stated, 'making visible the imperceptible shifts in the flow of time.'

Works like *Evening calm* and *Sunset* are absorbing meditations on light and transience. While deeply evocative of quietude and stillness, *Sunset* pushes its subject—the last light of day over the Bay—almost to complete abstraction, and prefigures, as various art historians have noted, the hovering, luminous colour fields of Mark Rothko.

The fluid and the fugitive are similarly at play in Beckett's repeated motif of reflected lights cast across water. Beckett's light sources and their shimmering, ephemeral reflections are flickering, seemingly minimal fragments that she composes carefully to craft aesthetically and conceptually refined pictures that powerfully evoke the mysterious atmospheres of dusk and the onset of night.

Winter sunset c. 1928

oil on card

Private collection

Sunset 1928

oil on board

Private collection

Evening calm 1928

oil on board

Collection of Mark and Louise Nelson

Dusk c. 1928

oil on canvas on board

Private collection

Lights across the Bay 1930

oil on canvas on board

Private collection

Wet day, Brighton c. 1928

oil on board

Art Gallery of South Australia

Gift of Alastair Hunter OAM and the late Tom Hunter in
memory of Elizabeth through the Art Gallery of South Australia
Foundation, 2019

Rainy day 1930

oil on canvas on board

Geelong Gallery

Purchased 1973

Rainy day is rich in motifs that recur throughout Beckett's work, and clearly reveals her painting method. The trees that flank either side of a wet road are configured with dark tonal applications of rich green paint to create density and simultaneously 'close-in' on the centre of the picture. While empty winding roads are a repeated, psychologically charged subject in many of Beckett's works, here her solitary, umbrella-covered figure walking by a cart lends pathos and loneliness to the quiet visual narrative.

Posts and telegraph poles extend upwards and recede to give the picture a commanding structure, scale, and spatial depth. And as was her habit to revisit and envisage anew her local sites, Beckett returned again to this stretch of road, as we see in a picture of quite different atmosphere and painterly detail in *Rainy morning* further along this wall.

This work has been conserved through the generous support of Geelong Conservation.

Beach Road after the rain (Street scene) c. 1927

oil on cardboard

National Gallery of Victoria

Bequest of Harriet Minnie Rosebud Salier, 1984

Bus stop, Beach Road, sunset c. 1927

oil on board

Private collection

Rainy morning c. 1930

oil on canvas on board

Collection of Mark and Louise Nelson

Motor lights 1929

oil on board

Art Gallery of South Australia

Gift of Alastair Hunter OAM and the late Tom Hunter in memory of Elizabeth through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation, 2019

Rainy evening, city c. 1929

oil on board

Private collection

Gardening c. 1929

oil on board

Private collection

End of the garden c. 1929

oil on board

Private collection

This exhibition continues in the adjacent Hitchcock Gallery.
These labels correspond to paintings beginning at the left-side of
the Gallery and continue clockwise around the room.

Wet night, Brighton 1930

oil on board

Private collection

Wet night, Brighton distils to an essence the vision and feeling that is evident throughout Beckett's oeuvre. Beckett had the courage of her convictions, and her clear-headed attention to composition was always calculated to suit her chosen subject. She knew exactly what effect she was after.

At first glance *Wet night, Brighton* is an unassuming, modestly sized picture of a rainy evening; a flooded bayside suburban road demarcated by four poles, and a rising surf behind. Despite its apparent simplicity its compositional motifs and painterly effects are carefully orchestrated to evoke an atmosphere of silence to heighten its emotional impact and mood. Its power lies in its evocation of feeling, in its suggestion of things intangible and unseeable that can create in the quiet, intuitive viewer an intense encounter with something familiar and simultaneously strange.

Silver mornings and mists

As her works reveal to us, Nature was Clarice Beckett's inspiration, and she returned again and again to familiar locations to capture them at different times. The water's edge was a place of contemplation for her and provided a rich fund of imagery and atmospheric effects.

Beckett's capacity to see, feel and paint diffuse light and enveloping mists resulted in compositions of radical reduction but rich painterly vibration. Beckett focussed her eye on what was before her and avoided superfluous detail. In *Silver morning (Near Beaumaris)* and *Sea drift* the economy of her painterly mark and deft configuration of light, reflection, and human movement can border on minimalism. Some of her landscapes approach pure abstraction in their simplification, like *Autumn evening, Rickett's Point*.

While Beckett suffuses many of her works with a mystical air, it is difficult to look now at Port Phillip Bay, and the waters of Beaumaris or Ricketts Point reflecting a grey-blue sky, to see the near-dissolution of the horizon and the merging of sea and sky, and not think of Beckett's truth to Nature, to her painting of the reality of what she saw.

