



Workshop: 7 October 2021

The Abbey Art Centre: cosmopolitanism, expatriatism and exchange **CoVA workshop, Thursday 7th October 2021, 10:30 am – 4:15 pm**

In the aftermath of World War 2, with the re-opening of international travel for civilians, artists from across the British Commonwealth flocked to London as the former heart of Empire. There they could explore their historical ties with Britain and Ireland, while engaging with contemporary currents in British art. From London most travelled to the Continent—particularly Belgium, France and Italy—to experience at first hand the European tradition. Modern art was sought in Paris, which, in the immediate postwar years, still retained its reputation as the centre of the art world even while it was being usurped by New York. Added to this heady mix were the vast ethnographic collections of the British Museum and the Musée de l’Homme while, on a smaller scale, items of ethnographic art could be handled in person at William Ohly’s Berkeley Galleries in Mayfair and at his residential artists’ colony at New Barnet, known as the Abbey Art Centre.

Established in 1947, the Abbey Art Centre grew from the remnants of England’s earliest open-air folk park, which Father J.S. Ward’s Confraternity of the Kingdom of Christ had sold to Ohly when they departed England in 1946 for Cyprus (ultimately re-settling at Caboolture, Queensland). It comprised a peculiar mix of historic English buildings, an African kraal, Chinese temple, carriage house, a reconstructed Neolithic lake dwelling, a wattle and daub hut and a relocated fourteenth-century tithe barn that Ward had consecrated as the Abbey Church of Christ the King and which Ohly would briefly transform into the Abbey Art Museum. Among the first artists to arrive at the Abbey in 1947 were expatriate Sydney artists James Gleeson, Robert Klippel, and Mary Webb, followed soon afterwards by a contingent of social realist painters from Melbourne including Noel Counihan, Peter Graham, Douglas Green, Grahame King, and Max Newton. Working alongside them were several middle-Europeans including Marcel Frishman, Helen Grunwald, Margret Kroch Frishman, Carl Koch, Lotte Reiniger, Angela Varga, and Inge Winter (soon to be Inge King), as well as a handful of struggling young British artists, notably Alan and Bili Davie and Peter King.

This workshop is the first of a series of public events arising from an Australia Research Council funded project, *The Abbey Art Centre: Reassessing postwar Australian art, 1946-1956* (DP200102794). It presents the research team’s preliminary findings, alongside those of invited guest speakers working on related aspects of the Abbey, and explores the key elements of cosmopolitanism, expatriatism and exchange that shaped the experience of art at the Abbey and beyond.



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Program

Presentations are 20-minutes with 10-minutes Q&A immediately after each speaker. Where, due to international time-zone differences, presentations are pre-recorded and the speaker unable to be present in real-time, the 10-minutes Q&A will be retained for an open discussion of any points arising from the paper. Questions for overseas speakers may also be held over until the round-table discussion at the end of the program.

10:30 am: Ian McLean — welcome; introduction to the Abbey project and first two speakers

10:45 to 11:15 am: Sheridan Palmer — **The Abbey Art Centre as aesthetic terrain during the Cold War**

11:15 to 11:45 am: Jane Eckett — **Creating an archive: the Abbey Art Centre digital repository.**

11:45 am to 12 noon: coffee break

12 noon: Ian McLean — introduction of speakers

12:05 to 12:35 pm: Rex Butler and Andrew Donaldson — **Australian artists in the colonies, or, The artist colony as a model for art history**

12:35 to 1:05 pm: Tashi Petter — **'Here we live... Quaint, ain't it?': Lotte Reiniger and Carl Koch at the Abbey Arts Centre** [pre-recorded]

1:05 to 2 pm: lunch break

2:00 pm: Ian McLean — introduction of speakers

2:05 to 2:35 pm: Geoff Ginn — **Making the Abbey Folk Park: John Ward's Historical Imagination in Context**

2:35 to 3:05 pm: Simon Pierse — **William Ohly and the Abbey Museum of Ethnographic Art**

3:05 to 3:15: ten-minute break

3:15 to 4:15 pm: **Roundtable discussion** chaired by Ian McLean.



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Speakers

- Prof. Rex Butler, Art History and Theory, Monash University
- Dr Andrew Donaldson, Lecturer, National Art School, Sydney
- Dr Jane Eckett, Research Fellow, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne
- Assoc. Prof. Geoff Ginn, School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland
- Prof. Ian McLean, Hugh Ramsay Chair of Australian Art History, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne
- Dr Sheridan Palmer, Senior Research Associate, School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne
- Dr Tashi Petter, Department of Film Studies, Queen Mary University of London
- Dr Simon Pierse, Emeritus Senior Lecturer, School of Art, Aberystwyth University

Abstracts

Sheridan Palmer

The Abbey Art Centre as aesthetic terrain during the Cold War

Mapping the movements of Australian expatriate artists in the immediate postwar years provides an opportunity for revisional critiques on postnationalism and a decolonised dialogue of the dispersed conditions of global modernism. My paper considers the 'transient historical and cultural predicament' of this period by investigating the Abbey Art Centre, a stand-alone artist colony outside London. Between 1947 and 1953 a swathe of Australian artists lived and worked at the Abbey alongside European refugee, Commonwealth and British artists. It can be argued that the Abbey reflected not only the inherent contradictions of a postnational world but also the nature of postwar artistic dispersal and global modernism. Yet historically the Abbey Art Centre has not been deemed important enough to be written into art history. As a site of multivalent modernism it offers an important interstitial space to evaluate how artists negotiated postwar Britain and Europe and navigated their creative journeys during this major geo-political, reconstructive cultural phase.

