

The following essay was written by Tristan Sharp, Assistant Director of the [Newcastle Region Art Gallery](#) in the catalogue 'William Rose - Composing Space, 19 March to 29 May 2011'

"The works by William Rose (1929-1997) in the collection of the Newcastle Region Art Gallery bring insight into the artist's practice and career. Including two paintings, five works on paper and one rare lithograph, they represent each decade of the artist's career from the 1950s to the 1990s and are the basis for the exhibition *William Rose Composing space*.

The exhibition has been enhanced by some twenty works selected from the estate of the artist, many of which have not been seen since they were first exhibited or never publicly displayed. They bring context to those in the Gallery's collection and together present a focussed survey of the development of Rose's oeuvre. Rose's name today does not instantly command attention, despite the national and international recognition he achieved and maintained during his forty-year career.

Bringing together this range of work is an underexplored exercise that affords unexpected rewards. Rather than being overwhelmed by repetition, one can attune to their subtle nuances; marks and notations, palette, spatial variations and rhythms, all corralled, at times barely contained, within the space on which they are laid down.

The artist and art critic James Gleeson advised when viewing Rose's work, "Only close attention will reveal the fact that every painting is a wholly new raid upon the intangible, always aimed in the same direction yet always uncovering a new variation, a subtly different nuance of form or motion."

1

Throughout his career, Rose did not wander from his signature style or drastically change its form. Repetition with variation was his mantra. He was proud of his consistency. Indeed, Gertrude Stein's quote 'a rose is a rose is a rose' was parroted by his detractors while defiantly embraced by the artist himself - because a Rose was going to be a Rose forever. ²

Born in 1929 and raised in the Newcastle suburb of Carrington, Rose left school at seventeen and worked the variety of industrial jobs expected of a young man growing up in the city. He developed an interest in art, first attending night classes at Newcastle Technical College before moving to Sydney in 1950 to pursue it more seriously at East Sydney Tech and the National Art School. He lasted no more than three weeks at either institution, which he, "...found unacceptable in my revolt against the academic short comings of Anglo-Australian art teaching"³ preferring what he called "the University of the Street."⁴

His short tenure at art school did pay some life changing dividends though. He met fellow Novocastrian John Olsen and through him Robert Klippel who were connected with the local Sydney bohemian art scene and studio space in 'the loo' (Woolloomooloo). Both artists remained lifelong

friends, sparring partners and supporters. He was also introduced to Early Modernism by tutor, then friend John Passmore, and he met fellow art student and future wife Sharn.

Rose was self-taught. He absorbed and synthesised everything he could to develop his vision as an artist. The pioneers of early Modernism and their assault on the academic traditions of representation and subject matter, these were the ideas that resonated tremendously with Rose and his anti-establishment sensibilities. Cezanne, Picasso, Mondrian and Kandinsky, are all embedded within the DNA of a Rose composition.

Rose first exhibited publicly in 1954 with the Contemporary Art Society, Sydney and in 1956, along with Olsen, organised the seminal 1956 exhibition *Direction 1* at Macquarie Galleries, Sydney. It lasted one week in December of that year and was a sensation. It thrust the then 27-year-old artist to national prominence along with Olsen, Eric Smith, John Passmore and Robert Klippel. Both *Untitled 1954* and *September 1956* have been included in the exhibition representing these two defining moments for Rose.

Three years later Rose and Olsen instigated the *9 Sydney* exhibition at David Jones' Art Gallery, Sydney with Peter Upward, Carl Plate, Stanislaw Rapotec, Clement Meadmore and art critic Robert Hughes amongst others. It was a direct response to art historian Bernard Smith's *Antipodean Manifesto* and the importance it placed on figurative traditions over the 'fashion' that was abstraction.

Following *Direction 1*, Rose's career developed quickly. He was selected for important international exhibitions of Australian art including the Pacific Loan Exhibition in 1956 which toured Auckland, Honolulu, Vancouver and San Francisco on board the Orient Line's S.S. Orcades. This was followed in the 1960's by *Paintings from the Pacific*, New Zealand; *Recent Australian Paintings*, Australian painting Today (*Untitled 1963* is included in the exhibition) and *Antipodean Vision*, United Kingdom; *Paris Biennale*, France and *Young Australian Painters*, Japan. Rose held over 20 solo exhibitions throughout his career with most of the major Sydney commercial galleries as well as a major solo exhibition at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York in 1982, from which three paintings are included.

