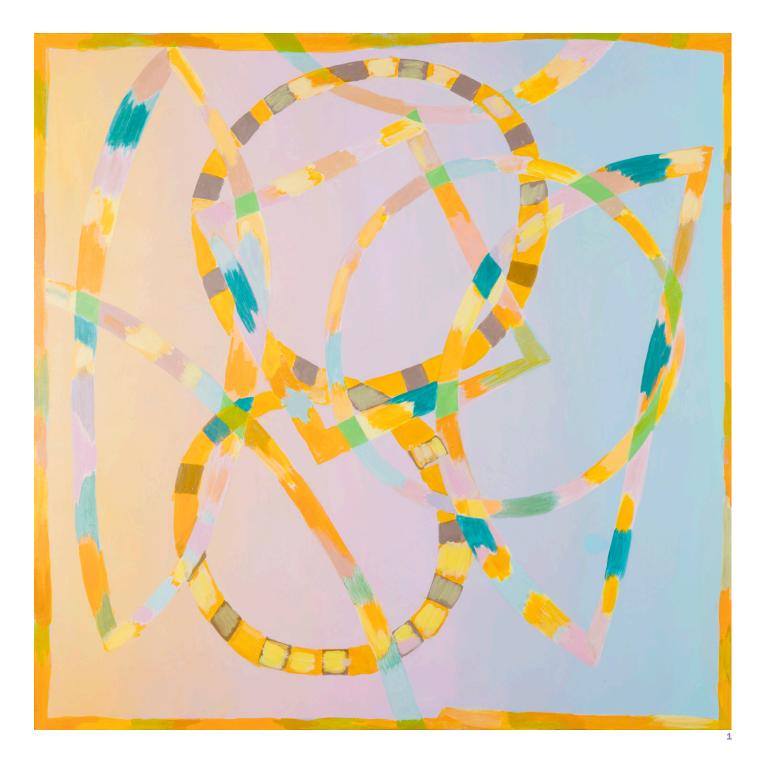
VIRGINIA CUPPAIDGE the nature of abstraction

11 May - 21 July 2019



FOREWORD

Newcastle Art Gallery is proud to present VIRGINIA CUPPAIDGE: the nature of abstraction, an exhibition featuring works of art by highly respected Australian abstract artist Virginia Cuppaidge. Born in Brisbane in 1943, Cuppaidge studied art in Sydney prior to moving to New York in 1969 where she remained for more than 40 years before returning to Australia to live here in Newcastle.

Following on from Cuppaidge's inclusion in the National Gallery of Australia's touring exhibition *Abstraction: celebrating Australian women abstract artists*, held at Newcastle Art Gallery in 2017, this exhibition presents the artist's work from 1972 - 2012 and brings together paintings from the Gallery's collection, key state, national and private collections.

Cuppaidge's practice is embedded in the abstract; the works of art selected celebrate her acute understanding of the landscape and mastery of light, balance, colour and form. Newcastle Art Gallery has collected Cuppaidge's works of art since the 1980s and VIRGINIA CUPPAIDGE: the nature of abstraction provides yet another opportunity

to develop a project that showcases a prominent artist from the collection. Drawn from the Gallery's holdings are three monumental paintings, Saix 1974, Valoniah 1979 and Center of the Beginning 1988.

Virginia Cuppaidge is represented in public and private collections nationally and internationally. My sincere thanks must go to Virginia for so enthusiastically accepting the Gallery's invitation to develop this exhibition. Thanks also to Nicholas Thompson Gallery in Melbourne, the private lenders and our colleagues from the Art Gallery of South Australia, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Macquarie University Art Gallery, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art and the University of Newcastle Art Gallery. It is through their generosity and support that the Gallery's vision for this impressive exhibition has been realised.

Lauretta Morton
Director, Newcastle Art Gallery

'Australian nature was a driving force in my paintings... However, even when I was painting I kept thinking, I don't think that I could create these paintings unless I was in my studio in New York City, with the familiarity of the city combined with my renewed spirit of Australia'

Virginia Cuppaidge

THE NATURE OF ABSTRACTION

Virginia Cuppaidge is an Australian artist whose art practice and identity are inextricably linked to place and time. With an extensive painting career from the 1970s to the present, living between Australia and New York, Cuppaidge has never lost sight of her origins or the immediacy of her surrounds.

In 2017 Cuppaidge chose to return to Australia from New York permanently, bringing with her a distilled archive of her collected works from the United States to be deposited strategically into collections throughout Australia. This included the painting Saix 1974 from Cuppaidge's inaugural *Geometrics* series, into the Newcastle Art Gallery collection.

