



ABBOTSLEIGH

GS Grace
CossingtonSmithGallery

Out of the Shadows of a Long Summer



Alison Rehfisch and her contemporaries

Acknowledgements

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*Out of the Shadows of
a Long Summer*

**Alison Rehfisch and
her contemporaries**

4 September to 10 October 2019

Artists: Jean Appleton, Janna Bruce, Enid Cambridge,
Margaret Coen, Grace Cossington Smith, Nancy Goldfinch,
Adelaide Perry, Margaret Preston, Alison Rehfisch

Curated by Nick Vickers

Out of the shadows of a long summer

Alison Rehfisch and her contemporaries

A group of women artists emerge from the shadows of the long summer of Sydney during the 1930s. These are the late afternoon shadows that stretch from the northern suburbs of Pymble and Waitara to the tiny bohemian enclave of Rowe, Bridge and Bligh Streets in the centre of a city exhaling the dust of the First World War. Sometimes these are the shadows of their male contemporaries who were riding a wave of Modernism into the ateliers and galleries that peppered that part of town.

The Dattilo-Rubbo studio, based in Rowe Street, was to become the central meeting point for many of the women artists of that inter-war period. The studio was not just a physical location, but also a place where ideas, philosophies and colour theories become the dialogue of the day. Dattilo-Rubbo was energised by the works of Cezanne, Matisse and Gauguin and his influence on the direction that the works of artists like Alison Rehfisch, Grace Cossington-Smith, Nancy Goldfinch, Adelaide Perry, Jean Appleton, Janna Bruce, Margaret Preston, Enid Cambridge and Margaret Coen were to take, forms the central curatorial direction of this exhibition.

While Australia was experiencing the deepest economic depression between the wars, there were many symbolic advances. The Sydney Harbour Bridge became an iconic emblem of progress that was to become the inspirational subject for women artists like Grace Cossington-Smith and Margaret Preston. Within the creative sphere the contradiction between fruitful creativity and an anchorage for staid traditionalism could not have been more apparent. While artists like Alison Rehfisch and her contemporaries at the

Dattilo-Rubbo studio immersed themselves in the whole Modernist movement and its inherent linkages to spirituality and the meaning of colour, the establishment was steeped in academia.

12 Bligh Street was situated at the centre of Sydney's creative district and if that building's walls could speak there would be tales of the tenancies of some of Australia's best known creative talents – Alison Rehfisch, George Duncan, Margaret Coen, Douglas Stewart, Adelaide Perry, Norman Lindsay and Jean Appleton occupied studios. These were the extraordinarily dedicated and brilliant women artists whose own radiance emerged from the shadows of a long summer. But as early as 1933 more businesses were moving into the district and Sydney was beginning to lose its creative community. It was time for Alison Rehfisch to move to London where she formed friendships and working relationships with many Australian creative ex-patriots. Her first port of call was with Norman and Edith Lloyd, whose mansion in St John's Wood was a haven for Australian creatives. From there she moved to the Bloomsbury district and attended the Grosvenor School of Modern Art and cemented her beliefs in the principals of Modernism.

In her expansive study of *The Life and Art of Alison Rehfisch*, Rachel Power asserts, 'These are simple statements, devoid of ornamentation, which represent a visual record of the rooms in which she lived and worked. These weighty, unpretentious still lives are testimony to the successful integration of intellect and intuition prevalent in the work of many female Modernists. In breaking free of personal

and artistic constraints, purity and clarity of vision became the overwhelming features of their work'.

The mid to late 1930s saw Alison Rehfisch at the height of her time in London. However, this time was to suddenly end with the death of her constant but estranged husband and benefactor Rodney Rehfisch. In 1938 Alison Rehfisch returned home.

On the eve of World War 2, one of the most extraordinary and influential exhibitions to ever have been curated came to Australia – the 1939 Herald Exhibition of *French and British Contemporary Art* that comprised more than 200 works curated by Basil Burdett and sponsored by the Murdoch family. If ever there was to be an exhibition that polarised the Australian art community, the *1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art* took the dialogue into the stratosphere with JS MacDonald describing the works as, '*... exceedingly wretched paintings ... putrid meat ... the product of degenerates and perverts ... filth.*'

In November 1939, the David Jones Gallery hosted the exhibition and it must have been an illumination for the Dattilo-Rubbo cohort. The 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art was deemed by many to be so important that it stayed in Australia, a safe haven, for the duration of World War 2.