Silver morning (Near Beaumaris) c. 1931

oil on cardboard

Castlemaine Art Museum

Gift of the artist's sister Hilda Mangan, 1936

Sea drift c. 1930

oil on canvas on board

Art Gallery of South Australia

Gift of Alastair Hunter OAM and the late Tom Hunter in memory of Elizabeth through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation, 2019

Ricketts Point (Even tide) n.d.

oil on canvas on composition board

McClelland

Gift of John Farmer, 1971

Untitled (Fishing) n.d.

oil on board

Private collection

Misty evening, Beaumaris 1930

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of Ballarat

Bequest of Maud Rowe, 1937

Autumn evening, Rickett's Point c. 1930–33

oil on canvas board

Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art

Gift of Mrs IA Sheen, 1988

The wedding c. 1930

oil on board

Collection of Mark and Louise Nelson

Bay Road, smoke haze/Bay Road, foggy morning c. 1932

oil on board

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Purchased with funds provided by the Art Gallery
Society of New South Wales through the Elizabeth Fyfe
Bequest, 2022

Princes Bridge c. 1930

oil on pulpboard

State Library Victoria

Pictures Collection, purchased with the assistance of the State Library of Victoria Foundation, 2006

[Research into the dating of this work is ongoing (possibly c. 1924–26)]

View towards Princes Street Bridge, Flinders Street Station and the APA Tower c. 1930

oil on board

Art Gallery of South Australia

Gift of Frank O'Donnell OAM in memory of his mother Agnes O'Donnell through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation, 2020

Evening, St Kilda Road c. 1930

oil on board

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Purchased with funds provided by the Australian Art Collection Benefactors, 2013

Beckett was a mighty artist-wanderer; a great seeker of modern truths gleaned from the fleeting and the everyday. *Evening, St Kilda Road* beautifully reveals the distinct visual poetry that came from Beckett's roaming, capturing the last glow of sunset from a city excursion. It demonstrates that in Beckett's art of the momentary, what lingers is an enduring sensation of being in the world. Here, the receding taillights of traffic invite the eye to travel through the moment and connect with the sensations of her works.

Indicative of Beckett's painting method *Evening, St Kilda Road* is pigment rich and medium poor. She used little binding agent resulting in the sparseness of the paint layer, the hazed matt finish, and elusively defined forms. Lacking density, Beckett's application of oil paint has the feel of watercolour washes and carries the sense of transience that comes with it.

The Yarra, sunset c. 1930

oil on board

Collection of Mark and Louise Nelson

Across the Bay c. 1930

oil on board

Private collection

Beach scene n.d.

oil on canvas on composition board

Benalla Art Gallery

Gift of an anonymous donor, 1978

Anglesea 1929

oil on pulpboard

Collection of Russell Crowe

A good blow n.d.

oil on board

Private collection

Painted roofs n.d.

oil on canvas

Private collection

The solitary bathing box c. 1932

oil on canvas on board

Private collection

The brilliant light of early afternoon saturates *The solitary bathing box*: the short throw of shadow cast by the sinewy tree onto the structure suggests the sun is high in a summer sky. Natural and built forms are more clearly delineated in works Beckett painted in bright sunlight than those shrouded in the gloaming, hazes, and mists of other subjects. She also revels in the use of heightened colour despite the insistence of Meldrum that colour was of less immediate importance than tonal values.

Beckett's technical approach to painting light and arranging colour balanced the analytical with the experimental, even when depicting forms as concealing and mutable as dark shadows: 'you always put a bit of the colour of the object you're painting into its shadow, as it gives a greater luminosity' the artist shared while on a coastal painting excursion.

The beach c. 1930

oil on board

Art Gallery of Ballarat

Bequest of Maud Rowe, 1937

Wet sand, Anglesea 1929

oil on board

Art Gallery of South Australia

Gift of Alastair Hunter OAM and the late Tom Hunter in memory of Elizabeth through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation, 2019

Boatshed, Beaumaris c. 1928

oil on cardboard

Castlemaine Art Museum

Maud Rowe Bequest, 1937

While we perceive colour through light reflected from the object we are observing, the entrancing optical effects of 'reflections' were often a feature of Beckett's compositions. *Boatshed, Beaumaris* is an image of clarity and quietude. Reflected in the calm waters of Port Phillip Bay, the boatshed's solidity dissolves in a shimmering, fugitive mirror image.