Jane Eckett

Creating an archive: the Abbey Art Centre digital repository

The absence of a discrete tangible archive has arguably obscured the Abbey Art Centre from Australian and British art histories. The reasons for this absence stem from the organic growth of the centre in its first eight years under William Ohly. A core collection of archival material remains at the Abbey, in the care of William Ohly's adopted daughter Bienchen Ohly, while many more photographs and letters are dispersed among the archives and estates of the artists who passed through the Abbey's gates. A key objective of the present ARC Discovery Project is to create a digital repository that draws together material on the

Abbey from multiple collections, both public and private, primarily from Australia and Britain. Using an Omeka platform, hosted on a University of Melbourne cloud service, we have begun the task of cataloguing archival documents and photographs as well as artworks made either at the Abbey or shortly before or after an Abbey residency. In this paper I present an overview of the digital repository, showing the range of material being catalogued using Dublin Core metadata and explaining Omeka's potential in terms of its full-text search and linkage functionalities. At present the repository contains over 500 items, including biographic entries on Abbey residents and visitors. While only a tiny fraction is currently publicly accessible, these will be made public over the duration of the three-year project as requisite copyright clearances are obtained—enabling an informed reassessment of Australian artists in postwar London.

Rex Butler and Andrew Donaldson

Australian artists in the colonies, or, The artist colony as a model for art history

All around the world for the past 20 years, scholars have been writing histories of particular art colonies. There are Nina Lübbren's *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe 1870-1910* (2001), Scott Shields' *Artists at Continent's End: The Monterey Peninsula Art Colony 1875-1907* (2006) and Thomas Denenberg, Amy Kurtz and Susan Denley's *Call of the Coast: Art Colonies of New England* (2009), just to name a few. But perhaps what has not yet been done is a study of the artist colony as a new model of art history altogether. With the end of national histories of art that sought to isolate and specify the art of a particular country, artist colonies with their frequent coming-together of artists from different cultures and places suggest themselves as a way of thinking another history of 20th-century art. In this paper we will be considering the Australian and Australasian artists who lived and worked in St Ives in Cornwall and in Étapes on the Picardy coast around 1900, followed by those who lived in Taos in New Mexico in the interwar years and in Provincetown in Massachusetts after the war. Of course, there have also been artist colonies in Australia, and before examining the history of The Abbey at New Barnet then just outside London we will reflect on those at Papunya and Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory. Considered as a whole, the experiences of the artists who lived in these colonies point to a global trans-national history of Australian art that avoids the simple universalism of either a world or post-national art.

Tashi Petter

'Here we live... Quaint, ain't it?': Lotte Reiniger and Carl Koch at the Abbey Arts Centre

When remembered at all, the pioneering filmmakers Lotte Reiniger (1899–1981) and Carl Koch (1892–1963) are best known for *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926), the silhouette fantasy spectacle now credited as the earliest surviving animated feature length in cinema history. This paper, however, will explore a lesser-known aspect of their life and work when the husband-and-wife collaborators lived at the Abbey Arts Centre in New Barnet. The rise of fascism and financial problems had prompted Reiniger and Koch to leave their home country of Germany in 1935–36. The 1930s and 40s were characterised by itinerancy, with frequent travelling and spells in Rome, London, Paris as well as a forced return to Berlin at the height of WWII. By contrast, from 1953 onwards, the Abbey Arts Centre offered the émigré filmmakers a place of refuge, stability and creativity for several decades (until Koch's death in 1963, and Reiniger's departure in 1980). This paper will draw on research conducted for Tashi Petter's doctoral project and showcase some intriguing archival findings from the Abbey years (photographs, letters, drawings) as well as excerpts from interviews with a collaborator and an Abbey resident. Whilst offering a sense of daily

life in New Barnet, this presentation will shed further light on these often-neglected émigré filmmakers, revealing Reiniger and Koch's connections to other Abbey artists and highlighting their rarely acknowledged status amongst post-war avant-gardist circles in Britain.

Geoff Ginn

Making the Abbey Folk Park: John Ward's Historical Imagination in Context

The Abbey Folk Park, displaying Father John Ward's collection of artefacts, antiquities and curiosities, opened in New Barnet, North London in June 1934. Almost uniquely in museums of the time, its displays—in galleries and re-located heritage buildings—aimed to stimulate and enthuse audiences by what we would now call 'living history' techniques. Arguably, it was the first social history museum in Britain to try to present an atmospheric, immersive historical experience for visitors. This paper explains the sources of John Ward's antiquarian and museological instincts, through a consideration of his unusual biography, esoteric interests and outlook.

Simon Pierse

William Ohly and the Abbey Museum of Ethnographic Art

This paper will reveal the extent to which the Abbey Art Museum (also known as the Abbey Museum of Ethnographic Art) had antecedents in the Abbey Folk Museum, set up by the Reverend Father Ward at 89 Park Road, New Barnet in 1934. When Father Ward sold the Abbey estate to William Ohly in 1946, Ward also sold, or in some cases gifted a number of artefacts and museum cases to Ohly from his Folk Museum collection. Of the reported 43,000 items in the Abbey Folk Museum, only a few thousand were transported to Cyprus when the Confraternity relocated there in 1946. Among the 500 or so items in the Abbey Art Museum a number of Tibetan artefacts came from Ward's collection. The Abbey Museum was a relatively short-lived initiative and some of the items were later reclaimed for the Berkeley Galleries by Ernest Ohly after his father's death in 1955, or even before. It emerges that fragments of the museum collection still remain at Hadley Hall, while other valuable items were sold, as is documented in auction catalogues. The British Pathé newsreel released in September 1952 (just six months after the museum's official opening) promotes the museum collection as a resource that artists in residence at the Abbey were actively engaging with. But was this really the case?