If ever an art movement was destined to survive, it was going to be Modernism. Born out of the pixilations and light modulations of Impressionism and with the tumultuous backdrop of two major European and worldwide conflicts, Modernism embraced the alchemy and spirituality of the

elements of pure colour. Broad brush strokes and *alla prima* applications of paint become synonymous with capturing a more profound compositional statement.

Striding beyond those shadows of a long summer afternoon were the familiar figures of Alison Rehfisch and her companions: Jean Appleton, Janna Bruce, Enid Cambridge, Margaret Coen, Grace Cossington Smith, Nancy Goldfinch, Adelaide Perry, Margaret Preston and some more obscure figures but nevertheless influential. Ethel Anderson was one such person whose mural works in churches involved many of the artists from the Turrumurra district, and her 'open house' policy became the open door for the spirited dialogue of The Turrumurra Wall Painters group. She was a writer, a journalist and many of her existing works remain in the private collections of philanthropists and supporters of the times.

These were the extraordinarily dedicated women who traversed a parallel universe with many of their male counterparts whose radiance often created the very shadows from which the women artists in this exhibition strove to emerge.

Nick Vickers, Curator, 2019

Alison Rehfisch

(1900–1975)

Alison Baily Rehfisch was born in Woollahra in Sydney and was the eldest daughter of William Baily Green and his wife Annie, who was a talented artist in her own right. As a boarder at Redlands in Cremorne, Alison was a student of Albert Collins and after graduation she attended the Julian Ashton School of Art. In 1919 she married Rodney Eshenberg Rehfisch and they moved to Neutral Bay in 1922 where they had their only daughter.

Once her daughter was old enough to attend school, Alison followed her passion and became a student of Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo. She threw herself into the bohemian lifestyle that thrived around the inner city of Sydney near Bligh and Rowe Streets. It was here that she met and became friends with George Duncan, who was to become her lifelong partner.

She had her first solo exhibition at The Blaxland Gallery in 1929 and began exhibiting her work on a regular basis with the Society of Artists. In 1930 Alison and her husband separated and she moved into a studio in the centre of Sydney, a studio that was later occupied by Margaret Coen.

In 1933 she moved to London where she studied at the Grosvenor School of Modern Art where she studied with Iain MacNab.

It was here that she was introduced to the Modernist school of painting and in 1934 she participated in the Six Colonial Artists exhibition at the Cooling Galleries in New Bond Street. She also worked with other Australian artists on the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow.

Alison immersed herself thoroughly in the European lifestyle and travelled through France and Spain. She wrote colourful and descriptive letters to her mother who had a radio program with the ABC, and who broadcast them under the title 'Story of an artist in Spain'. Unfortunately, Alison Rehfisch's time in Europe was cut short by the death of her estranged husband in 1938 as well as the outbreak of WW2 in 1939.

Back in Sydney once again, Alison joined with other artists to exhibit with the Macquarie Galleries. She married George Duncan in 1942 and they moved to the Southern Highlands of NSW for 10 years. They returned to Sydney and lived in Pymble where she continued to paint and exhibit her work until her death in 1975.



Alison Rehfish
Bucket & Breadboard with Pumpkin
Oil on board
60 x 80 cm

Jean Appleton

(1911–2003)

Jean Appleton attended Haberfield Private School before enrolling in the five-year Art Diploma of Drawing and Illustration course at East Sydney Technical College (now The National Art School). She graduated in 1932 and her main lecturers were Douglas Dundas and Fred Britton.

In 1936 she travelled to London and enrolled at the Westminster School of Art where she lived on a small allowance from her mother of three pounds per week. Her main tutors at that time were Mark Gertler and Bernard Meninsky who were closely associated with the Bloomsbury group of artists. She was one of a team of Australian artists that worked on a mural and exhibit for the Wool Secretariat pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition in Glasgow in 1938. However, Appleton's stay in London was cut short by the devastating impact of WW2 and she reluctantly returned to Australia where she eventually gained some work with the Church of England Grammar School in Canberra. While in London she met her future husband, artist Eric Wilson, who came to Australia and they married in 1943, but unfortunately his life was shortened by the onset of cancer and he died three years later.