Cuppaidge is an abstractionist whose works move between the realms of geometric abstraction in the 1970s, to ethereal and translucent bodies with curved peaks and forms in the 1980s. Her works evolved to abstract expressionist bursts of visceral colour and staccato mark making in the 1990s, to the harmony and quietness reached in works of art from the 2000s to the present day. The key epochs of her paintings are also symbolic metaphors of emotional and personal transitions in Cuppaidge's life; of relationships, location, spirituality, and identity. Cuppaidge recalled, 'Thinking back I can delineate precisely what was going through each phase, that directly caused me to create different visual imagery.' 1

Curating an exhibition of this kind, is to address the issue of distance for artists living abroad (particularly women practitioners) that can often affect an artists' appreciation of their home country. Cuppaidge has bucked this and steadfastly maintained a career in both realms, with significant exhibiting histories with the iconic Gallery A in Sydney through the 1970s and 80s and galleries throughout the US and Canada to the present day.²

FAMILY CONTEXT

Growing up in the suburbs of Brisbane in the late 1940s and early 50s was a creative environment for Cuppaidge with the sanctuary of mother Judy's botanical drawing studio. Virginia recalled, 'When I was six years of age I decided to be an artist... seeing paintbrushes and drawing pens stored in old coffee cans in the quiet atmosphere of the studio... most likely with the encouragement of my mother, I decided I'll make art '3

In her teenage years, Cuppaidge undertook Saturday painting classes and resolved at age thirteen that abstraction was the pathway. Support from art teachers at Frensham College in NSW's Southern Highlands further emboldened a love of painting. Cuppaidge recalled; 'painting seemed so honest. There is no embellishment using a brush. It's personal and raw. I believe that an artist's brush strokes are as unique as fingerprints, they do not lie.'4

In 1963-4 after finishing school at Frensham, Cuppaidge returned to Brisbane. With screen-printing skills learnt at school, Virginia began designing and hand-printing fabrics in the family garage. At night she attended art classes with Andrew Sibley and drawing classes with Jon Molvig, an artist whose paintings Cuppaidge had grown up with in the family home and 'as a teenager... [had] loved the paint quality in these works, beautiful at the same time primordial.'⁵

In 1965 Cuppaidge exhibited her hand-printed fabrics at Brian Johnstone Gallery in Brisbane. The same year she moved to Sydney working and studying life drawing with Desiderius Orban, painting with John Ogburn and John Olsen alongside Marea Gazzard, William Rose and Robert Klippel at the Mary White Art School. Cuppaidge's 'deep

painting desire was to create abstraction with new images I'd never seen before'. An exhibition at the Hungry Horse Gallery in Paddington spawned the business 'Virginia Prints' producing hand-printed clothing. Despite initial success, the business folded and Cuppaidge 'decided that it was the moment to follow my dream of creating big paintings on whitewashed walls in New York city.'



THE MOVE TO NEW YORK

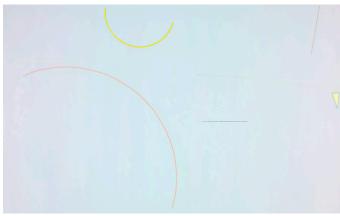
In 1969 Cuppaidge planned to 'see the best abstract art going on at the time and *live* in the art museums'. In the wake of John F Kennedy and Martin Luther King's assassinations in 1963 and 1968 and in the middle of the Vietnam War, moving from Sydney to the United States seemed risky for a young creative. Despite such turmoil Cuppaidge defiantly told her friends, 'I'm not going to America, I'm going to New York.'8

A love of painting lured Cuppaidge, with its rich holdings of abstract art in its many museums and galleries. She recalled, 'Since 16 years of age I had longed to go to New York, to experience the Abstract Expressionists' paintings up close... so in 1969 I arrived in New York City on a hot Saturday night wearing a pink satin miniskirt, clutching my one suitcase and one phone number.'9

The phone number belonged to Australian sculptor Clement Meadmore and led to doors being opened to the New York art scene, as well as a long-standing personal and professional connection with Meadmore. It was through him that Cuppaidge met Gallery A Director Max Hutchinson in 1970. Hutchinson was opening a space in New York on 127 Greene Street in SoHo with Virginia, helping set up the Gallery representing US artists and she worked there for several years. In an Australian context, Gallery A, Sydney would also provide Cuppaidge with major gallery support, exhibiting her paintings in the years 1974, 1976, 1979, 1980 and 1982 and developing a life-long friendship with Gallery A Director Ann Lewis in Sydney.¹⁰