Similarly, in the adjacent *Wet sand, Anglesea*—painted during an artists' summer camp in the coastal town west of Geelong—the receding surf creates a watery mirror reflecting Anglesea's landmark red sandstone cliffs and a solitary walker on a warm summer day. It is a daringly radical landscape composition in which Beckett's contemplative lone figure holds the picture in its clever balance of realism and abstraction.

Across the Yarra c. 1931

oil on cardboard

National Gallery of Victoria

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Marjorie Webster Memorial, Governor, 1985

Across the Bay c. 1931

oil on board

Private collection

Brighton Jetty c. 1931

oil on canvas on board

Private collection

Reflected lights n.d.

oil on canvas on board

Private collection

Nocturne

Clarice Beckett's capacity to distil light, atmosphere, colour, tone, and emotion in images that are just 'there' reaches a peak in her evening scenes painted in the early 1930s.

In its title and compositional minimalism, Beckett's *Nocturne* pays homage to the paintings of nineteenth century American/British artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler. In assigning this musical term to his paintings, Whistler sought to emphasise mood and emotion over subject matter, narrative, or place. A Whistlerian approach underpins Beckett's radical simplification of subject, reduced palette, thinned, diluted paint, and the composition's elevated horizon line inspired by unconventional, flattened perspective found in some Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints.

Beckett's *Nocturne* teeters on the edge of abstraction. The diminutive moon in the upper right, and the declarative vertical strip representing the moon's reflection are the most subtle of elements to frame a grey watery expanse opposite a scrubby shoreline and the silhouette of a boatshed darkened by nightfall.

In *Evening, after Whistler*, Beckett takes abstraction further. Darkness and veils of atmosphere bring ambiguity and tenuousness to what it is we are seeing. Beckett does not compel us to attempt to identify the location. Her subject is mood, and here that could be loneliness, longing, or melancholy.

Beckett's nocturnes represent not only her interest in 'the quiet mysteries of dusk and night' [*The Herald*, 4 May 1936] but an artist testing visual perception, and boldly advancing towards the language of abstraction. Through these progressive works of the early 1930s, we can only speculate on where Beckett may have taken her practice—and Australian art—if not for her premature death in 1935, aged only forty-eight.

Nocturne c. 1931

oil on canvas board

Art Gallery of South Australia

d'Auvergne Boxall Bequest Fund, 2000

Evening, after Whistler c. 1931

oil on board

Art Gallery of South Australia

Gift of Alastair Hunter OAM and the late Tom Hunter in memory of Elizabeth through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation, 2019

Taxi rank c. 1931

oil on canvas on hardboard

Kerry Stokes Collection

Passing trams c. 1931

oil on board

Art Gallery of South Australia

Edna Berniece Harrison Bequest Fund through the Friends of
the Art Gallery of South Australia, 2001

Wet night, St Kilda Road c. 1932

oil on board

Collection of Mark and Louise Nelson

Sunset across Beaumaris Bay c. 1930–31

oil on composition board

Bayside City Council Art and Heritage Collection

Purchased 2014

Sunset on the Bay n.d.

oil on card

Private collection

Saturday n.d.

oil on pulpboard

Collection of Russell Crowe

Ricketts Point n.d.

oil on board

Collection of Sean Loughrey and Simone Calderwood

Last light, Beach Road c. 1934

oil on cardboard

Collection of Mark and Louise Nelson

Collins Street, evening 1931

oil on canvas on cardboard

National Gallery of Australia

Purchased 1971

The presentation of this artwork from Australia's national collection has been made possible by the generous support of AWM Electrical and Data Suppliers through the National Gallery of Australia's Regional Initiatives Program.

Expand Your Experience

Atmospheric Lab

To coincide with *Clarice Beckett—Atmosphere*, the Gallery's Learn Space is transformed into an immersive *Atmospheric Lab* designed by Sandpit, an award-winning technology and experience design studio based in Melbourne.

Take a sensory journey exploring colour, sentiment and place inspired by the work of Clarice Beckett.

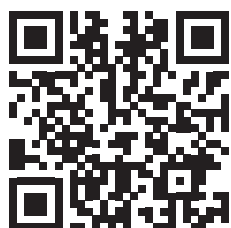
Exhibition Catalogue

Visit the Geelong Gallery Store to purchase the illustrated exhibition catalogue accompanying *Clarice Beckett—Atmosphere*.

Upcoming Events

Explore the remarkable life and work of Clarice Beckett through our suite of public programs and events.

Discover what's on offer by scanning the QR code or visiting: geelonggallery.org.au/events



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Clarice Beckett—Atmosphere

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