In 1940 Jean Appleton's work was featured in a solo exhibition at Macquarie Galleries. Between her two solo exhibitions she taught at the Julian Ashton School of Art and The National Art School. In 1943 she was elected to the membership of The Society of the Artists and also contributed to the Contemporary Group.

In 1949 she met the English artist Tom Green while travelling and whom she married in 1952. In her later years she revisited the artists that had influenced her in her early years and this period represents the second plateau in Jean Appleton's career as a visual artist. She became increasingly focused on her surroundings and preoccupied with light; not a source of light, but light playing over the whole area.

In 1965 Appleton, was the inaugural winner of the Portia Geach Prize for a Portrait by a Female Artist. She is represented in most of the state gallery collections throughout Australia. It was not until 1989 that a survey of Jean Appleton's work was undertaken by the Robyn Brady Gallery.



Jean Appleton
The Window in Autumn
Oil on board
86 x 73 cm
Private collection

Janna Bruce

1909–2000

Janna Bruce was born in Chatswood and grew up in Warrawee. From 1925–1935 she studied, along with Nancy Goldfinch, under Dattilo-Rubbo at his Sydney art school and in 1933 was included in the Royal Art Society of NSW's annual exhibition in the Education Department's Art Gallery.

Bruce travelled widely, living and studying in England from 1936–1938, at which time she studied at the Westminster Art School in London and at the Academie Ranson in Paris. She also shared a studio with Jean Appleton and exhibited with Alison Rehfisch and other Australian artists on the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow. In 1939 she was appointed Art Teacher at the Westminster Art School.

In 1946 she married Eric Sowerby Drake, and returning to Sydney, before heading to China, it was noted in the 1947 Daily Telegraph, 'An Australian who returned from the U.K. in the Otranto, Mrs J. Sowerby-DRAKE, formerly Miss Jana BRUCE of Wahroonga, has been art student, camouflage expert and film producer during 10 years abroad in Europe and England. During the War, Mrs Sowerby-DRAKE took a job with a camouflage unit. Later she was given direction of a film unit and made responsible for production, from scripts to editing, of documentary and educational

films for the Army. Mrs Sowerby-DRAKE is en route to China to join her husband, who has been appointed adviser in English studies to the British Consulate in Nanking.'

They lived in China from 1948–51. On their return to Australia, Bruce taught at the Bissietta School in Pitt Street and then at Abbotsleigh from 1954–1976 and her husband became Assistant Master in English at The Kings School Parramatta.

Bruce exhibited in the *NSW Society of Artists' Autumn Exhibition*, David Jones Art Gallery, 1956; *Women Painters: 1st Annual Exhibition* at the Bissietta Art Gallery in 1958 and *An exhibition of Women's Achievements in the Arts* in the David Jones Art Gallery in 1960. She was an exhibiting member, and Vice President, of the Australian Watercolour Institute, a finalist several times in the Wynne Prize at the Art Gallery of NSW and her work *Lilies and Figs* (1958) is part of the collection of the AGNSW.

Yellow House, *McCarrs Creek* was donated by Piers Laverty, on the occasion of Abbotsleigh's 127th birthday. His mother Ursula was a friend of Janna's and his artist father Peter was Director of the Art Gallery of NSW 1971–1978.



Janna Bruce
Yellow House, McCarrs Creek
Watercolour
57 x 42.5 cm
Collection of Abbotsleigh

Enid Cambridge

1903–1976

Born in Mosman in Sydney, Enid Cambridge studied painting and drawing under Julian Ashton at the Sydney Art School from 1920–1929 and also attended Roland Wakelin's classes at Chatswood and Waverton. In 1930 she exhibited at the Macquarie Galleries exhibition, A group of seven, with Grace Cossington Smith and other artists. During the 1930s until the early 1950s she often went on painting excursions around Sydney and in regional New South Wales with Cossington Smith. Between 1939–76 Cambridge held 12 exhibitions at the Macquarie Galleries, Sydney and in 1945 Hal Missingham purchased her work for the AGNSW. She taught art at SCEGGS Darlinghurst from 1933 to 1968.