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GEOMETRICS SERIES

In the early 1970s, Cuppaidge began the Geometrics series of large abstract paintings. Initial studies on un-stretched canvases measuring one metre by one metre were important precursors for larger canvases to come. Renting a studio space in New York's Hell's Kitchen district, Cuppaidge's idea was to create large-format canvases responding to New York's monolithic skyline, 'with looming skyscrapers on the dark avenues.'11 Instead, these paintings unconsciously reflected the Australian landscape, quietly floating beneath the surface. And despite the visual impacts of Mark Rothko and Brice Marden on her aesthetic, Cuppaidge could not deny the connection to Australian artists such as Sidney Nolan, Jon Molvig and Ian Fairweather. She reflected, 'No matter how hard I tried to create images that were born in New York City, the nature of my homeland made its mark on my paintings.'12 The Geometrics series debuted in 1973, as part of the group exhibition Women Choose Women at the New York Cultural Centre (now Museum of Arts and Design, New York), featuring five floors of women artists involved in the New York feminist movement. Her first solo exhibition the same year at AM Sachs Gallery on West 57 Street, had American viewers commenting on the paintings being 'so Australian'. The exhibition sold its first work by 10am opening day, with eminent American art critic Clement Greenberg commenting, 'this is very mature work for an artist her age.'13

SKYSPACE SERIES

The late 1970s *Skyspace* series showed Cuppaidge's increased confidence in her application of paint, with delicate layers of transitional colour. Emerging from a 1975 residence at MacDowell Colony New Hampshire, Cuppaidge's precursor series of pastel drawings of grass stems configured in curvilinear shapes, was what 'inspired her to pursue an expanse of light opening the surface.'¹⁴ A departure from the 'interior' nature of the geometric paintings, Cuppaidge was driven by a desire to create 'playful surfaces with just a hint of tension on the surface,'¹⁵ evoking an experience of the sky in both the paint surface and scale of the canvas.

In 1979 Art and Australia discussed; 'The sense of light and movement in Cuppaidge's paintings owe much to the technique she has evolved. Each coat of paint was rubbed into the surface of the canvas with a sponge... Once she has achieved the basic surface colour (often after thirty or forty coats have been put down), Cuppaidge pencils in or tapes the shapes she wants to use. She does this before she applies her remaining colours as she is interested in her shapes coming from varying depths at the surface. When asked how she arrived at this technique she believes that "if one has the vision, one will find the technique."16 Epitomised by the Newcastle Art Gallery collection painting Valoniah (1979) and the monumental six-metre Skyspace painting in the University of Newcastle art collection, scale has never been a source of fear for Cuppaidge. Contrarily, she regards working in large format as freedom, an ability to harness space and room to move. The challenge to Cuppaidge was the limitations that small canvases provided and how to navigate such picture planes with finesse and control.17







NATURE OF PAINTING SERIES

From the 1980s to the 1990s, Cuppaidge's love for large scale and passionately high-coloured paintings continued, striving for a 'primitive timelessness in her work' A dramatic departure from the quiet and ethereal colour gradations of the Skyspace series, The Nature of Painting series, embodied by the painting Center of the Beginning 1988 embraced abstract expressionism and channelled the vibrancy of the natural environment. And although non-objective, the painting evokes a sense of nature, of water and sky and tropical flora... [exploring]... the range of possibilities of an ideal and consummate correspondence between nature and painting. 19



NEW YORK AND AUSTRALIA SERIES

The continuum of Cuppaidge's paintings is the bond between the artist and nature. Since the origin of her geometric works four decades prior, the connection between the artist and her environment endures. Buoyed by a residency back in Australia at the iconic Hill End artist residency in 2010, Cuppaidge's connections with the Australian bush and childhood memories simmered beneath the paintings. The deliciously titled Bee Map 2012 conjures memories as a teenager in Queensland staying on a country property, meeting an Aboriginal elder explaining the symbolism of native bees flying in figure eight to show the location of pollen. The painting's form, delicate palette, and shape suggest change, yet continuity of Cuppaidge's painting practice. As the only remaining painting in her private collection, it is fitting that this painting visually and metaphorically 'closes the loop' on the survey of Cuppaidge's impressive and profound painting oeuvre.

Virginia Cuppaidge's monumental paintings reflect her passion for the medium with an extensive and inspiring forty-year art career. Following her return to Australia in 2017, VIRGINIA CUPPAIDGE: the nature of abstraction recognises the artist's contribution and achievements in Australia and abroad.

Sarah Johnson Curator, Newcastle Art Gallery

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Virginia Cuppaidge, correspondence with Sarah Johnson, March 2019.
- ² Christine France, 'The Galleries of Max Hutchinson', Gallery A 1964-1983 exhibition catalogue, Newcastle Art Gallery/Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2009, pp45-6.
- Wirginia Cuppaidge, correspondence with Sarah Johnson, March 2019.
- ⁴ ibid. ⁵ ibid.
- ⁶ ibid.
- 7 ibid.
- 8 ibid.
- ⁹ Virginia Cuppaidge, *The Geometrics*, 1970s retrospective works by Virginia Cuppaidge, 2018. Courtesy Virginia Cuppaidge.
- ¹⁰ Christine France, op.cit.