Of the eight works by Rose held in the Gallery's collection, the most significant are the two paintings *Rhapsody in Blue* 1959 and *February painting* 1975. Purchased by the Gallery from Von Bertouch Gallery, Newcastle and Gallery A, Sydney respectively, both works are excellent examples of Rose's signature style. The shift from an open to closed structure and use of positive and negative space within the composition is apparent when comparing the two. Both are an ongoing attempt to delineate an unseen but sensed 'fourth dimension', but the former is open, ongoing and pulsing beyond the frame. The latter very obviously and deliberately contained and constrained, almost vibrating due to its confinement. The influence of music, especially jazz and classical, is clear in Rose's titles and a consistent subtext of any of his compositions. He would listen to it loud when working in the studio. Names of the months in which works were painted were also regularly used, not only denoting a time of creation but a sense of mood and tone related to a season.

Rose realised early that canvas would not do. Painting on masonite board, and later marine ply was essential. Both were strong enough to withstand the thin slashes of oil paint applied or rather etched in, with a sharpened kitchen knife. The size of the paintings is due to the stock size of masonite rather than any particular desire of the artist, but it increased exponentially once the lighter marine ply was available. This was the nature of Rose's studio practice - happenstance, experimentation, and the use of whatever was available at the time. The absolute aim being not to slow down any opportunity to activate intuition, improvisation and spontaneity at any time.

Rose's physical ailments equally influenced his practice. In 1967 he won the Transfield Prize, the prize money enabling a second ear operation to rectify his declining hearing, a lifelong problem. "Since my last operation which gave me back my full hearing, my paintings have become explosive. Where once I painted sombre, bluey-grey colours, now I am using yellow and red – bright awareness colours that live," Rose declared.⁵ *Rhapsody in blue* 1959 and *February painting* 1975 bridge this time and transformation in the use of colour. Curiously Rose also noted he was a more likeable fellow when he was deaf. Once he could hear everything, he argued with everyone.⁶ Something many people would note as both endearing, frustrating and quintessentially William Rose.

Drawing is the foundation of Rose's practice, in its own right, as a way of limbering up for painting, and within his painting technique itself. Most usually scratched out in ink with a stylus, early works from the 1950s were skeletal linear experiments. With later works from the 1960s on, like those in the Gallery's collection, Rose would build form around the dashing point and line structure with watercolour or pastel, solidifying the composition together. The affect being more organic, and more akin to agitated bio-morphic organisms found in rain forests, under a microscope or on newly discovered planets. Such was the continuous micro to macro view that Rose was attempting to tap into with every mark.

William Rose has made a significant contribution to Australian art and, yet his work is still not very well understood. This is because he has created his own private language, an imagery which is his way of investigating and describing the universe.⁷ People find all sorts of physical suggestions – skyscrapers, dockyards, scaffolding, battleships under construction, space stations in orbit or industrial landscapes – and in a way, they are right. It would be strange if his visual surroundings either from Throsby Creek in Newcastle or the skyline of Sydney years later were not embedded in there somewhere.⁸ Rose would always discount this though, he lived in his 'own place' where machine, nature and self-met and became indistinguishable. Rose was always trying to get to the truths underlying experience, with little more than paint and a sense of something greater than himself.

In Rose's own words: "The essence of my work from my very first showing in 1954 is to prove that the easel painting as such is not an anachronism. That it can still work beyond the artificial subject representation and is still a worthy vehicle for artistic search."⁹

William Rose always claimed that his artistic philosophy and style were moulded in Newcastle. It is fitting that this survey of his unique body of work, is presented back here in his home town."

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- 1 James Gleeson, *Australian Painting Studio Series, Modern Australian Painters*, 1970, pp 110.
- 2 John Olsen, *Indelible impression of a Rose in full bloom*, Sydney Morning Herald, 24TH December 1997.
- 3 Jill Sykes, *Rose aims to make the heart sing*, Sydney Morning Herald, 15 April 1982.
- 4 Christine Franz, Exhibitions catalogue *New Directions 1952 – 1962*, The Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Art Gallery, 1991
- 5 Gloria Newton, *An artist also sees with his ears: operation which restored hearing has given painter new world*, The Australian Women's Weekly May 22, 1968.
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Laurie Thomas, *A new sort of alphabet*, The Australian, 24 June 1967.
- 8 Ibid
- 9 William Rose, *Artist statement*, in Exhibition catalogue *The Paintings of William Rose: Metaphysical Australian Structure*, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, 1982