In 1943 Cambridge was elected a member of the Society of Artists, and from 1941 was a member of the Australian Watercolour Institute. She was a member of the

Contemporary Group, exhibiting with it from 1939 until its disbandment in 1959, when she travelled to Europe and studied under Oskar Kokoshka, at his International Academy of Art in Salzburg.

Grace Cossington Smith painted Enid Cambridge in 1957 and at the time of Cambridge's death in 1976, Cossington Smith wrote, *'Everyone loved Enid, she is my dearest art friend. Her superb watercolours are the expression of love and understanding of Nature, and of things around her; and are of high distinction among Australian watercolours. Her loss to the community is a very great one and a sorrow to us all. Artist, Teacher, Nature and Animal Lover and Friend – Enid is a shining personality.'*

(written on Macquarie Galleries Exhibition Catalogue, courtesy SCEGGS Darlinghurst)



Enid Cambridge
Celia in Yellow
Oil on canvas
101 x 74.5 cm
Collection of SCEGGS Darlinghurst

Margaret Coen

(1909–1993)

Margaret Coen was born in Yass, NSW. At Kincoppal Convent, Elizabeth Bay she studied art with Antonio Dattillo-Rubbo, who was the school's art master, and after leaving school she joined Dattillo-Rubbo's day class for women in his city studio. Among the other students at Dattillo-Rubbo's was Alison Rehfisch. This marked the beginning of a life-long friendship between the two.

Painting flowers was always Coen's first love and she rapidly became adept at capturing rich arrangements in watercolour. By the early 1930s she was exhibiting in group shows and in 1938 she had her first one-person exhibition. This same year she met, and eventually married, the young New Zealand poet Douglas Stewart. In 1940 she moved into friend Norman Lindsay's studio in Bridge Street, a studio whose previous occupants had included Alison Rehfisch and George Duncan.

In 1953 Coen moved to Kuring-Gai and she found the area with its landscape and gardens creatively stimulating. Her skill as landscapist and feeling for the Australian bush and countryside was clearly evident in the resulting works. Her 1968 watercolour *Dry Summer* was awarded the Pring Prize (chosen from the Wynne Prize entries at the Art Gallery of New Wales).

Her work can be found in private collections, as well as institutions including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Manly Art Gallery and Museum, the New England Regional Art Museum, the SH Ervin Gallery Collection and the collection of the State Library of New South Wales.



Margaret Coen
Hydrangeas with Chinese figure, 1934,
Watercolour on paper
31.0 x 36.0 cm
Private collection
Photograph courtesy Greg Weight

Grace Cossington Smith

(1892–1984)

Grace Cossington Smith was born in Neutral Bay, Sydney but most of her youth was spent at Thornleigh, where she studied art at Abbotsleigh with well-known artists Alfred Coffey and Albert Collins. She graduated in c1910 and studied for two years with Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo until her parents moved to Bowral in the Southern Highlands of NSW.

In 1912 she and her sister went to Winchester in England where they stayed until the outbreak of WW1. Upon her return to Australia, she moved to Turrumurra and remained at the same address for the entirety of her professional life working from a studio in the garden and then in the house. In 1920 the house became the property of the Smiths and was named Cossington and Grace adopted that name as her professional working moniker.

Cossington Smith re-commenced classes at the Dattilo-Rubbo school to study painting. Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo encouraged his students to look to Europe and Modernism for inspiration and Cossington Smith's use of colour

developed into an unmistakably signature style. During these years she often went on painting excursions around Sydney and in regional New South Wales with her friends Helen Stewart, Enid Cambridge, Treania Smith and Jean Appleton.

Cossington Smith participated in group exhibitions and in 1928 had her first solo exhibitions with the Grosvenor and then with Macquarie Galleries until 1972. From the 1940s, major institutional collections started to acquire her work, which at that stage encapsulated the privacy of her studio with inspirational still life studies of objects collected from her travels.