- $^{\rm 11}$ Virginia Cuppaidge, correspondence with Sarah Johnson March 2019.
- 12 ibid.
- 13 ibid.
- ¹⁴ ibid. ¹⁵ ibid.
- ¹⁶ Dr. Kerrie M Bryan. 'Unbarring the gates of light -The Work of Virginia Cuppaidge' in *Art in Australia*, Volume 17, Number 3 March 1980, pp258-262.
- $^{\rm 17}$ Conversation with Virginia Cuppaidge & Sarah Johnson 19 March 2019.
- ¹⁸ ibid.
- ¹⁹ Peter Selz, Art Historian, Professor Emeritus, Berkley, 'Beyond the Mainstream: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Art', located at Virginia Cuppaidge, www. http://www.virginiacuppaidge.com/ nature-of-painting#center-of-the-beginning.

LIST OF WORKS

LYON 1972 synthetic polymer paint on canvas 198.5 x 300.0cm Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Gift of the artist 2012

Mauve River 1972 synthetic polymer paint on canvas 88.9 x 153.0cm Gift of the artist through the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation 2017. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

Sasafras 1972 synthetic polymer paint on canvas 198.5 x 305.4cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Gift of the artist through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2018

Second Transition 1974 synthetic polymer paint on canvas 197.0 x 304.0cm Gift of the artist through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2017. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program Saix 1974
acrylic on canvas
1.14.0 x 198.0cm
Donated through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program by
Virginia Cuppaidge 2017
Newcastle Art Gallery collection

Valoniah 1979
acrylic on canvas
198.0 x 305.0cm
Purchased 1980
Newcastle Art Gallery collection

Darkon 1979 - 1980 acrylic on canvas 95.5 x 151.0cm Artist collection

Wivina 1980 acrylic on canvas 115.5 x 184.0cm Private collection

Skyspace 1981
oil on canvas
200.0 x 606.0cm
University of Newcastle Art Collection
– Donated through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program by
Libby Hathorn

Vrinda 1982 acrylic on canvas 182.0 x 305.0cm Artist collection

Trailing the Perimeter 1986 acrylic on canvas 114.5 x 183.0cm Private collection

Center of the Beginning 1988 oil on canvas 212.0 x 454.0cm Presented in 2002 by Mrs Judy Cuppaidge Newcastle Art Gallery collection

Dusk on Grand Street 1989 oil on canvas 114.0 x 182.0cm Collection Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Gift of the artist 2016

Chrysalis Beginning 1989 acrylic on canvas 198.0 x 396.0cm University of Newcastle Art Collection – Donated by Helen and Christopher Ford When Ships Come In 1992 oil on canvas 182.0 x 244.0cm Private collection

Inside the Garden 1994 - 1995 oil on canvas 190.0 x 250.0cm Macquarie University Art Collection

Quiet Night 1999/2000 acrylic on canvas 190.0 x 300.0cm Private collection

Sunlight and Sea 2000 oil on canvas 182.0 x 244.0cm Private collection

Bee Map 2012 acrylic on canvas 91.0 x 91.0cm Artist collection

Archival material in vitrine
Series of photographs, fabric, invitations,
drawings, notebooks & works of art
c1960s-2012

CAPTIONS

- 1. Virginia CUPPAIDGE Bee Map 2012 acrylic on canvas 91.0 x 91.0cm Artist collection
- 2. Virginia Cuppaidge in handprinted dress, photo shoot at car demolishing yard Brisbane c1962-3.
 Photography: Judy Cuppaidge.
 Artist collection
- 3. Virginia CUPPAIDGE
 Saix 1974
 acrylic on canvas
 114.0 x 198.0cm
 Donated through the Australian
 Government's Cultural Gifts Program
 by Virginia Cuppaidge 2017
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection
- 4. Virginia CUPPAIDGE
 Valoniah 1979
 acrylic on canvas
 198.0 x 305.0cm
 Purchased 1980
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection
- **5.** Virginia Cuppaidge in front of *Skyspace* painting, New York c1981. Image taken by Clement Meadmore Artist collection
- **6.** Virginia CUPPAIDGE *Darkon* 1979 1980 acrylic on canvas 95.5 x 151.0cm
- 7. Virginia CUPPAIDGE
 Center of the Beginning 1988
 oil on canvas
 212.0 x 454.0cm
 Presented in 2002 by
 Mrs Judy Cuppaidge
 Newcastle Art Gallery collection
- 8. Virginia Cuppaidge in front of painting Center of the Beginning c1988. Photography Judith Ahern.
 Artist collection











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