Cossington Smith became more widely known after Bernard Smith included her in his book *Australian Painting 1788-1960*, published in 1962. In 1973 she was appointed OBE and that year a museum retrospective exhibition of her work was organised by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and toured Australia. In 1983 she was awarded the Order of Australia.



Grace Cossington Smith
The Curve of the Bridge (from Milsons Point), c1927-30
Pastel and pencil on paper
36 x 54.5 cm
Collection of Abbotsleigh
Photograph courtesy Richard Glover

Nancy Goldfinch

(1911–2010)

Nancy Goldfinch was encouraged to paint by her uncle who was a gifted watercolourist. Her first formal lessons were with Marjorie Arnold, an artist and family friend. While at secondary school at Abbotsleigh, Wahroonga, her teacher Eirene Mort inspired her to continue painting and suggested that she study with Will Ashton. At age 17 Goldfinch attended Ashton's Saturday afternoon classes as well as drawing classes at the Royal Art Society of NSW.

After leaving school Goldfinch attended Dattilo-Rubbo's Bligh Street art school from 1930-32. Here she was inspired by Modernist artists such as Cezanne and she also met Janna Bruce. Goldfinch also continued classes and exhibited at the Royal Art Society of NSW.

In 1933 Goldfinch went to England for three years where she studied at the Chelsea Art School. Her work was shown with the Royal Society of British Artists and she exhibited her student work at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1935.

On her return to Sydney, Goldfinch exhibited with the Macquarie Galleries in 1935 and 1940, and the 1940 exhibition was opened by Dattilo-Rubbo. She attended a drawing group with Thea Proctor and other artists and she worked *en plein air* or from a studio in Bond Street, Sydney. In 1951 Goldfinch moved to Hunters Hill where she raised her family. She continued to create paintings, collages, drawings and pastels and worked with John Olsen at the Bakery Art School from 1968-71. Goldfinch had a one woman show at Macquarie Galleries in 1992 and in 1994 a retrospective at Newcastle Region Art Gallery. She is represented in the Art Gallery of NSW.



Nancy Goldfinch
Henriette Street, Double Bay, 1939
Oil on canvas, mounted on board
45.5 x 36 cm
Private collection

Adelaide Perry

(1891–1973)

Adelaide Perry grew up in Beechworth, Victoria and studied art in 1914 under Frederick McCubbin and Bernard Hall at the National Gallery of Victoria School of Art in Melbourne. In 1920 she was awarded a travelling scholarship that took her to Paris and to the Royal Academy of Art in London.

It was in London, between WW1 and WW2 that she worked with British artists like Walter Sickert and Ernest Jackson and developed a profound interest in Modernism.

In 1926 she returned to Australia and settled in Sydney where she became a member of the Society of Artists and a founding member of the Contemporary Group while also teaching on a part time basis at the Julian Ashton School of Art. She also exhibited her work at the Grosvenor and Macquarie Galleries in the Bligh Street district of Sydney which was at that time the gallery district of the city. She

became well known and well respected as a draftsman, printmaker and painter and even set up her own school of art in Bridge Street, Sydney

Adelaide Perry was appointed to the part time position as the Art Mistress at the Presbyterian Ladies' College in Croydon in 1930 and soon after the outbreak of WW2 was appointed to a full time position. The college gallery, The Croydon, hosts an annual exhibition in her memory and name. Adelaide Perry retired from the school in 1962 and continued her art practice from her Hunters Hill and Killara homes until her death in 1973.



Adelaide Perry

Road out to Richmond, 1930

Oil on panel

24 x 34 cm

The PLC Sydney Collection, Presbyterian Ladies' College, Sydney.

Donation, A.E Perry, 1965

Keith Saunders Photography

Margaret Preston

(1875–1963)

Margaret Rose Preston (née MacPherson) was born in Port Adelaide in 1875 but by 1888 was studying art in Sydney with William Lister Lister and then in 1893 with Frederick McCubbin at the National Gallery of Victoria school. Due to the death of her father in 1894, Margaret Preston moved back to Adelaide where she lived with her mother and sister.

In 1896 she returned to Melbourne and studied with Bernard Hall at the National Gallery of Victoria School of Art and Design. Two years later she returned to Adelaide to study at the School of Design, Painting and Technical Arts and to teach from her studio.

By 1904, after her mother died, Margaret Macpherson, as she was still known, decided to travel to Europe with one of her students, Bessie Davidson. While there she visited Munich and Paris, where she first came in contact with the works of Cezanne and Matisse. They returned to Adelaide in 1907 and set up a studio-based teaching practice.

In 1912 she returned to Europe with her close friend, Gladys Reynell, where she furthered her studies of Cezanne and was able to view the second Post Impressionist Exhibition that was curated by Roger Fry. This exhibition not only featured the works of Matisse but also those of Picasso. She and Gladys Reynell lived in Brittany before moving to London at the beginning of WW1 in 1914. It was in London that she showed her first woodcuts with the Society of Women Artists and it was at this time that she moved away from her background

of formal studies and academic realism to embrace a practice based more fundamentally on colour theory. This would have been a direct influence from the designs and ceramics of the Bloomsbury Group.

The post war years saw Macpherson and Reynell working in Devon with soldiers who were suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Her artwork continued to receive acclaim and in 1919 she was invited to exhibit at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburg USA, and it was on the return trip from America that she met her husband, William Preston (1881–1878).

They returned to Adelaide where she had an exhibition with Gladys Reynell. George and Margaret married in 1919 and from that time Margaret MacPherson become known as Margaret Preston. They moved to Sydney and established themselves in Mosman where she became closely associated with the Society of Artists and the eminent writer and publicist, Sydney Ure Smith. Margaret Preston's first major printmaking exhibition was with Thea Proctor in 1926. She was subsequently featured in three major one-woman exhibitions through to the 1950s and in 1930 was the first woman to be commissioned by the trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW to paint a self portrait.

Margaret Preston died in 1963 and although she is best remembered for her extraordinary range of prints, she also left a legacy of experimentation.

Dattilo-Rubbo Art School

Artist; painter; art teacher; curator
Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo (1870–1955) was born in Naples and arrived in Sydney in 1897. Upon disembarking on 13 November, he was befriended by Eirene Mort. In return for accommodation and English lessons with the Mort family, Rubbo conducted an art class at their Strathfield home. In 1898 he began a studio class in Hunter Street, moving the next year to Rowe Street, where he established his atelier, the main rival to Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School.

As well as teaching at the Art Society and private schools, he was a vocal advocate for art in the school curriculum with mandatory drawing study, and for establishing a national art school.

Dattilo-Rubbo encouraged his students in the search for colour, vibrancy and light, and his enthusiasm for modern art transformed his studio into the hub for Sydney's avant-garde. However, his teaching was always embedded in draughtsmanship.

Many of his paintings are held at Sydney's Manly Art Gallery & Museum, which he helped establish. In 1969, Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo's son, Sydney Rubbo interviewed some of his father's former students. The notes are held in the archives of the Manly Art Gallery & Museum, and the tapes by the Art Gallery of NSW.

Grace Cossington Smith remembers how Dattilo-Rubbo described the bedroom of van Gogh with yellow walls, red carpet and red ceiling. She painted an interior based on these colours and took it to the studio – from then on, Dattilo-Rubbo called her Mrs van Gogh. She thought Dattilo-Rubbo was a wonderful teacher who inspired his students to go their own way.

Alison Rehfish pointed out that Dattilo-Rubbo took students to be friends. He was able to understand a student's particular view and let them express their own ideas without imposing his own ways. Rehfish thought Dattilo-Rubbo to be tolerant, sympathetic and generous, between the old and the new. She learnt from him the heavy impasto technique.

Janna Bruce believed that Dattilo-Rubbo's greatness was in inspiring his students. He had the power to make students use their imagination. He was broadminded and interested in his students, and he had a presence that dominated the studio. This was also apparent in his everyday life, getting special treatment from shopkeepers and tradespeople, and women just adored him.

Margaret Coen studied with Dattilo-Rubbo from 1928–1929. Dattilo-Rubbo called Margaret Coen 'gunner' – he said that one day she would go boom.



Gallery hours Mon to Fri 10 am-5 pm Sat 9 am-4 pm FREE ENTRY | Gate 7, 1666 Pacific Highway, Wahroonga
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